

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | ART REVIEW

‘Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form’ Review: Fugitive Figures

A contemporary of Rodin and a fellow pioneer of the modern movement, Rosso combined sculpture’s solidity with painting’s evanescent illusionism.



Medardo Rosso's 'Ecce puer (Behold the Child),' 1906 PHOTO: ROBERT PETTUS

By [ERIC GIBSON](#)

Dec. 20, 2016 3:47 p.m. ET

[0 COMMENTS](#)

St. Louis

In our culture of easy celebrity it's hard to imagine such a thing as an undersized reputation. Yet that has been the fate of the Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso (1858-1928), currently the subject of an enthralling and exceptionally well thought out exhibition at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

Sculpture is traditionally the art of solidity and tangible form, painting the art of illusion. Irreconcilable opposites? Not to Rosso, whose ambition it was to fuse the two by modeling figures and forms that appear wrapped in an envelope of light and atmosphere.

Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form

*Pulitzer Arts Foundation
Through May 13, 2017*

A contemporary of Auguste Rodin and, like him, a pioneering figure of the modern movement, Rosso has never been the household name that Rodin is. But among those who know his work Rosso enjoys something like cult status. Visit this exhibition

and you'll understand why.

“Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form” was organized by independent curator and Rosso authority Sharon Hecker and the Pulitzer's Tamara H. Schenkenberg. On view through May 13, 2017, it is the most comprehensive Rosso show in the U.S. in over 50 years. It features about 30 sculptures, in some cases versions of the same subject in different media—wax, plaster or bronze. In addition, there are about 70 rarely seen drawings and photographs. If any show should travel, it's this one. As of now, St. Louis is the only venue. But with five months' lead time, miracles can still happen.

Rosso seems to have received little formal training. His first mature works date from the early 1880s of which “Portinaia (Concierge)” (1883-84) opens the show. It is a richly material yet evanescent head-and-shoulders image of a woman caught in a reflective mood. The sculpture is broadly and loosely modeled so that, in what one writer has described as Rosso's “double game,” its washes of light and pools of shadow don't just articulate the form but present the figure as if seen in a half-light or through a steamed-up window.

In 1889 Rosso moved from Milan to Paris, where over the next decade he was the most radically innovative sculptor at work anywhere—more so even than Rodin. Walking through this show you see much of 20th-century sculpture predicted. “Madame X” (1896), a head so simplified as to be little more than a large lozenge, gives us a foretaste of Constantin Brancusi’s similarly reductive approach to form and anatomy. The vigorously, almost expressionistically worked surfaces of the clothing in his portrait of the Impressionist art patron Henri Rouart (late 1889-90) scream “Alberto Giacometti.” And Rosso’s overall aesthetic of sculpture as something addressing itself to the eye rather than the hand looks ahead to the work of James Turrell, Robert Irwin and the other artists of the Light & Space movement that originated in Los Angeles in the 1960s.

At times, Rosso pushes form to the limits of visibility, employing a freedom of handling so extreme that the image seems almost accidental, like those shapes we perceive in clouds or the veining of a rock. Close up, “Madame Noblet” (c. 1897-98) reads as nothing more than a pile of gouged and scraped plaster. Only from several feet away does one begin to discern a face.

MORE ART REVIEWS

- [‘One and One Is Four: The Bauhaus Photocollages of Josef Albers’ Review: A Colorist’s Black-and-Whites](#) Dec. 20, 2016
- [‘The Art of the Qur’an: Treasures From the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts’ Review: Beauty by the Book](#) Dec. 19, 2016
- [‘Claire Falkenstein: Beyond Sculpture’ Review: Shaping Her Story](#) Dec. 5, 2016

Many of the details of Rosso’s life are shrouded in mystery so, unusually for an artist, we know little about his influences. One hovering presence here is the Post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat. Works like the bronze head “Ecce Puer (Behold the Child)” (1906) read as sculptural equivalents of Seurat’s haunting black crayon drawings from the 1880s, where forms emerge from an enveloping gloom. Some of Rosso’s drawings here, too, show strong affinities with Seurat’s. But how, where, when or even whether he saw those

works is impossible to know.

