

SALVATOR ROSA

Salvator Rosa (1615–1673) was one of the boldest and most powerfully inventive artists and personalities of the Italian seventeenth century. He is still best known as ‘savage Rosa’, the creator of wild landscapes, where bandits and hermits lurk amongst shattered trees and rocks. But Rosa’s range was wide, and he was also an actor and a major satirical poet. His grace and charm delighted the literary and scholarly worlds, yet he was also excessively vain and quarrelsome, and often involved in bitter feuds.

Rosa was born in Naples, where he painted battle scenes and small landscapes, enlivened by vivid everyday figures; he absorbed much of the violence and harsh naturalism of seventeenth-century Neapolitan painting. He moved first to Rome and then, in 1640, to Florence, where he won the patronage of Cardinal Giovan Carlo de’ Medici. Here he became famous for ‘a new and most beautiful manner of painting landscapes and marines’, but his ambitions grew, and, encouraged by a circle of distinguished intellectuals, he began to write satire and to paint increasingly learned subjects. His macabre scenes of witchcraft appealed to a Florentine taste for the bizarre, and he introduced a novel kind of allegorical painting, full of recondite symbolism. After nine years Rosa found the court restricting, and Florentine life provincial, and he sought in Rome a wider stage to satisfy his insatiable thirst for fame.

In Rome Rosa’s art became grander and more heroic. He now longed to be accepted as a philosopher painter, and bitterly resented his reputation as a painter of genre and landscape. He sought to startle and intrigue a learned public with novel subjects, boasting that they were ‘altogether and in every way new, and never touched by anyone else’. Yet his considerable success never satisfied, and he attacked a hostile world with a recklessly satirical painting, *Fortuna*, showing Fortune favouring fools. In his final decade his paintings became more mysterious and poetic. He now painted dreams and prophecies, wonders and marvels, and those ancient philosophers who had fearlessly confronted the elements. His late landscapes, dark and awe-inspiring, are amongst his most moving works.

Portraits

Salvator Rosa's portraits present an attractively personal side of his art. He did not paint official or commissioned portraits, but imaginary portraits of philosophers, allegorical figures, and 'heads', or *teste*. Only one, his *Portrait of Lucrezia*, is a true portrait, and presents a fresh and direct likeness of the sitter.

Philosopher portraits were popular in Naples, and Rosa's philosophers, intensely naturalistic and striking in character and expression, are rooted in the art of the Spanish artist Juseppe de Ribera, in whose studio Rosa had worked. Boldly silhouetted against light backgrounds, they confront the spectator with a variety of attributes, scrolls, inscriptions, or a surprising mechanical dove. In Florence there was a taste for three-quarter length allegorical figures, and it was here that the artist, now celebrated as poet and painter, created personifications of the arts to please his courtly patrons.

Rosa was a flamboyant personality, unusually charming and graceful, and a skilled self-publicist. In a small group of self-portraits he presented his many sided talents with panache, showing himself as actor, painter or philosopher, contemplating the transience of all earthly things. These are personal works, which Rosa gave to his scholarly friends from the literary academies of Florence and Pisa, where writers and painters enjoyed exchanging poems and portraits. For his friends, too, Rosa made gifts of 'heads', comparatively small and informal paintings full of character and a sense of mystery. He produced many such works, and this kind of portraiture, of strongly characterized fanciful heads, of interesting types - aged philosophers, 'Turks', soldiers and bandits - was popular in the seventeenth century, and rooted in a growing interest in the exotic.

Landscapes

Rosa, his friend and biographer Passeri tells us, was born in Naples, the garden of the world. Here he painted, with a new freshness and directness, the beauties of the Neapolitan coastline, with its high cliffs, grottoes and sea-carved arches of rock.

In Rome, and later Florence, Rosa responded to all that was new in landscape painting, to the brilliant light effects of Claude Lorrain, and to the coast scenes and mountain views of Dutch and Flemish landscapists, full of lively figures of sailors, travellers and wandering pedlars. He was attracted by wild landscape, and loved to paint in the rocky countryside around Volterra, where, amongst the crags, plains and mountains, water and torrents, he found the 'fittest nourishment of his painterly talent that could ever be seen'. Later Rosa moved away from these brightly coloured Tuscan coastal scenes and landscapes to grander, more classically structured works, with a vast scenery of windswept trees, rushing torrents and stormy clouds.

In 1662 he travelled in Umbria and the Marches, and wrote of his pleasure in the rugged countryside, with its 'extraordinary combination of the terrifying and the domestic, of flat country and crags'; he exclaimed over the desolate hermitages he saw by the roadside, and admired the 'terrifying beauty' of the falls at Terni. His later landscapes, with their splintered trees, rocks and caves, became increasingly theatrical, and man seems tiny and insubstantial before the violence of the elements. Often they are inhabited by hermit saints, or picturesque armed men, who seem emblems of a wild nature. His fame in England, in the Romantic period and beyond, depended on these dark and awe-inspiring landscapes, so neatly summarised in Horace Walpole's famous comment: 'Precipices, mountains, wolves, torrents, rumblings - Salvator Rosa'.

Witches

Salvator Rosa's scenes of witchcraft are amongst the most bizarre images of seventeenth-century art. The practice of witchcraft was then still perceived as a reality, and the background to these paintings lies in the manuals of Renaissance demonologists, which codified in detail the perceived activities of witches. At the centre of such writings was the idea of the Sabbath, a vast meeting of witches where the devil was worshipped. The witch, having stripped naked and anointed herself with an unguent, travelled to this ceremony on a broomstick, a goat, or at the centre of a monstrous cavalcade.

