

The quarterly members' journal of Art and Christianity (A+C) ISSN 1746-6229 Summer 2023

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Sassetta  
*San Sepolcro Altarpiece, The Wolf of Gubbio, 1437-44*  
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# Telling her story

Tina Beattie explores art, Catholicism, and the female gaze in the work of Paula Rego



British-Portuguese artist Paula Rego (Dame Maria Paula Figueiroa Rego) was born in Lisbon in 1935. She produced a large body of work spanning a career of more than six decades – from her early association with The London Group (which included David Hockney and Frank Auerbach) in the 1960s, to her death on 8 June 2022. Her sources of inspiration were wide and continuously expanding, from the myths and folk tales told to her by her grandmother with whom she stayed as a young child, to pop culture, nursery rhymes, Disney films, and literary works such as Dylan Thomas's *Under Milkwood*, Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and the novels of Portuguese author José Saramago.

Rego spent her childhood in Portugal, then a deeply conservative Catholic country under the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar. In 1936 her Anglophile parents moved to London, leaving her in Lisbon in the care of her grandmother, where she attended an English-language school. Rego's father was a liberal who was opposed to both the Salazar regime and the Catholic Church. Her mother was an artist but did little to encourage her daughter's early signs of artistic talent, and the two had a difficult and distant relationship. Rego moved to the UK to attend finishing school in 1951 at the age of seventeen, but she was unhappy there and persuaded her parents to allow her to study at the Slade School of Art, which she attended from 1952 to 1956. She began an affair with her fellow student and future husband, Victor Willing, who was also a talented artist. Willing was married and he coerced Rego into having several abortions before she moved back to Ericeira in Portugal where she gave birth to a daughter, Caroline (Cas). Willing soon joined her and the two were married after his divorce in 1959. They had two more children, a daughter, Victoria, and a son, Nick. Willing took over Rego's father's failing busi-

ness when he died, against the older man's advice, and the result was several years of penury. The family moved back to London after the Carnation Revolution in 1974, when left-wing revolutionaries overthrew the *Estado Novo* regime established by Salazar. Despite the support of Rego and Willing for the revolution, their business was appropriated by the revolutionaries. Willing had by then been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and he died in 1988.

In 2017, Nick Willing made a BBC documentary of his mother's life and work, *Paula Rego: Secrets and Stories*, sharing deeply revealing and often poignant interviews with the artist and those who knew her. It becomes clear that, like her own mother, Rego was a distant and preoccupied mother. Her daughter Cas observes that 'she couldn't do any of that caring stuff', either with her children or with Willing when he was increasingly incapacitated by his illness. Rego speaks movingly about the conflict between motherhood and art, and about her resentment of Willing's illness. The art was all in all, and everything else had to revolve around it. 'It was brush or baby, that has always been the case,' she explains, likening painting pictures to being a man. 'It's the part of you that's a man.' That's a fascinating admission from an artist who perhaps did more than any other to expose the raw female flesh that subtends the socio-sexual order.

Rego and Willing had a turbulent marriage blighted by his extra-marital affairs, with several of his mistresses appearing in Rego's drawings. She too embarked on a number of affairs. Yet it was a love that endured until Willing's death in 1988, despite Rego saying she had to cut herself off from him in order to survive. Several of her works portray him during these painful years. When Rego died in 2022, she was buried alongside Willing in Hampstead Cemetery.



Below left: Paula Rego, *Crivelli's Garden*, 1990-1  
 The National Gallery, London. Presented by English Estates, 1991  
 © Ostrich Arts Ltd. Photo: The National Gallery, London  
 Right: Carlo Crivelli, *Altarpiece from S. Francesco dei Zoccolanti, Matelica*, after 1490  
 © The National Gallery, London



The year of Willing's death marked a turning point in Rego's career, with exhibitions at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon and the Serpentine Gallery in London bringing her international acclaim. She was the first Associate Artist at the National Gallery in London from 1990 to 1992, and she continued with her prolific output until shortly before her death.

