

The most up-to-date monograph on Paula Rego, one of the most important figurative artists of her generation

Paula Rego

The Art of Story

Deryn Rees-Jones

340 illustrations

38.0 x 24.0cm

376pp

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Book



Key Sales Points

- Beautifully written by highly respected critic Deryn Rees-Jones, who has engaged extensively with Rego's work across her career
- 350 reproductions of artworks span the full arc of Rego's long career and her explorations of different themes and media
- Published ahead of a major retrospective at Tate Britain in 2021, and in the wake of a major exhibition at the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (October 2018–February 2019)



Praise for *Paula Rego*

‘Paula Rego is an outstanding artist. She deserves an outstanding book. And now she has one’

Waldemar Januszczak

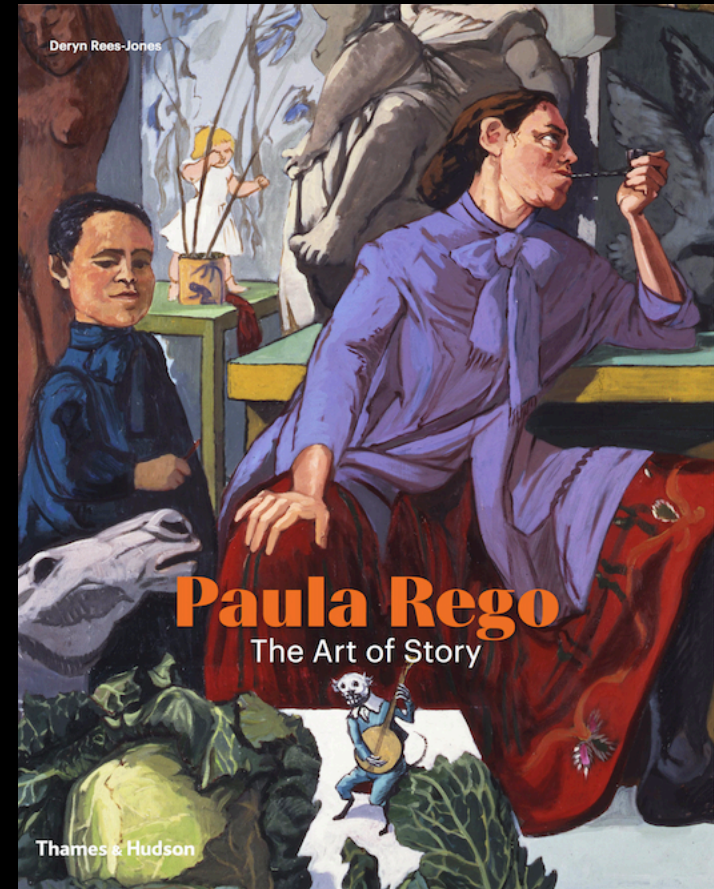
‘Paula Rego is a painter of astonishing power, and that power is undeniably, obviously, triumphantly female... her paintings quiver with anger and compassion of which we have sore need’

Germaine Greer

‘Paula Rego has become increasingly impressive. She has a unique imagination and a total command of drawing. She is an extraordinary artist’

Frank Auerbach

Provisional



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SHE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY
ARTIST.

Frank Auerbach

10th December 2018



Angel, 1998 (detail).
Pastel on paper.

Foreword

Marina Warner

Books and catalogues and even sequences of poetry have paid tribute to Paula Rego's vision, and the compelling biographical undercurrents in her art have inspired art historians, critics and filmmakers, including her own son Nick Willing, to interpret her paintings and drawings in the light of her personal experiences. In this beautifully produced book, Deryn Rees-Jones, a scholar and herself a poet, illuminates Rego's oeuvre from an entirely different standpoint, exploring instead the stories Rego tells and the way that she tells them. In so doing, Rees-Jones is keeping faith with a strong strain in Paula Rego's own self-definition: in the artist's eyes, her work continues the tradition in which she was steeped during childhood – that of passing on old stories, making up new ones, and realising these fantasies, dreams, desires and fears as pictures. When the town of Cascais in southern Portugal wanted to build a museum to her work, Paula chose to call it 'La Casa das Historias' – The House of Stories.