Italian painters had often painted the beautiful sorceresses of classical literature, but Rosa turned for inspiration to the ugly and obscene witches created by such German artists as Hans Baldung Grien and Albrecht Dürer, and blended this novel imagery with macabre skeletons culled from contemporary anatomical illustration. He shows an array of grotesque old women, some astride skeletons, others practising divination, necromancy and the casting of love spells. He paints elaborate still lives of the ingredients of magic, amongst them a hangman's rope, a wax model and mirror, a heavy book, a dead bird and skull, papers with magic signs and letters, leaves and herbs, the hanging body of a condemned criminal. The spirit of these paintings is satirical, and, particularly in Florence, Rosa's literary friends delighted in macabre themes, vying with one another in gruesomeness. Rosa himself wrote a poem, *The Witch*, which has some affinity in mood with the famous scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where the witches, amongst a feverish variety of horrid items, toss into their hellish broth 'scale of dragon, tooth of wolf, Witches' mummy, maw and gulf'.

Bandits

Rosa's first brigand scenes are rooted in reality, and show, with vivid realism, the highwaymen who terrorised the countryside around Naples and Rome in the early seventeenth century. In 1656 he moved away from this realism with a series of etched figures, the 'figurine', a dazzling array of imaginary warriors, in fanciful and archaic armour, who seem united by vivid gesture and expression in tense and mysterious dramas. At the same date Rosa began to enrich his wild landscapes with such figures, who, remote and exotic, are far removed from the contemporary bandits of his first genre scenes. In Italy they were called *soldatini* or 'small soldiers'. The *soldatini* are associated with harsh and inaccessible countryside, and perhaps they evoked, to a contemporary viewer, the dangerous glamour of rough bands of outlawed men who haunted the Abruzzi and the Garfagnana, the wildest heights of the Apennines.

In England these figures were called banditti, and 'savage' Rosa's name rapidly became synonymous with wild scenery and bandits. The mystery of the mood which Rosa created inspired writers to spin legends and stories around them, and by the mid eighteenth century Rosa had himself become a legendary figure, identified with his own banditti. It was believed that he had been part of the Brigade of Death, a mythical band of soldier artists who had taken part in Masaniello's popular uprising against Spanish power in Naples in 1646. A slightly later story relates that Rosa had been a prisoner of the bandits of the Abruzzi. Lady Morgan, Rosa's nineteenth-century biographer declared with confidence 'though few of his biographers allude to the event, and those few but vaguely, yet tradition authenticates a fact to which some of his finest pictures afford a circumstantial evidence'.

Philosophy and Magic

An overriding love and thirst for glory created in him, from his early years, a passionate desire to appear in all his words and deeds a true philosopher. His thoughts were always full of dreams of walking beneath the spacious porticoes of Athens in the company of the ancient Stoics.

So his biographer, Baldinucci, described Rosa's burning passion for fame and his yearning to be accorded the status of a philosopher. To this end Rosa painted both philosopher portraits, and scenes from the lives of the ancient philosophers. His subjects do not convey any personal beliefs, but rather a search for novelty, and reflect the interests of those scholars and literary men in whose company he took such pleasure.

In his early years Rosa painted the Cynics and Stoics, around whom clustered debates on the virtues of the simple life, and on contempt for death and fortune; he celebrated the iron-willed hero of antiquity, Atilius Regulus, one of the most famous exemplars of Stoic virtue. In his late years Rosa moved away from these moral subjects. In a satire of 1656 he declared that the painter should be not only poet but also philosopher, a spirit inspired in his search for the great secrets of nature. His later philosophers reflect the interests of the scientific world in 1660s Rome, where experimental science existed alongside an older culture of wonders and marvels; Rosa depicted natural philosophers and magicians, from the earliest eras of civilisation, who seemed the heroic precursors of the Galilean scientists of modern times. This culture touches his mythological and biblical paintings of the 1660s, when Rosa painted dreams, prophecies and the strange creations of nature. Archytas creates a mechanical dove; Tobias finds a magical fish, and Jason pours poison onto a fiery dragon.

Allegory and History

Allegory and satire play a special role in Rosa's art, which was in so many ways unusually literary, and in this mode of expression Rosa's paintings and poems are especially close. In a group of novel allegorical paintings he took up those topics central to much of seventeenth-century satire – the sorry state of the arts in a corrupt age, fortune, envy and the misery of man. He used well-known texts, such as Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* and Andrea Alciati's *Emblems*, to create an allegorical language based on classical sources, and drew too on popular collections of aphorisms and maxims and the *Fables* of Aesop.

Fortune was a favourite allegorical subject, and Rosa showed the goddess both indifferent, hurtling blindly forward on the ever rolling ball of chance, and malicious, tipping wealth and finery onto a crowd of stolid animals. The *vanitas*, a contemplation of the transitoriness of human life, was another theme that Rosa liked, and his laments on the misery of human existence and the futility of all achievement are close in spirit to much of Florentine seventeenth-century lyric poetry. His choice of subject paintings – philosophers, Old Testament prophets, the fearless Stoic heroes of antiquity – often continue the idea of fortune and the satirist-painter's anger at the corruption of his times. Others, whose themes are prophecy and magic, create deeply poetic moods of mystery and enchantment.

+ Acknowledgements

TO FOLLOW (AMY CONCANNON TO PROVIDE)