

GEORGES ROUAULT: Holy Fools and the Theater of Society

by Dr. Jennifer Johnson



Georges Rouault in his studio, 1953. Photo by Yvonne Chevalier. Fondation Georges Rouault. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Ranging across the work of Georges Rouault (1871–1958) and the major themes that preoccupied him, the select group of works presented by Nahmad Contemporary and Skarstedt at Independent 20th Century showcase the depth of craftsmanship and philosophical thought that characterize the artist's peculiar form of modernism.

Born in 1871, during the siege of Paris, Rouault was originally apprenticed to stained glass makers before training at the École des Beaux-Arts under the great Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau. His contemporaries at the academy included Henri Matisse, alongside whom Rouault participated in the notorious Salon d'Automne exhibition of 1905. Art critic Louis Vauxcelles disparaged the color-saturated painting of Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck as that of “wild beasts” (*les fauves*). Rouault’s work, hanging two rooms away, shared many of the qualities of so-called Fauvism. The surfaces had a scrawled and frenetic appearance, and the subject matter was almost submerged by the mass of painted marks.

Rouault linked this period of work to the death of Moreau, who had become a mentor and father figure to him. “A kind of outburst occurred,” Rouault wrote, “and I began to paint with a kind of frenzy.” Some of this can be seen in *Fille (Femme aux cheveux roux)* from 1908, in which the figure of a prostitute dominates the canvas. The orange and blue washes, set against black gouache lines, emphasize the fleshiness of the body and create a haunting image of a figure on the edges of society.

As with the Fauves, the language of the critics who reviewed Rouault’s early paintings of prostitutes and clowns was filled with images of anger or madness — these works were repeatedly accused of being too violently dark. By the time of the First World War, Rouault was also making prints, including the series *Miserere*, a meditation on suffering. A strong sense of form and linear style began to replace the wildness of earlier works. The placement of shapes next to each other, layered with brushmarks, recalled both his printmaking and the influence of stained glass.

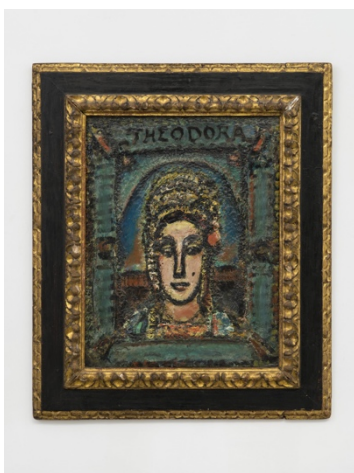
Rouault’s later subjects were calmer, too — even still. He had long explored the allegorical potential of clowns and the circus, with a particular interest in Dostoyevsky’s idea of the “holy fool.” Pablo Picasso’s “rose period” (1904-06) works were similarly preoccupied with these themes. But where Picasso foregrounded a dramatic melancholy, Rouault’s interwar and postwar work approached the clown as a portrait with an air of faded grandeur. He used framing devices indebted to Byzantine iconography around the clowns, as well as in works such as *Théodora* (c. 1949) and in multiple images of the face of Jesus Christ. Often, as in *Pierrot* (c. 1937-38) or *Clown anglais* (1937), these are fused with the suggestion of curtains, a motif derived from both grand portraiture and the stage.



Georges Rouault, *Pierrot*, c. 1937-38, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 25 1/2 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



