

# Paula Rego

February 1 - May 25, 2008

## TRANSCRIPT

**Free Audio Tour**



The text below is an exact transcription of comments recorded by exhibition curator Marco Livingstone and the artist Paula Rego as an audio guide for the exhibition.

### **Prompt 1: Curator's Introduction—Marco Livingstone**

Paula Rego is a leading figurative painter based in London, England. She was born in Portugal in 1935, but has made most of her life as a professional artist in England. The works represented in this major retrospective—the first retrospective exhibition to be held of her work in the United States—cover a period of fifty-five years, going back as early as 1952 when she was a seventeen-year-old art student.

The themes in the exhibition are very constant, but the ways in which she has dealt with those themes have changed many times over the years. In the 1950s, she was working in a fairly naive and straightforward figurative style in certain works such as *Celebration*, which is on the wall here in the first gallery. Very soon, however, she discovered the work of French artist Jean Dubuffet and through him the notion of outsider artists, artists working outside the mainstream and dealing with very urgent psychological themes from their own lives. The influence of these different kinds of art is evident in the work she did in the early 1960s, such as *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland*, which is one of the several paintings she made at that time dealing with the situation in Portugal under the fascist dictatorship at that time.

In the early 1980s, Rego's style changed dramatically when she started painting in acrylic paints on paper, making comic and tragic pictures at the same time using animals as stand-ins for human beings and re-enacting incredible dramas of daily existence. In 1986, she began treating the human figure more volumetrically in space, introducing shadows. Her husband, the painter Victor Willing, was dying at that time from multiple sclerosis and these paintings are very touching evocations of their marital life and of the circumstances of his passing.

The themes continued to be enriched by her move towards a more naturalistic style, and in the early 1990s she found a new medium. In 1994, specifically, she started working in pastel, still working on paper, but now working mainly from life instead of from the imagination as she had done until then. Most of the works in this exhibition are from this later period of the last twelve or thirteen years. There are wonderful groups of works such as the *Dancing Ostriches* after Walt Disney's "Fantasia" from 1995, which get a room to themselves, a chapel-like space. The first pastels, which she did in 1994, are the series of "Dog Women"; a group of paintings based on the nineteenth-century novel by the Portuguese author Eça de Queiros called *The Crime of Father Amaro*; and a series of paintings in 1998 about abortion, which are some of her toughest and most heartfelt works.

The show ends with two galleries devoted to works in the last five years, including a remarkable triptych called *The Pillowman*, which was prompted by a play by the Anglo-Irish play writer Martin McDonagh, and paintings and lithographs inspired by *Jane Eyre*.

**Prompt 2: Artist's Commentary – *Centaur*, 1964**

The centaur is actually a woman. There is a very powerful and dangerous warrior riding her carrying a deadly weapon that she has to carry on her back. I was very interested in Dionysian rituals and Greek religion as written by Jane Harrison, which my late husband Victor Willing was reading to me, and this was what came out of it.

**Prompt 3: Artist's Commentary – *Red Monkey Beats His Wife*, 1981**

The red monkey beats his adulterous wife. She has actually come home with a baby that isn't his and he's furious. And her boyfriend has covered his head with hair because he doesn't want anything to do with it. My husband Vic had a little theater as a boy, and he displayed these characters in the army. He was brought up in the army, and he had a bear and a dog and a dog with one ear, and he made up plays which he showed to the

soldiers and he told me this. I used the same kind of characters except in the end they became real people and the stories followed on from real life.

**Prompt 4: Artist's Commentary—*The Maids*, 1987**

*The Maids* is from a play by Jean Genet, which is a very violent play. The maids were two sisters that were employed by a very rich lady to look after her and what they did was they killed her and then they tried on her clothes. They became heroines of the surrealists. In any case, I felt that it was a wonderful story, and this is a picture which is all women in it, and the only male present is the hog, which actually is a pincushion I had, and a dressing gown behind the screen. Otherwise it's what goes on in some homes.

**Prompt 5: Artist's Commentary—*Nursery Rhymes* series, 1989**

The *Nursery Rhymes*. It has always been a huge relief to turn to printmaking—in this case etching—after spending a long time painting, and I did. I painted an enormous picture called *The Dance*, and I took six months after that. Doing the *Nursery Rhymes* was heaven because they could come up very quickly—sometimes four at a time—and you could make an image in no time at all and then with aquatint it would give it a 3-D look; it would give it atmosphere, and you could tell story after story. And the stories didn't have to come from you, they came from a book by the Opies called *The Nursery Rhymes* and you open the page and you read one of them. Sometimes no idea came, shut the book, go to sleep, and the next morning you would get an idea in your head and you draw it, and it's quick, quick and I could do so many. It was a great relief.

**Prompt 6: Artist's Commentary—*Jane Eyre* lithographs, 2001-2002**

*Jane Eyre* lithographs. I got to doing *Jane Eyre* after reading *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, which is about Bertha, Rochester's poor wife. Jane is an admirable character. She is brave. She always does the right thing, and in the end she wins the prize, not a very great prize, but she does get what she wanted. I did many of them. I did them up at the Curwen Gallery in Cambridge and with a marvelous lithographer called Stanley Jones, and I really enjoyed doing them. One image again came after the other because that's always happened with the print making, it's like that.

**Prompt 7: Artist's Commentary—*Bride*, 1994**

The bride is wrapped up in her wedding gown very tightly. She is really like a moth wrapped up in a kind of cocoon, very vulnerable. Her veil is spread out like wings, so

in a way she is like some sort of angel, and she is waiting her fate, which I don't think is going to be a very happy one.

**Prompt 8: Artist's Commentary—*Looking Out*, 1997**

*Looking Out*. Amelia, she is called, had a passionate affair with a priest called Amaro, and she became pregnant. They sent her off to the country where she was isolated with an old aunt, and she would sometimes look out of the window to see who was passing. This story describes her. And she could only show her top part because she was polluted from the waist down because she was pregnant and this is what I did: thick legs and heavy skirt. But up there, there were frills, and she is okay looking out. Sometimes she sees the priest go by talking.

**Prompt 9: Artist's Commentary—*The Pillowman*, 2004**

"The Pillowman" is a play by Martin McDonagh, which I went to see and was bowled over by it. I didn't know how somebody else could know all these things, which I seemed to know them as well, and they are cruel stories. It's a play about telling stories. It takes place...they're interrogating someone who is accused of actually committing crimes; in fact, he has only written the stories. It's very complicated to explain, but I found it immensely moving and at a certain point, I have discovered talking to Marco that in fact, the Pillowman stood in for my father and after that I was able to finish it in a different way.

**Prompt 10: Artist's Commentary—*The Shakespeare Room*, 2005**

*The Shakespeare Room* is also based by an unpublished story by Martin McDonagh in which lot of monkeys are put together in order to write Shakespeare because there is a saying that if you put a lot of monkeys together with typewriters, they end up by typing Shakespeare. Well, that was made into an experiment, and this girl was looking after all these monkeys, and before her, her mother was looking after them, and before that, her grandmother. But when it got to the girl's turn, she was so fed up and these monkeys just couldn't write anything and so she shot them and killed them all.

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