It would be a mistake to conclude from all this that Rosso was merely a kind of sculptural prestidigitator. His works are deeply human. “Aetas Aurea (Golden Age)” (late 1885-86) is a tender yet unsentimental portrayal of maternal love and childlike innocence. And a crackling psychological energy courses among the three sketchy figures in “Une Conversation (A Conversation)” (1892-99). One marvels at Rosso’s ability to express so much with so little.

There are no labels or wall texts at the Pulitzer—a printed handout provides the necessary information about each work. But the museum has gone one better when it comes to explaining Rosso's aesthetic. A portable control pad allows visitors to try three separate lighting options on "Ecce Puer," with each revealing the work in a different way. One handheld is worth a thousand words.

Plan to allow plenty of time for a visit. Once you enter Rosso's world, you won't want to leave.

—*Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Arts in Review editor.*



1 of 11
Medardo Rosso, 'Carne altrui (Flesh of Others),' 1883-84 COLLECTION PCC





2 of 11

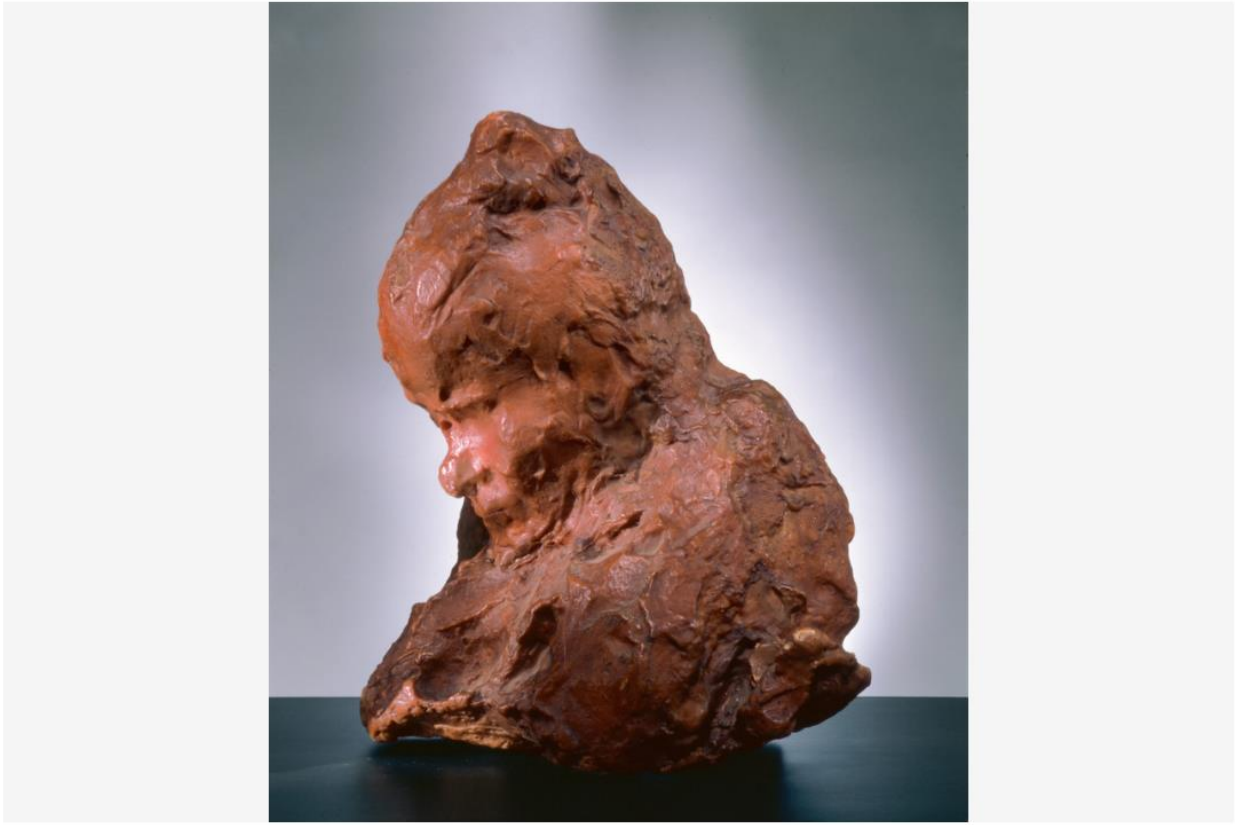
Medardo Rosso, 'Enfant au soleil (Child in the Sun),' 1891-92 *COLLECTION PCC*



