



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome everyone. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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61-13 PAULA REGO

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Angel,
1998

- This is Section 61 on recent artists and this talk is on the Portuguese-British artist Dame Paula Rego.
- To see additional information on Rego and other recent artists click on the small "I" symbol above and then the link.
- This Angel is a moral witness and symbolic guardian of all those women who have been harmed or silenced and I will be discussing it later but let me start at the beginning...

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Self Portrait in Red,
1966,
152 x 152 cm,
Museu Nacional de Arte
Contemporânea do
Chiado, Lisbon

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Self Portrait in Red*, 1966, 152 x 152 cm, Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea do Chiado, Lisbon

- Born **Maria Paula Figueiroa Rego** (pronounced "figer-ro") on 26 January **1935** in **Lisbon** during Salazar's authoritarian dictatorship. Her father José worked as an **electrical engineer** for the **Marconi Company** and was **ardently anti-fascist**. Her mother Maria was a **competent artist** but gave her daughter no encouragement despite Paula beginning to **draw at age four**. The family was divided in 1936 when her father was **posted to work in Britain**.
- Paula was left behind in Portugal with her **grandmother** until 1939. This grandmother became a significant figure, teaching her **traditional folk tales** that would later influence her art. She attended Saint Julian's Anglican School in **Carcavelos** (pronounced "kar-kuh-VAY-loosh") from 1945 to 1951, the only **English-language school** in the Lisbon area. In 1951 she was sent to The Grove School, a finishing school in **Sevenoaks, Kent**. Unhappy there, she attempted to study at **Chelsea School of Art** in 1952 but her legal guardian David Phillips steered her to the **Slade School of Fine Art** instead, considering it more respectable as he had heard that many young women at the Chelsea School of Art became pregnant. It was not until 1967 that the contraceptive pill became available to unmarried women.
- This early collage work reflects her Slade School training. Rego presents herself against a **saturated red field**, signalling **ambition, intensity, and emerging self-definition**. Using abstract forms, fragments of drawings, and painted

elements like a **tailor's mannequin**, it is a cryptic exploration of her **identity and story-telling prowess**, marking her pre-1980s period of using collage as a primary medium

NOTES

- António de Oliveira Salazar ruled Portugal from 1932 to 1968 under his authoritarian "Estado Novo" regime. An economics professor, he was appointed Finance Minister in 1928 and became Prime Minister in 1932, consolidating power through a new corporatist constitution. His secret police, the PIDE, suppressed opposition through imprisonment, torture, and exile — estimates suggest thousands were killed or "disappeared," with around 30,000 political prisoners passing through his jails over the decades. His costly colonial wars in Africa further destabilised his rule. Salazar suffered a stroke in 1968 and was quietly replaced by Marcelo Caetano, dying in 1970.
- In 1974, **The Carnation Revolution**, a peaceful military coup took place. Left-wing military officers, frustrated by years of futile colonial wars in Africa, overthrew Caetano's government in a near-bloodless takeover. Citizens famously placed red carnations in soldiers' rifle barrels as crowds celebrated in the streets, giving the revolution its name. It ended 48 years of authoritarian rule, triggered the rapid decolonisation of Portugal's African territories, and led to **democratic elections in 1975**. It remains **one of the most celebrated peaceful transitions from dictatorship** to democracy in modern European history.