When I first encountered Paula's work in 1988 at the Serpentine Gallery, London, her vision struck me with the force of revelation, and I was hardly alone in feeling the artist's mind-opening power. The wild exuberance of the large Vivian Girls paintings, with their delinquent and valiant heroines, the enigmatic scenes of pets and children, adults and monkeys, were bravura in their curiosity about little known areas of experience. They also threw open windows onto a horizon of possibility. At the time, this excitement was intertwined – for me at least – with the visibility of women artists and women's lives, an issue that was then beleaguered to a greater degree than now. But the new interest in art by women, itself partly due to Rego's achievements, no longer dominates discussion of her work; his book shows us an artistic virtuoso of astonishing imaginative power, as Rego forges 'an ethical feminist practice', conveying 'not just one meaning but multitudes of potential meanings ... [in which] feeling is allowed its full repertoire of contradiction' (page 24).

From the vantage point of today, it is difficult to recall how scornfully narrative art used to be dismissed and how fantastic storytelling itself carried a suspect charge – it was appreciated in the practice of surrealism, as the imagery arose from the artist's subjective unconscious, but when the picturing was inspired by myth, fairy tale or fiction, such work was condescended to as 'literary' or, worse, 'illustrative'. Since the 1950s and her studies at the Slade, Rego has kept to the narrative and figurative qualities of her vision: she combines sources and lays down layer upon layer from her varied interests in art of the past – Tintoretto and Art Brut, Gillray and Bacon, Degas and Disney. Sublime or vulgar, lovely or repulsive, all is material to plunder: Victor Willing pointed out that 'orgiastic inelegance' allowed her to explore 'pain and awkwardness' (page 49).

Deryn Rees-Jones's perceptive interpretation orients us here to the successive phases – movements, you could call them – in the great symphonic act of narrative in Rego's life's work, and beautifully presents ways into understanding her complex and wide-ranging oeuvre. Rego is an artist of unsettling inner worlds. From the riddling scenarios of power and play in those 'psychic snapshots' (page 87) from the 1980s to the imposing storytelling works – couples dancing in the moonlight, a girl polishing her father's jackboot – she is remembering Portugal where she grew up during the years of Catholic power allied with the fascist Salazar regime. But these images are also dream inventions, taking place in 'psychic time' (about myths, the Roman philosopher Sallust wrote that 'These things never happened but always are', and his epigram equally applies to Rego's story-making).

Rego's sheer technical fluency means that she can and does make the products of her imagination look real, however fantastic they are (the pelican billing Jane Eyre, the snarling, crouching Dog Women). She uniquely combines the literal and the imaginative,



The Eating, 1959.
Oil on canvas.

Chapter One

Configurations (1951–1980)

I was doing everything in collage because I thought I was doing art. And if you're doing art it's obscene. You should never do art, it's obscene. You should do a picture, a story about something. But my working in collage initially had a lot to do with the texture, and then it became art. It's wrong. Doing art is wrong.

Paula Rego¹

Rego's earliest paintings, rooted in her student days at the Slade between 1952 and 1956, suggest a series of attempts to think about figuration. These early pictures draw notably on social satire, reflecting the artist's early immersion in and love of the bound collections of Spanish magazines belonging to her grandfather: *Pluma y Lápiz* and *Blanco y Negro*.² The satirical strain would go on to run, though in many guises, through Rego's work, taking the form of illustration or cartoon, and sometimes engaging directly with the work of the political satirist, painter, printmaker and cartoonist William Hogarth (1697–1764). *Wonder Bar* (1951, page 29), with its pun on the German *wunderbar*, opens up a dimension of Rego's work that connects satire and word play. Wealthy women sit – faces set to grimacing laughter, a smaller man smoking his cigar between them – as they drink champagne. Though there is no given narrative to sit alongside this early image we are asked nevertheless to position the man's relationship with the two women – one dark-haired, one blonder – considering the fact that as the three of them sit, there are only two glasses. Other early examples of political images, including *On the Hill* and *Interrogation* (both 1952, page 28), look forward to later works. In *On the Hill* an image of a woman and child anticipates Rego's much later depictions of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, desolate, wearing a hooded gown. *Interrogation* is Rego's most overtly political image of the period, in which we see two men with instruments of torture on either side of a woman who sits, head in hands. The work anticipates in its title the much later *The Interrogator's Garden* (2000, see fig. 213) in which interrogator and interrogated are conflated, satirized and metamorphosed. The child suckling at the maternal breast in *The Meal* (1951) looks ahead to images from 2014 of the king of Portugal, sucking at a dead mannequin's breast. And while there is a difference in style between this image and Rego's portrait of her father José Figuerioa Rego (1952), the shadow behind the blurred facial features in both pictures suggests a line of experimentation reminiscent of Francis Bacon's portraits of the same period.