Threading through all Rego's works is the formative influence of her early life. She filtered her experiences of living under a Catholic dictatorship through a lens that focused on the trauma, resilience, and defiant vulnerability of female bodies caught in the vice of these oppressive religious and political cultures. In an in-depth study that situates Rego's life and art in a wider context of cultural, religious and artistic influences and resonances, Maria Manuel Lisboa observes that 'her images are rooted in a pre-existing context whose nuances inform the resulting pictures, and are central to their meaning'.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these images are unsettling, often grotesque or surreal, sometimes metamorphosing between human and animal forms. They are haunted with a sense of violent eroticism, raw sexuality, and tormented flesh blurring into each other. In her vivid representations of women ranging from the Virgin Mary to women in the throes of abortion, Rego's work subverts the reification of Woman as an essentialist ideal and unleashes female life in all its fleshy abundance and diversity. Her women are wounded and proud, undefeated by the struggles that are written into their writhing limbs and violated bodies. The mottled bodies are evocative of Lucian Freud, but where the 'male gaze' refers to bodies seen through an androcentric lens by both artist and intended viewer, Rego's gynocentric focus constitutes a 'female gaze'.

Christopher Moore likens Rego's art to Luce Irigaray's philosophy. Rego paints the history of art in the same way that Irigaray writes the history of philosophy, as an exposure of 'an unaccountable and unaccounted (female) coefficient [that] was always missing'.<sup>2</sup> To understand what this means, we might turn to Rego's 1991 work commissioned by the National Gallery, *Crivelli's Garden*, inspired by Carlo Crivelli's 15th-century altarpiece in the gallery, *Predella of La Madonna della Rondine*. Rego explains how, during her residency at the National Gallery, she occupied the artist's studio in the basement where she felt like 'a scurrying animal':

I could creep upstairs and snatch at things, and bring them down with me to where I could munch away at them. And what I brought down here from upstairs varied a lot, but I always brought something into my den.

Rego attributes her interest in the Christian story as told through art to those years of working in the National Gallery.<sup>3</sup> Her *Crivelli's Garden* reimagines the stories of women biblical figures and medieval saints by situating them in Crivelli's house and garden. As with all her art, the references are allusive and personalised, with the characters representing various people known to Rego. An exhibition at the National Gallery later this year (20 July – 29 Oct) will display the Crivelli and Rego works alongside each other and explore their relationship.<sup>4</sup>

This Crivelli work, with its domesticated array of homely women, lacks the sense of trauma that haunts many of Rego's paintings and drawings. Catholicism suffuses much of the work with a religious sensibility tensed between outright rejection and willing conformity. In the BBC documentary, she passionately asserts that she believes in God and in the Virgin Mary, but whether these occupied the same imaginative plane as the other myths and stories that inspired



Paula Rego, *Annunciation*, 2002

her is impossible to know. When questioned about her belief in God, she is reported elsewhere as saying, 'I think it is because I am Portuguese and because I love stories, and Christianity is a very good story.'<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Rego's politicised feminist relationship to Catholicism is best explored through two of her works – the controversial *Abortion Pastels* (1998), and the *Nossa Senhora* series representing the life of the Virgin Mary (2002). The ten pictures and numerous etchings in the *Abortion* series represent the trauma of illegal abortion. They were Rego's passionate response to the result of a Portuguese referendum to legalise abortion in 1998, which was strongly opposed by the Catholic hierarchy and was defeated by a narrow majority. A second referendum in 2007 resulted in a majority voting for the legalisation of abortion – a result that is believed to have been influenced by Rego's paintings, etchings of which were widely distributed.

Rego's own experiences of illegal abortion made her acutely sensitive to the isolation, vulnerability and loss experienced by women and girls in such situations. A girl in a school uniform squats on a bucket, her face set in an expression of resignation as well as determination. This forms part of a triptych, with each of the three women positioned differently. One lies on her back with her knees raised and parted as if giving birth or inviting sexual penetration, while the third lies curled on a trolley, her desolation intensified by the empty chair and the bucket beside her. In another picture, a schoolgirl is curled up in foetal position on a shabby settee, her trainers and ankle socks a poignant reminder of how young she is. An older woman in a blue shift and red scarf gazes defiantly out of the frame, legs akimbo with her shift draped between them. Whom is she looking at? The backstreet abortionist? The man who caused the pregnancy? Or the viewer, daring us to judge her, to criminalise her plight? The rug beneath her and the bowl beside her are presumably intended to catch the mess – though there is no blood and gore in these images, and there are no aborted fetuses. Rego explained that she avoided anything that would sicken her viewers because she wanted them to find the images attractive to look at. These women and girls are both vulnerable and defiant,

