

THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE



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from functional craft to non-functional art in modern studio ceramics. Yet, like Dale Chihuly in glass, whose work is an omnipresent fixture in so many art museums, he is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. The broader history may be defined by the acceptance of craft within a fine arts educational and institutional context – Voukos was a G.I. Bill student, and later played his part in making ceramics part of MFA programmes. But as is suggested by the ‘re-branding’ of the Museum of American Craft as the Museum of Arts and Design, craft media have still not been completely accepted and integrated within the larger art world, even if ceramics have become fashionable of late. A half-century after the developments highlighted in this exhibition, the relationship between craft and art and the status of ceramics continue to be uncertain and contested. Yet Voukos and his breakthrough years remain as compelling as ever.

¹ Catalogue: *Voukos: The Breakthrough Years*. Edited by Glenn Adamson, Barbara Paris Gifford and Andrew Perchuk, with contributions by the editors, Jenni Sorkin, Elissa Auther and others. 208 pp. incl. 67 col. + 48 b. & w. ills. (Black Dog Publishing, London, and Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2016), \$34.95 (PB). ISBN 978-1-91043-89-8 (Black Dog Publishing); 978-1-890385-36-1 (Museum of Arts and Design).

² R. Slivka and K. Tsujimoto: *The Art of Peter Voukos*, New York 1995, p.47.

³ “‘New Talent’ Display at Museum’, *New York Times* (2nd February 1960), p.40.

⁴ Adamson, Gifford and Perchuk, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.84.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Modern Art, New York, in 2014–15, which sought to place the artist into an American historiography. The present exhibition – conceived by Sharon Hecker and Tamara H. Schenkenberg – builds on these earlier projects, but seeks to reach a deeper understanding of why and to what effect Rosso made his sculptures the way he did. The chief argument advanced here is that Rosso’s artistic project is informed by light and the development of photographic technologies. Although this is not a new proposal – Rosso’s concern with light and photography is well established – the exhibition attempts to convey these themes visually. The Pulitzer’s remarkable building, which comprises galleries flooded with natural light as well as underground rooms with controlled artificial lighting, is used to both demonstrate the impact of atmospheric conditions on the objects and to explore Rosso’s experimentation with light as part of his working process.

The exhibition includes twenty-six sculptures and more than seventy photographs and drawings, making this the most comprehensive survey of Rosso’s work in a North American museum to date. Some of Rosso’s best-known works are included, alongside many others that are rarely seen. The key themes are introduced in the first room, which presents three variations of one work, *Carne altrui* (*Flesh of others*), in plaster, wax and bronze (1883–84; cat. pp.28–29), alongside a case of six photographs depicting the sculpture from different vantage points. In the same space, the sculpture *Portinaia* (*Concierge*) (p.16; Fig.98), made of wax and plaster, is placed next to eight photographic renditions of the piece (Fig.97). The relationships between these works confound the linear logic of production that we tend to expect from sculpture. There is no clear start and

end point; the wax does not represent a beginning, it may or may not have preceded the bronze and plaster, and it is no more original or derivative than the other versions. What we can take from this display is that variation and repetition are intrinsic to Rosso’s conception of each sculpture. The question arises – should we be thinking of Rosso’s work in terms of originality and repetition at all?

Photography provides a way of capturing the subjective, variable nature of perception. Rosso’s photographs are taken variously from the left or right of the sculpture, from above, low down or straight on. From image to image the depicted object appears different, sometimes only subtly, sometimes radically. These conventions of photography are familiar. More surprising are the unorthodox ways in which the individual prints have been snipped and cropped, without regard for pleasing proportions or rectilinearity. The purpose seems to be controlling the point of focus, bringing particular details to the fore while diminishing others. A similar kind of control is exercised in the objects themselves – sculptures taken from the same mould are differently cropped, terminated, reoriented and finished, effectively making each version into something new. The plaster of *Carne altrui* is surrounded by a phalange left over from the moulding process, which transforms the sculpture into a relief-like tondo; this detail is absent in the bronze, which is truncated and angled so as to emphasise the face. If the similarities and differences between each version prompt a comparative mode of looking, Rosso’s sculptures, in analogue to his photographs, also summon the idea of a creative process that is inconclusive and endlessly open.

