

# Rehabilitating a wonderful artist

GEORGES ROUAULT WAS SEEN AS A MAJOR FIGURE IN 20TH CENTURY ART, BUT THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH IS PASSING ALMOST UNNOTICED. A LOCAL ART COLLECTOR EXPLAINS WHY THIS IS A CRIME

John Kohan is a retired *TIME* magazine correspondent and Cyprus-based art collector with an interest in Rouault's work

The Old King, 1937, is probably Rouault's best known work. It belongs to the Carnegie Institute

Nothing in the world of contemporary art should surprise me anymore, but I did a double take one morning last November, when I saw a news item on the TV in my Paris hotel room about an anonymous buyer, paying \$23.7 million in auction for a painting of Elizabeth Taylor by Pop-Art Idol Andy Warhol. I can understand a Van Gogh fetching that kind of price. But a work by Warhol, copied from a photograph, similar in style to eleven other portraits of the actress? I could just hear the proud new owner explaining to house guests that *his* Warhol was the one with the aquamarine blotch over Liz's eye.

Later on, I stopped by the Galerie Tamenaga to see a sales exhibition of works by French artist Georges Rouault. A huge canvas of three oafish, red-robed judges, outlined in broad, black brush strokes, immediately caught my eye. Not a trio you would ever want to hear your case in court! There was a world-weary, chalk-faced Pierrot, and a starkly simple head of Christ of ethereal gentleness. One glowing autumnal landscape in crusty blues, aquamarines, and yellows seemed painted with a brush dipped in jewels. I had never seen so many Rouaults in one place before. They were spectacular.

When I began totalling up the prices



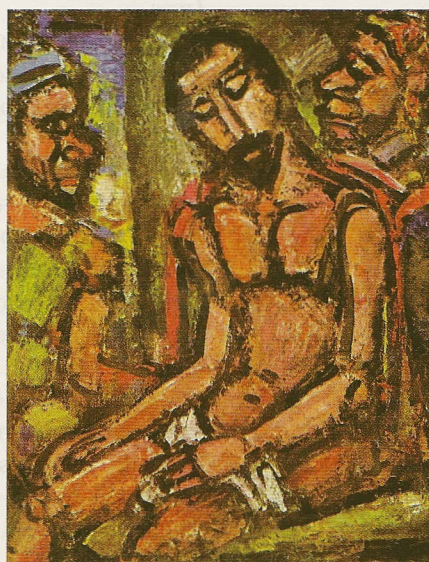
on these museum-worthy works, I got my second shock of the day. For what it cost to buy that one Warhol, I could have hauled off a truck-load of Rouaults. The art market may be fickle, but this was absurd.

Rouault was one of those fortunate artists who lived long enough to enjoy success. Looking with fierce, unblinking compassion at what he called "this anguished world of shadows and hollow men", he created expressionistic works that moved art lovers in the postwar years. In a monograph written for New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1947, James Thrall Soby concluded that "in relation to other living artists, [Rouault] emerges as one of the few major figures in 20th century painting." When Rouault died at age 86 in February 1958, the French government accorded him a state funeral with full pomp and circumstance.

Fifty years on, major museums across Europe and the United States are marking the anniversary of Rouault's death with a collective yawn. In his homeland, only the Pinacothèque de Paris is mounting a retrospective exhibition this autumn - borrowing works from Tokyo's Idemitsu Collection. What the French artist called his "outrageous lyricism" is clearly out of synch with post-modernist tastes.

Walking through the Museum of Modern Art in January, I could not find a single work on display by this once "major figure in 20th century painting". He seems to have tumbled into an aesthetic black hole - except, interestingly enough, in Japan, which claims the only Rouault museum in the world.

One reason for this neglect may be that in our era of "niche" art marketing, Rouault stubbornly refuses to be labelled. He first exhibited with the "Fauves" in Paris but was never concerned with decorative effects the way Matisse was. His art can certainly be called "Expressionist". Yet, Rouault was a far more deliberate painter than his German counterparts, not wanting to let go of a canvas until he had reworked it several times, leaving behind hundreds of unfinished and unsigned works. Never tempted by



Christ and the Pharisee 1937, top, from the Kohan collection. Christ Mocked by Soldiers, 1932, above, in storage in New York's Museum of Modern Art

pure abstraction like his contemporaries, Rouault created representational art until the day he died, though his portrait, still-life and landscape motifs are more *true* than real. In a sceptical, secular age, the onetime apprentice stained-glass maker kept his faith.

I wonder if art consumers, grown comfortable with "shock art", are made uneasy by Rouault. Damien Hurst is saying something about death with his human skull encrusted with 8,601 precious stones, but it's so slick you can't take it se-

riously. Have a look at the charnel house in plate 28 of Rouault's *Miserere et guerre* print series with its piles of skulls like leering faces. That's not so easy to dismiss. And there is more to this devoutly Christian artist's seething visual world than time-ravaged prostitutes, over-the-hill clowns, and houses of the dead. The rich impasto surfaces of his late biblical landscapes radiate a numinous light - holy, hopeful, healing - and that, too, runs counter to the glib nihilism of post-modernist art.

I have a modest proposal to make to the trustees of the Museum of Modern Art. During this anniversary year, replace those huge, lopsided colour triangles in the hall devoted to American Minimalist Ellsworth Kelly with prints from Rouault's *Miserere et guerre* series. These passionate black-grey studies of human folly and redemption would provide a perfect foil to Kelly's antiseptically abstract, single-colour rectangles on the opposite wall. In the room with the conceptualist fluorescent "installation", why not hang *Christ Mocked by the Soldiers*, that magnificent Rouault canvas now in your storage vault. Visitors could view this painting extolling human dignity in a new light and still ponder "spatial illumination" issues. Rouault *needs* to be remembered. ■