refusing to be cowed by the dictates of society or to conform to the childbearing imperatives of patriarchal religion and culture. They may have had little choice over the sex act and no access to contraception, but they are refusing to accept the maternal role that society would force upon them as punishment or reward for sex.

I find these images disturbing but searingly honest. In showing the complex emotions of the women, they lack the bravado of some in the pro-choice movement, who celebrate the right to abortion as an affirmation of women's autonomy. Today, the far right once again seeks to seize control of women's reproductive bodies, not only in the United States but in some of Europe's nationalist political regimes. Conservative Christian men constitute a high proportion of those most vociferously in favour of criminalising abortion. For all Pope Francis's calls for a more pastorally sensitive and compassionate church in touch with the realities of everyday life, there is no attempt to understand what drives women to seek abortions, even though thousands of poor women continue to risk their lives with illegal abortions rather than carrying their pregnancies to term. As Rego observed in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2019, speaking of women who suffered the consequences of backstreet abortions in Portugal: 'It affected the poor disproportionately. If you were rich it was easier to find a safe way to have an abortion, usually by travelling to another country. Poor women were butchered.'<sup>6</sup>

Rego was commissioned by Portuguese president Jorge Sampaio to create the series about the life of Mary for the chapel in his official residence, the Palácio de Belém. The eight pastel drawings include *Annunciation*; *Nativity*; *Adoration*; *Purification at the Temple*; *Flight into Egypt*; *Lamentation*; *Pietà*, and *Assumption*. The project so delighted Rego that she did additional pastels for her own personal collection.

Discussing the commission in an interview with Richard Zimler in 2003, Rego emphasised the novelty of such works being done by a woman: 'A woman telling the story – in fact, Mary telling the story.'<sup>7</sup> The images are unsettling and disrupt expectations honed by familiarity with the story. In an interview published in this magazine (#108, Winter 2021), Rowan Williams describes them as 'a deliberate messing with your theological mind.' The pictures are odd, but there is little that directly offends. Rego said they 'were created with admiration and respect', but some conservative Catholics wrote an open letter to the president declaring the works to be an 'outrage done to the vast majority of the Portuguese people ... and an offence to the Virgin Mary.'<sup>8</sup> In the BBC documentary, Sampaio explains that he invited the local cardinal to see the series, and 'he was really impressed, very impressed'.

The contrast between the *Abortion Pastels* and the *Nossa Senhora* series is perhaps more apparent than real. Like the girls in the *Abortion* pictures, Rego's Mary is a young woman who must face the bewildering reality of pregnancy and childbearing alone, perhaps enduring a pregnancy that she never wanted, with only a strangely amorphous angel to accompany her. This is, Rego explains, Mary's guardian angel. It appears in different scenes as a consoling maternal figure, a controlling matriarch, a male voyeur, and a young boy. Williams refers to

the queering of the angelic figure... saying something about the fact that the narrative of the Annunciation and of the Nativity is, in the widest possible sense, a queering story; it's a story in which issues around gender and identity and power and compliance and all



sorts of other things are just rolled together in a wildly anarchic way.

In the Annunciation, the angel is an androgynous figure in a crinoline dress, looming over Mary with flared wings, while Mary sits on a low stool, reading a book as she often is in traditional Catholic art, wearing a pleated skirt evocative of the schoolgirls in the *Abortion* series. In the Nativity the bearded angel stares down at her lying splayed between its legs in childbirth, her posture again echoing some of the women in the *Abortion* Pastels. Each image combines a sense of earthy reality with a hint of an unsettling otherness.