If these pictures of the 1950s begin to suggest a gathering of styles and preoccupations that would underpin much of Rego's later work, the most significant – and Rego's earliest engagement with the literary – is her painting *Under Milk Wood* (1954, page 34). Prompted by the Slade's annual summer competition to respond to a piece of poetry, Rego saw the opportunity to offer a picture that drew on her experiences of life in Portugal:

It is set in a fishing village in Wales that was very much like the village where we had a small quinta, a traditional Portuguese farm house. So instead of doing the village in Wales, where I'd never been, I set it in Portugal. There is the chicken, which has been killed for dinner, three women and fried eggs. It is as simple as that. But this is Portuguese earthenware, not Welsh. I couldn't imagine what a Welsh village was like. It's all made up.³

Battle of Alcácer-Quibir, 1964.
Cotton and wool threads, various fabrics, cords,
ribbons, embroideries and appliqué on linen.



The Vivian Girls in Tunisia, 1984.
Acrylic on canvas.

opposite
The Vivian Girls with Windmills, 1984.
Acrylic on canvas.



The Policeman's Daughter, 1987.
Acrylic and paper on canvas.



across which ideas, objects and colours balance. The daughter's studied pose raises a series of questions about ownership. Her hand in the boot becomes part of the phallus at the same time as she is framed as its subservient victim. Does cleaning the boot with such an angry and focused expression suggest a sexual act? Or is this young woman accessing symbolic power over the boot that she rubs in determined preoccupation? Is this something she would like to do to the father, or perhaps something that the father has literally or metaphorically done to her? Her skirt, as in so many of the images of this period, is almost ossified in its heavy and stratified folds, and symbolically suggests the interior of the body it also seeks to hide. Her actual leg tucked under her, the daughter owns the boot as if it were her own limb. Across from the woman and boot peers a cat, looking capable of leaving the frames not only of the room and window, but of the picture as well. Its tail, the same colour as the boot, reiterates a different kind of phallic presence, while humorously reminding us that here, once again, a tale is being told, whatever we might make of it. The image of the woman with her hand in the boot anticipates other part-animal, part-human configurations in Rego's work, for example in the lithograph *Turtlehands* (2006, see page 280), or the later series 'The Dame with the Goat's Foot' (2013, see pages 323-34), which draws on the fairy tale of the same title. Here, in the simple act of cleaning and wearing the boot on her hand, she is both transformed and disfigured. She penetrates a space and takes control, but also remains subject to and complicit with the fascist power the jackboot symbolically offers.

Rego here was asking unanswerable questions about agency, abuse and power that would become the central preoccupations of her pictures over the thirty years that followed. The two pictures of daughters sit in direct alignment with two pictures from the following year, *The Cadet and his Sister* (1988, page 124) in which a sister laces her soldier brother's boots, and *Departure* (1988, page 125) in which a woman grooms what appears to be her master against the backdrop of a military fortification. The presence of this fort, seemingly a stylized version of the citadel at Cascais situated five miles west of Lisbon, where Rego was born, ensures that we do not forget the historical and political context of this 'departure'.⁶⁶ The fort was used as a prison and torture site prior to the 1974 revolution, and evokes a long history of cruelty and state oppression. In each picture there is the suggestion of a relationship of attention and intimacy, governed less by subservience than by love. The images sit in interesting juxtaposition to the *The Soldier's Daughter* and *The Policeman's Daughter*, both suggestive of anger and suppressed eroticism. The later pair acts as a bridge to the images of family scenes that follow.

