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Christian Reflection.

Rouault depicts the suffering of John the Baptist, the messenger sent to prepare us for the coming of the Lord through repentance and baptism.

Georges Rouault (1871-1958), St. John the Baptist (c. 1936). Oil, ink and gouache on lithograph mounted on canvas. 36.4 x 28 in. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo Credit: © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Voice in the Wilderness

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Reflecting on the life of John the Baptist during the season of Lent is appropriate because he is closely associated with penitence in Scripture. He is the messenger sent from God to prepare people for the coming of the Lord through repentance and baptism: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Matthew 3:3-4/Mark 1:2-4/Luke 3:2-6).

Thus, in art John the Baptist is usually portrayed in the wilderness and dressed in "clothing of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist" (Matthew 3:4/Mark 1:6). In Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist*, this wilderness prophet is also an example of human suffering.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Georges Rouault, a painter, draftsman, and printmaker in Paris, had developed the highly expressive style seen in this image, influenced by Henri Matisse and other artists. Although Rouault's background was among artisans (his father worked in Paris as a piano finisher and varnisher), his training in art was classical.¹ In the atelier of Elie Delauney at l'Ercole des Beaux-Arts in Paris he painted landscapes influenced not by the contemporary Impressionists but by the classical painters Poussin and Claude.² The deep, fragmented colors and flat composition in *St. John the Baptist* and many of Rouault's paintings reflects an earlier apprenticeship at age fourteen to makers of modern stained glass and restorers of medieval windows.

In the fall of 1891, after the death of Delauney, Rouault became the student of Gustave Moreau, who became an exceptional artistic and religious influence on him. Rouault had been baptized Catholic as an infant. Moreau felt that art could lead to real religion of the heart. Rouault quoted Moreau's confession of faith:

Do you believe in God? I am asked. I believe only in God. In fact, I do not believe in what I touch nor in what I see. I only believe in what I cannot see; solely in what I sense. My mind and my reason seem to me ephemeral and of dubious reality. My inner consciousness alone appears eternal and unquestionably certain.³

Rouault, however, struggled with his faith in a culture where writers like Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola sought to portray "reality" in their art with little or no concern for religion.⁴ Furthermore, Rouault was devastated by the death of Moreau in 1898.

Rouault's "realism" springs in small part from Flaubert and Zola, but in a much larger part from his exposure to Léon Bloy, a Catholic who was significant in one of the most important revivals of religious literature in French history. Rouault represents the pictorial expression of this literary revival.⁵ Lionello Venturi, art historian and an early biographer of Rouault, stated that Bloy was the very embodiment of the necessity of faith, which Rouault felt; the writer was for him an "older brother."⁶

In 1903, Rouault became the first curator of the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris. The artist began to explore the human condition through watching the passers-by, and this is the time of his famous works depicting clowns, acrobats, and prostitutes. Brothel scenes had become popular with other contemporary artists such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. Rouault was also fascinated by Cézanne's *Bathers* and did a series of nudes.

Ambroise Vollard, an influential dealer in French contemporary art who advanced the careers of Cézanne, Renoir, and Picasso among others, became Rouault's agent in 1917. This provided the stability for Rouault's fifty-eight plates (conceived in 1912) that were printed in black in *Miserere*, a meditation on death.⁷

The 1930s were a very productive period for Rouault's religious art. World War I seemed to deepen his faith and inspire him to create religiously inspired work such as *St. John the Baptist*. Soo Yun Kang, professor of art history at Chicago State University, believes this is one of the unfinished works stored at the Pompidou.⁸ She confirms the brush marks as typical of the artist and notes the white sketch marks indicate that he planned to change the composition, as he did hundreds of times.⁹

Rouault utilized a very complex painting technique that began with a lithographic print in black ink.¹⁰ This paper piece was then glued to a stretched canvas and placed on an easel where Rouault filled in the blank areas, painting over the print with oil, gouache (opaque watercolors), and more ink. It is most likely that the artist put the gouache on before the oil because gouache dries faster than oil and oil adheres to gouache more permanently than the reverse application. It is certain that the drawing ink was applied last because after using too large brushes, the artist would have covered the original black litho markings and wanted them to reemerge in the composition. This multi-faceted application of materials was probably useful to him as a working "drawing" or cartoon that allowed him to return to another litho print and paint directly with purpose and knowledge of the desired outcome, or enlarge the idea (and print) for another canvas.¹¹

This thick application of the materials allows a greater form of expression in *St. John the Baptist*. The prophet's emaciated body is depicted with the same flesh tones used by Rouault in his clowns and prostitutes. John has suffered in the same manner as so many of Rouault's other subjects. The head is very similar to the Jesus-types that Rouault painted previously. Another depiction of St. John the Baptist is not recorded in the literature on

the artist, so it is likely that Rouault chose a familiar head and then transformed it into Christ's relative by adding the hairshirt attribute. The blue background with two strong red horizontals draws the eye back to the saddened figure. The eyes look directly at the viewer, although Dr. Kang noted that they are probably unfinished as Rouault usually clearly marks the eyeball.¹²

This painting of John the Baptist was created by an artist whose own faith became stronger over the years as he reflected on the suffering of Christ and the perpetual pain and suffering of humans due to sin. So in another sense, Rouault's *St. John the Baptist* is appropriate for meditation during Lent: in this season of our repentance for sin we identify with the physical suffering and humiliation of Christ, even as we journey with him toward his bodily resurrection.

NOTES

1 William A. Dyrness, *Rouault: A Vision of Suffering and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 23.

2 Pierre Courthion, *Georges Rouault* (New York: Harry S. Abrams, 1961), 15-16.

3 Georges Rouault and André Suarès, "Gustave Moreau," *L'Art et les Artistes* (April, 1926), 240, as quoted in Dyrness, *Rouault*, 27.

4 Dyrness, 32-33.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Lionello Venturi, *Georges Rouault*, second edition (Paris, France: Skira, 1948), 22.

7 See Holly Flora and Soo Yun Kang, *This Anguished World of Shadows: Georges Rouault's MISERERE ET GUERRE* (London, UK: D. Giles; and New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2006).

8 The painting is illustrated in the forty pages of Rouault's work in the online collection of Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Search "Rouault" and "Jean Baptiste" at collection.centrepompidou.fr/Navigart/index.php?db=minter&qs=1 (accessed December 4, 2012).

9 I thank Dr. Kang for our email correspondence (December 3, 2012) regarding the attribution of this unpublished painting.

10 Lithography is the process of printing from a plane surface (as a smooth stone or metal plate) on which the image to be printed is ink-receptive and the blank area ink-repellent.

11 I thank Professor Mark Anderson, Chairman and Professor of Art, Baylor University, for explaining this process. Professor Anderson's area of expertise is printmaking.

12 Kang, email correspondence (December 3, 2012).



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