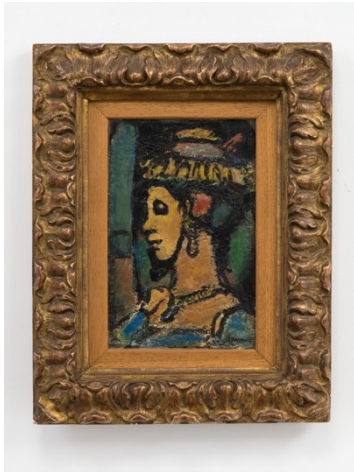
Georges Rouault, *Clown anglais* (English clown), 1937, oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 17 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Georges Rouault, *Théodora*, c. 1949, oil on cardboard, laid on panel, 22 3/4 x 18 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Georges Rouault, *Juges* (Judges), 1937, Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 7 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Georges Rouault, *Louissette*, 1946, Oil on paper mounted on panel, 11 3/4 x 7 1/2 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Theater — and, by extension, the artificial nature of appearances — is deeply important to understanding the spiritual and moral dimensions of Rouault's work. He often directed his criticism at the corrupt values of modern society, for instance in the damning depiction of two judges, *Juges* (1937). Alongside this, a number of works questioned the opposition between the powerful and the down-and-outs. *Théodora* depicts the wife of the Roman emperor Justinian, a woman who began as an actress and prostitute, and rose to empress. Drawing heavily on the Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna, Rouault's representation aligns her with his multiple paintings of performers who blur the boundaries between life and theater.

Louissette (1946) performs the same maneuver. The name means "warrior," and the image replicates the composition of a traditional portrait of an aristocratic woman. But there is a darker side: "louissette" was the first name given to the guillotine in the early days of the French Revolution.

In *Satan* (c. 1937), the devoutly Catholic Rouault echoes his imagery of Christ with strong black lines, a limited palette, and a framing structure that evokes the imprint of Jesus's face on the Turin Shroud. To give this particular work the title of "Satan" calls everything about this vision into question. Could it be Christ's vision we are witnessing? Saint Veronica, whose legendary veil also bore the image of Christ, was another recurring theme in Rouault's oeuvre. His thick layers of paint offer a material counterpoint to the translucent veil of Veronica or the Turin Shroud, as if this higher vision might be accessed through the act of painting itself.



Georges Rouault, *Satan*, c. 1937, oil on board, 15 x 10 3/4 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Georges Rouault, *Cirque de l'étoile filante* (The shooting star circus), 1938, oil on card, laid on canvas, 29 x 21 1/2 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Georges Rouault, *Paysage biblique* (Biblical landscape), c. 1940–48, oil, gouache, and ink on paper, laid on canvas, 11 1/2 x 15 in. ©2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

There is something of the stage set about Rouault's late landscapes and ensemble scenes such as *Cirque de l'étoile filante* (1938), *Paysage biblique* (c. 1940-48), and *Le fugitif* (1945-46). Within fragmented interiors or exteriors, the figures are held by the fierce lines of Rouault's design. The luminescent arrangements of hills, trees, and the sun in these late compositions also relate to the tarot, whose imagery recurs across Rouault's work during this period, marking his interest in the ancient mystical beliefs of Hermeticism as well as his own Catholicism. *Le fugitif* alludes to the Fugitive card in some traditional tarot decks, the equivalent to the Fool. Rouault's use of the tarot reflects a widespread interest in the early to mid-20th century in the interconnections between different philosophies of religion and in mystical, rather than scientific, systems.

From the early 1900s onwards, Rouault often worked at a table instead of an easel, eschewing the traditions of fine art for the methods of the artisan. The table in his studio was littered with canvases in various states of progress, paint tubes, and brushes. Photographs show him dressed in a surgeon's white gown and hat, a gift from his physician son. Rouault later painted various clowns in similar attire, and there is a strong sense of the artist casting himself as the innocent circus figure, or the fool.

Rouault's work encompasses the serious social and political concerns of the early 20th century, as well as the experimentation and avant-gardism of modernist painting. Questioning perception at every level and positioning himself, like the clown, as an outsider looking into society, Rouault also questions painting itself — challenging the medium to take on the deepest and most difficult of subjects.

Dr. Jennifer Johnson is the author of *Georges Rouault and Material Imagining* (Bloomsbury, 2020). She is currently the Paul Mellon Fellow in British Art at the British School at Rome and is working on her next book about women artists and postwar abstraction.