Like *The Maids*, *The Family* (1988, page 126) also sets the male figure at its centre. Here, though, the identity of the man is almost totally obscured by the arm of the woman who is dressing or undressing him. The intimacies of caring that we saw in the relationships of girls and dogs are retranslated here into care for the sick father. The sexual undertones of the relationship are reframed in a more explicit suggestion of incest between the father and his young daughter. Initially Rego had considered calling the picture *Lazarus* after the biblical figure who died and was resurrected by Jesus after a period of illness. With her typical turning of the tables on power relations, Rego depicts a relationship in which it is the father, rather than the daughter, who is powerless and subject to unwelcome advances. But it is also the father, mannequin-like and powerless, who may miraculously be brought back to life. His undressing, or perhaps it is his dressing, is observed by the little girl in the corner of the room, who carries an expression, difficult to read, hinting at both fear and pleasure. While, again, the title does not suggest a direct reference, the details of the tableau embedded in the cupboard, which serves as a backdrop to the picture, offer symbolic but ambiguous glosses on the scene. There is a depiction of the



The Pillowman (Triptych), 2004.
Pastel on board.



**The Sky was Blue, the Sea was Blue
and the Boy was Blue, 2017.**
Pastel on paper.

with the kind of fracture marks at the knee we would associate with bone. Young child, boy and man are all seen as puppet-like victims of patriarchy, which deals cruelly with the powerless.

At this late stage in Rego's career, the physical demands of art led to her development of a freer, less painterly style. While none of her images are ever direct or fixed in their symbolism, the depiction of the ocean here is one of the most complex, permeable and vital of her uses of metaphor. Rego's commitment, from her very earliest work, to finding a way of using imaginative capacity to bring together the social and historical in psychic time appears in this phase at its most poignant. The picture carries with it a history of travel and exile rooted in Portuguese seafaring and empire building, but is overlaid with the horrors facing contemporary refugees. Rego attempts identification with the refugee in terms of her own estrangement from her country of birth as well as historical narratives of exiled kingship and loss. Building on potentials for shared experience, she also reminds us to recognize differences of experience as the political and the private, interior and external worlds are at once interwoven and independent. Rego's fusion of historical tragedy, political reality, classical story and mythological fable invites identification by means of what she, as artist, and we, as viewers, *have* seen. But in that identification, she also builds in a sense of her own potential to objectify the boy, whose life is also, of course, so unlike her own.

In January 2017, Rego suffered a fall that left her face damaged, bruised and cut. In a series of self-portraits in pastel, she responded to the fall's physical effects (pages 354–56). As she looks at herself in a mirror, her haunted gaze is directed both back at herself and at the viewer. Each of these portraits, with their tousled hair, open mouths and teeth displayed, once again reflects pain and ugliness through the lens of the grotesque. The deep rubbing and scratching needed to create the dense, rich colour of earlier works gave way in the making of these pictures to the swift, less physically demanding, movements of pastel on page. With their estranged quality, the portraits draw attention to their own status as acts of representation by someone in pain, and this pain is registered and enacted through their oversized and sometimes distorted proportions, and play with the physical realities of a stitched wound. Pale but luminous flesh-coloured pastel is applied lightly, producing a smudgy effect and revealing the white page beneath. We are reminded of the incompleteness of a late Degas, or the transforming images of Bacon's early heads; in one portrait, the artist's head is thrown back, her mouth opened wide, almost as if she is in the process of some radical act of shape-shifting. With one eye open and one eye closed, the gaze is ambiguous. Is this the artist squinting to see herself as she works; or the woman looking, but not quite wanting to see, the reflection in front of her? As much as the mark on the forehead resembles a bullet wound, Rego also seems to reinvent the wound as a third eye. The eye looks back at us, and at the artist, but more importantly suggests a new way of looking, imbued with a higher and intuitive perception. In the loose abandon of these latest of self-portraits, nakedly and curiously observed, Rego opens us once more to pain – to vulnerability and age. She challenges us to look, as we confront her desire to show us life, with all its repetitions and contradictions, all its possibilities.



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