The series is a defiant assertion of a woman's reality over and against the idealised romanticism of the Catholic tradition, though as with all such subversive readings, it remains within that tradition and not outside of it. Rego's Mary is stripped of transcendence, shorn of her divine maternity, embodying the strength and struggle of women who have borne the weight of that dominant tradition but refused to let themselves be crushed by it – like Rego herself perhaps. As Williams says, 'It's as if the artist is saying: what you're seeing is, let's be clear, what I'm seeing. This is my world; these are my figures.'

Richard Rohr's expression of being 'on the edge of the inside' could well describe the relationship between Rego's iconoclastic art and her Catholicism. Her anarchic imagination belongs within an enduring if not mainstream tradition of Catholic art. From the tortured crucifixions of medieval art to the vividly depicted martyrdoms of the saints, from Hieronymus Bosch's orgiastic representations of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1495-1505, to Salvador Dali's surrealism, there is a visceral stream of corporal agony and ecstasy running through the Catholic artistic tradition. Artemisia Gentileschi might be seen as a distant forebear of Rego, with her female-centred portrayals of biblical scenes such as *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612-13, and *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610.

It is clear from the interviews with her son that Rego's art was her life, and she lived her life through art. She was painfully shy, quietly spoken and gently humorous, and admitted to never having shaken off the inhibitions and constraints of her upbringing. She suffered from times of dark depression and heavy drinking. It is telling that in the early 1990s she did a series of paintings titled *Dog Women*, through which she sought to express her sense of loss and mourning after Willing's death. Hettie Judah writes of these paintings that 'they communicate some deeply rooted, horrifying darkness that we recognise within ourselves: terrible pain, grief, longing and humiliation.' Judah traces these images back to Rego's early experience of the Salazar regime: 'The cowering obedience of the Dog Women was learned here: under the forces of a dictatorship and a society that demanded compliant behaviour of its women.'<sup>9</sup>

Rego's 1998 painting *Angel* shows an imposing and avenging figure, not dissimilar to the angel in the *Nossa Senhora* series, wearing a dramatic long gold and black dress, wielding a sword in one hand and a sponge in the other. The painting is the last in a series inspired by Eca de Queiroz's controversial 1875 novel, *The Sin of Father Amaro*. In the BBC documentary, Rego describes the angel as a punishing figure seeking justice for the priest's pregnant lover and her child. She says of it that 'I feel very strongly about that picture.' Perhaps that avenging angel represents the passion for justice that drove Rego to strip away the masks of respectability and convention that hide the realities of women's lives as exposed in her art, dirempted between eroticism and anguish, fecundity and futility, absurdity and strength.



Paula Rego, *Angel*, 1998

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1. Maria Manuel Lisboa, *Essays on Paula Rego: Smile When You Think About Hell* (Open Book Publishers, 2019), p. 201.
2. Christopher Moore, 'Paula Rego: Cruel Stories for Curious Women', *Ran Dian*, 5 November 2018, at [https://www.randian-online.com/np\\_feature/paula-rego-cruel-stories-for-curious-women/](https://www.randian-online.com/np_feature/paula-rego-cruel-stories-for-curious-women/).
3. See Richard Zimler, 'Mary's cross: a previously unpublished interview with Paula Rego', *The Church Times*, 15 July 2022, at <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/15-july/features/features/mary-s-cross-a-previously-unpublished-interview-with-paula-rego>.
4. See the National Gallery press release from which the Rego quotation is taken: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about-us/press-and-media/press-releases/paula-rego-crivelli-s-garden>.
5. Quoted in Victoria Miro exhibition notes, 'Paula Rego: Secrets of Faith', April 23 – June 22 2022, *Mutual Art* at <https://www.mutualart.com/Exhibition/Paula-Rego--Secrets-of-Faith/163D2246A30C4DD8>.
6. Lanre Bakare, 'Paula Rego calls US anti-abortion drive "grotesque"', *The Guardian*, Friday, 31 May 2019 at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/31/paula-rego-calls-us-anti-abortion-drive-grotesque>.
7. Interview with Richard Zimler.
8. Ibid.
9. Hettie Judah, 'Paula Rego: an artist of unflinching emotional honesty', 24 January 2020, at ART UK: <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/paula-rego-an-artist-of-unflinching-emotional-honesty>.