

Medardo Rosso Inventing Modern Sculpture

October 18, 2024, to February 23, 2025

Press conference

Thursday, October 17, 2024, 10 a.m.

Opening

Thursday, October 17, 2024, 7 p.m.



Medardo Rosso

Ecce Puer in his studio in Boulevard des Batignolles, 1906
modern print from original glass negative
17,9 x 13 cm

© Archivio Medardo Rosso

Media contact

Katharina Murschetz
T +43 1 52500-1400
katharina.murschetz@mumok.at

Katharina Kober
T +43 1 52500-1309
katharina.kober@mumok.at

Fax +43 1 52500-1300
presse@mumok.at
www.mumok.at

Artist and artisan, art theorist and proto-installation artist, master of high-publicity productions and rival of Auguste Rodin, Medardo Rosso (b. 1858 in Turin, d. 1928 in Milan) was one of the great pioneers of modernism and a figure as extraordinary as he was eccentric.

mumok is dedicating a comprehensive retrospective to the Italian-French artist's still little-known oeuvre, which will feature about fifty sculptures and a large selection of photographs, photocollages, and drawings. The show thus also ties in with the museum's earliest collection holdings.

In opposition to the burgeoning nationalism of his time, Rosso regarded himself as a "European anarchist born on a train," as he repeatedly emphasized. Rosso created an oeuvre that pursued a fundamentally anti-monumental, anti-heroic approach and defied all logics of the art industry. His "blurry" sculptures seem for a blink of an eye to peel individuals out of an anonymous crowd, thereby not only mirroring the radical changes in perception of the artist's time but also negotiating the collective upheaval within a society shaped by sweeping modernization and alienation around 1900.

The exhibition delves into a thorough analysis of Rosso's processual and repetitive approach, with which the artist defied all conventions of traditional sculpture. A concise selection of works by artists directly or indirectly influenced by Rosso—such as Jean-Siméon Chardin, Edgar Degas, Constantin Brâncuși, Louise Bourgeois, Jasper Johns, Robert Morris, Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Marisa Merz, and Phyllida Barlow—further unpack and create a dialogue with Rosso's equally groundbreaking and hermetic work. The show thus adheres to Rosso's own artistic practice of never exhibiting alone but always in "conversation" with others.

Excepting a year of study at the Accademia di Brera in Milan, Medardo Rosso was self-taught. Born in Turin in 1858, he was a permanent resident of Paris from 1889 on. There, he befriended Auguste Rodin, whose collaborator and later rival he became. Both artists sought to radically redefine the ostensibly unmodern medium of sculpture, which had been stuck in the confines of the monumental. Designed in the spirit of a fluid idea of modernism and shaped by the philosopher Henri Bergson's revolutionary concept of space and time, Rosso's sculptures overcame classical characteristics such as solidity and durability in favor of modern phenomena of the transitory and immaterial. His efforts to dynamically blend the figure into its surroundings and to inscribe this permanent malleability into the kinetic surface of the atmospheric environment make Rosso a precursor to Futurism.

In the course of his artistic evolution, Rosso homed in on a highly selective visual repertoire, to which he wouldn't add anything new from 1906 to his death. Time and again, he returned to this repertoire, repeated it in various materials and media, intensified and deepened it. In retrospect, this mode of working seems like an equally defiant and incredibly timely response to the cataclysms of modernism, part of which was the fledgling art market and its logics of exploitation.

For his sculptures, Rosso often reverted to bronze as well as wax or plaster, materials that had hitherto been deemed unworthy of art and used in the sculptural process in preproduction only. Furthermore, he employed painterly compositional means such as pigment coating to achieve changing tones of color and light or experimented with contamination or accidental traces of the work process. Rosso developed essential media- and material-aesthetic considerations on sculpture and the relationship between the figure and its environment through the medium of photography, which he systematically included in his creative process from 1900 on and exhibited together with his sculptures as ensembles.

Rosso thus approached a fundamental reassessment of the surrounding space. He saw it as an integral part of the sculptural effect. The way his works were displayed and presented increasingly moved to the center of his attention. The artist was also adept at staging effective public performances of his sculptural process. He repeatedly made a show of casting figures in his studio, thus emphasizing—unlike most of his contemporaries—his dual role of artist and artisan.

Medardo Rosso's busy exhibition activities took him all over Europe. His first appearance in Austria was in 1903 as part of the Impressionism exhibition at the Vienna Secession. In 1905, Kunstsalon Artaria at Kohlmarkt devoted the first comprehensive solo exhibition to him. Rosso's exhibition practice, with which he directed his audience's perception, attracted a great deal of attention at the time. He presented his objects in iron-framed glass cases that he made himself and that were strategically positioned employing electric lighting. He was also adamant about the scant architecture of the exhibition space—an unusual design element at the time. Another thing specific to Rosso's exhibition practice was the incorporation of works by contemporaries like Rodin and copies of works from other periods of art history.

120 years after his last presentation in Vienna, mumok is now taking Rosso's principle of comparative viewing as a starting point to highlight the groundbreaking nature of his experimental, genre-bending approach, juxtaposing historical and contemporary works by other artists from mumok's holdings as well as international collections.

As these encounters will show, Rosso's work heralded the most important paradigm shifts of twentieth-century art—from form to material and process, from originality

and uniqueness to serial (self-)repetition and reprise, from autonomous works to spatial and contextual reference. The sheer wealth of artists that refer directly to Rosso in various aspects or whose works resonate with Rosso's bespeaks the uninterrupted relevance of sculpture as an artistic practice at a time when reconsidering the relationship between material bodies and our technologically connected surroundings has become increasingly important.

Artists in dialogue with Medardo Rosso (selection ongoing)

Francis Bacon / Phyllida Barlow / Lynda Benglis / Umberto Boccioni / Katinka Bock / Louise Bourgeois / Constantin Brâncuși / Eugène Carrière / John Chamberlain / Giorgio de Chirico / Honoré Daumier / Edgar Degas / Jimmie Durham / Luciano Fabro / Jean Fautrier / Loïe Fuller / Alberto Giacometti / Robert Gober / David Hammons / Eva Hesse / Roni Horn / Jasper Johns / Hans Josephson / Ellsworth Kelly / Paul Klee / Yayoi Kusama / Sherrie Levine / Édouard Manet / Adolph Menzel / Marisa Merz / Robert Morris / Juan Muñoz / Bruce Nauman / Senga Nengudi / Giuseppe Penone / Odilon Redon / Auguste Rodin / Hercules Pietersz Seghers / Richard Serra / Georges Seurat / Erin Shirreff / Alina Szapocznikow / Paul Thek / Rosemarie Trockel / Tatiana Trouvé / Cy Twombly / Andy Warhol / Rebecca Warren / James Welling

Curated by Heike Eipeldauer

Exhibition design: Florian Pumhösl and Walter Kräutler

The exhibition will be accompanied by an extensive publication containing a comprehensive chronology of works with high-quality plates and contributions by Jo Applin, Heike Eipeldauer, Georges Didi-Huberman, Megan R. Luke, Nina Schallenberg, Francesco Stocchi, and Matthew S. Witkovsky, among others.

The exhibition is made possible in close collaboration with the Medardo Rosso Estate.

The exhibition will subsequently travel to Kunstmuseum Basel, where it will be on view from March to August 2025.