Moving from a low-ceilinged, relatively dark space into a double-height gallery with

Medardo Rosso

Saint Louis

by MARTINA DROTH

THE EXHIBITION *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form* at the **Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Saint Louis** (to 13th May),¹ is the second major showing of Medardo Rosso’s work to be held in the city. In 2003, *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions* travelled from Harvard Art Museums to the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas. That exhibition was informed by detailed technical research and made a virtue of Rosso’s notoriously repetitious *œuvre*.² Much of what we have come to know and understand about Rosso was established by that show: after 1906 he made no new sculptures, but instead reworked existing ones; he cast, rather than modelled, his waxes; and the evidence of production, such as casting seams, visible on so many of his sculptures, were left there intentionally. Other Rosso exhibitions have been held in the United States since then, notably one at the Center for Italian



96. *Une conversation*. by Medardo Rosso. 1892–99. Plaster, 35 by 66.5 by 41 cm. (Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio; exh. Pulitzer Arts Foundation St Louis).

generous windows, the exhibition shifts into a different gear, focusing on the play of natural light on Rosso's sculptural forms and surfaces. Rosso is often referred to as an Impressionist, and here we can see where this idea comes from. The unassuming plaster *Une conversation* (p.25; Fig.96), probably a cast from a clay model, is a masterful example of the barely-there. From a distance, light and shadow resolve the loosely modelled composition into decipherable figures – a standing man and two seated women. But, when we move closer, the shadows peel back and the figures turn into mere lumps of material. Like a painting dissolving into brushstrokes up close, Rosso's sculpture becomes a blur of finger marks.

Even though Rosso used only three kinds of material for the works shown here – plaster, wax and bronze – they possess remarkable variety. Most striking are the colours and tonal qualities of the sculptures. This is partly an effect of light, as one would expect, but more often the sculptures also incorporate tone and colour physically. We might hesitate to describe Rosso's work as 'polychrome', since the colours appear so earthy and natural, but when we look closely at the sculptures, it becomes clear that Rosso has purposefully calibrated their colour and tone. If *Birichino (Ragamuffin)* (1882; p.14) appears to flicker with light and shade, it is because light and shade are materially inscribed



98. *Portinaia (Concierge)*, by Medardo Rosso. 1883–84. Wax and plaster, 37.4 by 29 by 17 cm. (Collection PCC, Switzerland; exh. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis).



97. *Portinaia (Concierge)*, by Medardo Rosso. Gelatin silver print cut, 14 by 7.3 cm. (Private collection; exh. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis).

in the contrast of the dark bronze patina and the pieces of white plaster investment left behind in grooves. *Enfant à la bouchée de pain (Child in the soup kitchen)* (1892–97; p.35) is also a bronze with plaster investment, but the whole sculpture is synchronised in shades of white, the lighter shades acting as a halo-like frame around the smooth, creamy colour of the child's face.

This interplay of material, colour and light is further examined in a so-called 'light room' in the lower level of the building, which singles out one of Rosso's most famous works – *Ecce Puer (Behold the child)* (1906; p.6) – for special treatment. Installed on a tall plinth without a case, the sculpture can be viewed under different artificial light effects, which the visitor can manipulate on a tablet. This is no mere gimmick, but a thoughtful curatorial experiment which seeks to reconstruct the kind of light conditions Rosso might have used to stage his sculptures. It is well known that he was fastidious about lighting, and the recreation of these ephemeral effects turns an otherwise abstract understanding of his intent into an accessible experience. As the light changes, so the colour, form and texture of the sculpture change. We know light to be an instrument of photography; what is suggested here is that light is equally relevant for the perception of sculpture. The effects of the light blanching and darkening the surface of *Ecce Puer* is not so far removed from the way light and shadow develop on a photosensitised sheet. Light, for Rosso, we might conclude, is a medium for both sculpture and

photography, and even represents the point of their intersection.

The exhibition is accompanied by a slim booklet with essays by the curators. It will be followed later this year by a substantial volume gathering together new research stimulated by the exhibition in an effort to revitalise interest in the artist. Rosso has continued to be a marginal figure in mainstream art history. It is sometimes suggested that this is due to his idiosyncrasy and maverick persona, but these are qualities that art history usually prizes. Rosso's marginal status may have to do with his sculpture being so very slight, so close to reverting to mere matter, and so nearly appearing not like sculpture at all. His objects are not simply unorthodox; they are understated to the degree of failing to project any self-importance as art. It can be hard to get beyond this sense of the barely-there when so little of Rosso's work can be seen in public museums. This exhibition demonstrates that Rosso is best understood when seen in quantity – cumulatively, the sculptures, photographs and drawings resolve into an artistic project that is as fascinating and rich as it is coherent.

¹ Booklet: *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form*. By Sharon Hecker and Tamara H. Schenkenberg. 58 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis, 2016), free. ISBN 978-0-9976901-3-2. The plates are not numbered.

² H. Cooper and S. Hecker, eds.: exh. cat. *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions*, Cambridge MA (Harvard Art Museums), Saint Louis (Saint Louis Art Museum) and Dallas (Nasher Sculpture Center) 2003–04.