

## The artfully flawed sculpture of Medardo Rosso

An artist's reputation is rescued from near-oblivion at a stunning show at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London



Medardo Rosso in his Paris studio in the early 1890s

Rachel Spence  
33 MINUTES AGO

The boy gazes to one side, one eye swallowed by the rough surface, the other just visible through a veil of plaster that cascades down his cheek like a deluge of water. Is this waif drowning? Or has he been immortalised during an aquatic resurrection as in a Bill Viola video? Or is he perhaps emerging, embattled, from his material as Michelangelo once enjoined his sculptures to do?

Entitled “Ecce Puer” [Behold the Child] (1906), the sculpture’s elemental quality means it bears comparison with a contemporary artist such as Viola as effortlessly as with the Renaissance titan. Perhaps most extraordinary, however, is that the artist responsible, Medardo Rosso, is unknown to all but connoisseurs.

Born in Turin in 1858, Rosso was hailed as a revolutionary in his own time. Rodin spoke of his “wild admiration” on first seeing the Italian’s works. After the Frenchman died in 1917, Guillaume Apollinaire declared Rosso “the greatest living sculptor”. Giacometti admitted to “moving admiration” for the Italian; the Futurist Umberto Boccioni was enormously influenced by Rosso’s dynamism while Henry Moore bestowed equal importance on Rosso and Rodin for being the two artists who “cleared the way” for modern sculpture.

Now *Sight Unseen*, a stunning new show at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac’s London branch, promises to place Rosso once more on a pinnacle of adulation. Bringing together 12 of Rosso’s sculptures, none of which are for sale, alongside a clutch of his photographs and drawings, the exhibition unfolds in a small, low-lit gallery. With many of the works mounted on scratched wooden display units from their own era, the mood of spectral intimacy is in keeping with Rosso’s otherworldly gift.

Many of the works are tied together by the artist’s rapport with the British capital. His first recorded visit to London came in 1896, although he sent works for exhibition there some eight years earlier. The magnet for his arrival was a show at leading international gallery Boussod,

Valadon & Cie. However, the most sumptuous evidence of his sojourn are the drawings he made on scraps of paper such as envelopes, restaurant cards and hotel stationery.



'Ecce Puer' (1906) © Leemage/UiG/Getty

Including “Cab en route in London”, an untitled drawing of Trafalgar Square, “In the Omnibus in London” and “An Effect in a Bar in London” (all dated or presumed to be from 1896), these rapid sketches are characterised by figures and landscapes viewed through an evanescent haze of diagonal lines in soft grey pencil. As such they are the illustrations of an artist who declared his ambition to “excite human passions through the impression”. Furthermore, he wished to “revive the impression” a subject made on him the very first time he glimpsed it.

Rosso’s words seem to place him in the camp of the French Impressionists, an interpretation backed by his decision in 1889, having abandoned his wife and child in Italy, to move to Paris, where he remained for more than 20 years. There, he would come to know Rodin as a friend, and count Zola, a figurehead of French Modernism, as a patron.

Certainly when Baudelaire, whose literary flâneur was the Impressionist figure par excellence, described the style as an attempt to catch “the transient, the fleeting and the contingent”, he could have been talking about wax sculptures such as Rosso’s “Impression de boulevard. Femme à la Voilette” [Impression of a Boulevard. Woman with a Veil] (1895). On show at Ropac’s, the woman’s face is a devastated blur under a headdress looming over her like a rocky spar that might split off and crush her at any moment.

Rosso, like Rodin, could never have developed as he did without Impressionism’s influence. Yet like his

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great French rival he also went far beyond what was, in any event, essentially a painterly movement. What the pair shared was a desire to express the sensation — emotional, sensual — that they felt in front of a three-dimensional human figure. Yet Rodin, for all the gritty, unfinished aura of much of his work, left you in no doubt of his models' original loveliness.

Rosso, in contrast, eschewed heroic beauty. Although he cast in bronze and plaster, his signature medium was wax, which he poured into flexible gelatin moulds rather than hand-modelling over wire armature as did, for example, Degas. This method allowed him to capture the finger marks that wounded his original clay surfaces. Even when casting in bronze, while other sculptors gave the task to professional foundries in order to iron out flaws, Rosso did the job himself, thus preserving the physical damage so it became a symbol for humanity's existential imperfections.

Such technical peccadilloes were in synergy with his desire — like a modern-day Caravaggio — to champion the experience of the humble and powerless. Nursing mothers, small children, the elderly and the sick were the models Rosso preferred to the Herculean men and women who peopled Rodin's pulchritudinous casts. A wax model of a concierge — “Portinaia, Concierge” (1883-84) — on show in London, shows the woman withdrawing like an ancient, snub-nosed cherub into the wrinkled folds of her thick neck as if the world were intolerably hostile.



'Portinaia' (1883-84) © Collection PCC

Even Rosso's most abstract sculptures retain a vitality that sharpens our senses. Made in plaster, the surface of "Conversation" (1897) explodes into three concrete-grey quiffs of jagged, indecipherable energy that suggest a wave frozen in mid-splash or a muddy snow drift on the cusp of melting. This cryptic allusion to communication — itself so vulnerable and prone to vagueness — strikes the viewer more forcefully than a more orthodox replica of a human encounter.

It's likely, however, that Rosso's refusal to compromise his enigmatic vision is responsible for the crisis that engulfed the work that would ultimately be known as "Ecce Puer". Commissioned in 1906 by London-based German industrialist Emile Mond and his wife Angela as a portrait of their young son Alfred William, the ghostly, flowing lines of Rosso's sculpture — which aimed, so the story goes, to reflect the boy as Rosso first glimpsed him behind a curtain — displeased the parents so greatly they refused to buy it. Tragically, however, Rosso's perception of ephemerality proved prescient — Alfred killed himself at the age of 27.

The sculpture, with its new title, went on to become Rosso's best-known work. Meanwhile, his work continued to sell in Britain late into the 1920s — on show at Ropac, "Enfant au Soleil" [Child in the Sun, 1891-92], was bought by the British philosopher Charles Meek. As for the sculptor himself, after the first world war he returned to Italy where he died in 1928.





'Enfant au soleil' (1891-92) © Amedeo Porro Fine Arts Lugano

Despite never achieving widespread recognition, his oeuvre is admired by numerous contemporary sculptors, including leading British exponent [Tony Cragg](#). A Cragg sculpture — blessed with his signature scalloped surface — is on show in Ropac's vestibule. A riveting interview between Cragg and *Sight Unseen*'s curator Sharon Hecker, in the catalogue, sees the Turner Prize winner describe Rosso as the “first modern sculptor, in a sense” and mentions how “fantastic [it would be] to see the Tate Turbine Hall just with three Medardo Rosso heads.” Everyone who catches *Sight Unseen* will surely find themselves in enthusiastic agreement.

'*Sight Unseen*', to February 10, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, [ropac.net](http://ropac.net)

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