3 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Ecce puer (Behold the Child),' 1906 *ROBERT PETTUS*





4 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Portinaia (Concierge),' 1883-84 *COLLECTION PCC*



5 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Aetas aurea (Golden Age),' late 1885-86 *NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER, DALLAS*



6 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Madame Noblet,' 1897-98 MUSEO MEDARDO ROSSO



7 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Une conversation (A Conversation),' 1892-99 MUSEO MEDARDO ROSSO





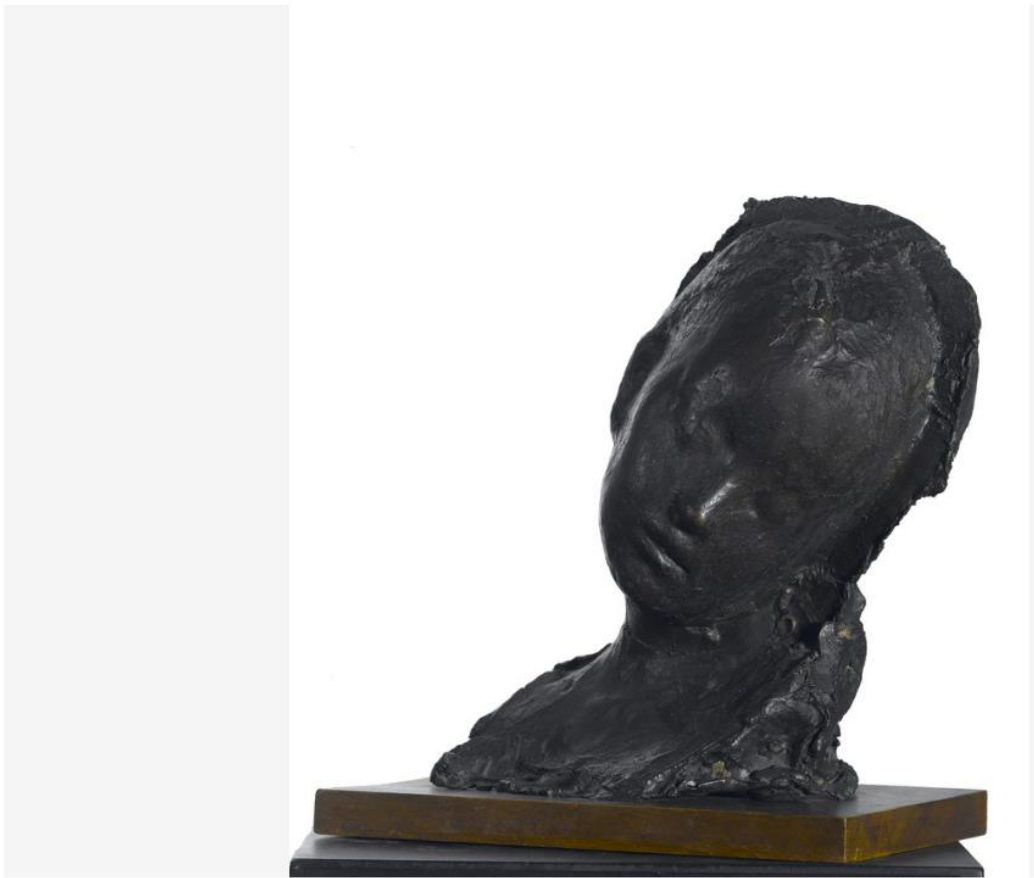
8 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Bambino ebreo (Jewish Boy),' 1892-94 PETER FREEMAN, INC. NEW YORK/PARIS



9 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Bookmaker,' 1893-95 GALLERIA D'ARTE MODERNA, MILANO



10 of 11

Medardo Rosso, 'Enfant malade (Sick Child),' 1893-95 GALLERIA D'ARTE MODERNA, MILANO