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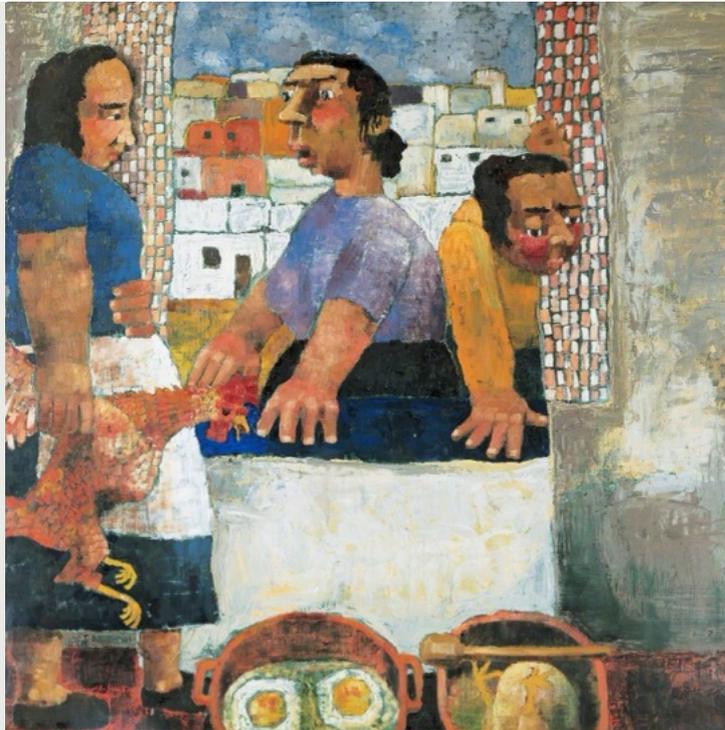
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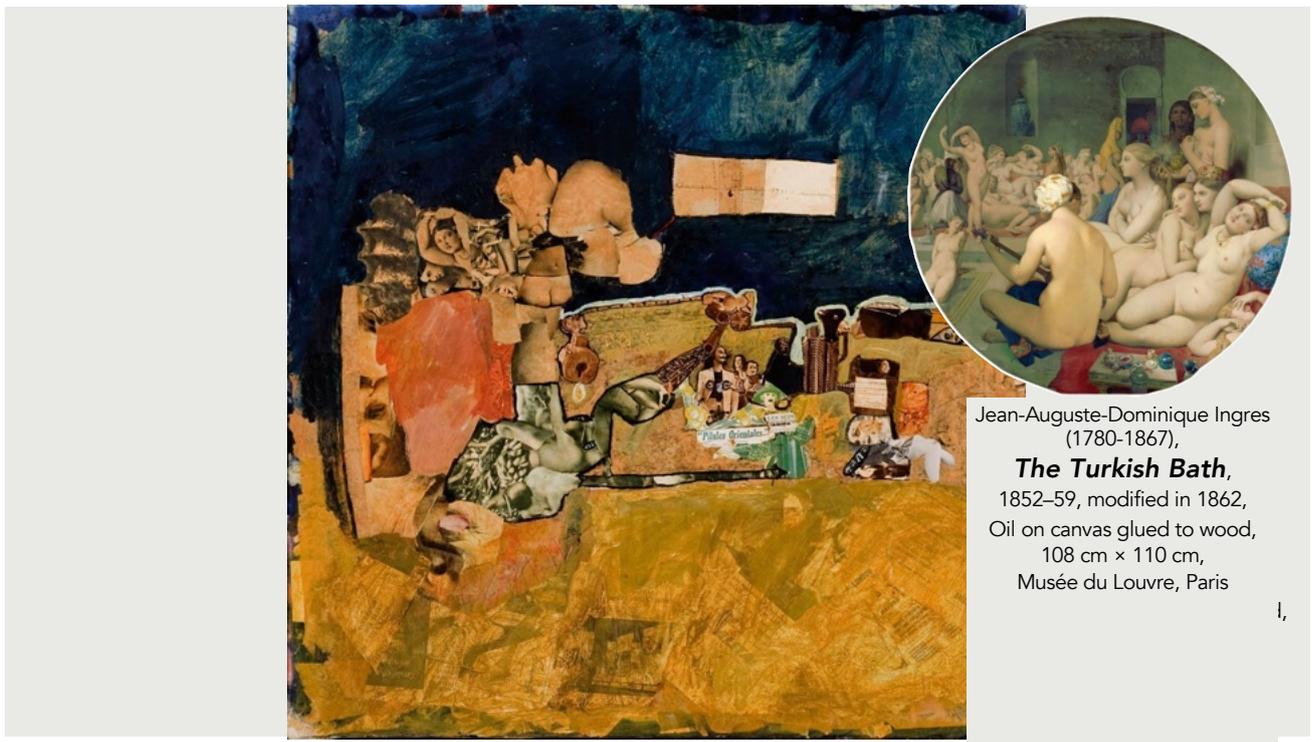
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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Under Milk Wood,
1954,
109.3 × 109.3 cm,
UCL Art Museum

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Under Milk Wood*, 1954, 109.3 × 109.3 cm, UCL Art Museum

- When she was 18 (from 1952 to 1956) she met fellow student **Victor Willing** at the Slade. He was seven years her senior and already married. She became **pregnant** and kept the child and had three children by him, **Caroline**, often known as 'Cas' Willing, **Victoria** Willing and a son **Nick** Willing.
- In **1954** she won the **prestigious Slade Summer Composition prize** for this work, ***Under Milk Wood***.
- This painting depicts a bustling scene of **domestic life**, featuring three monumental women engaged in **gossip** amidst symbols of the everyday—**dead chickens, cooking activities, and Portuguese earthenware**. She arranged the figures vertically on the picture plane, creating a crowded, imaginative space that reflects the "centre of activity" she remembered from her childhood.
- Rego was influenced by the play's focus on dreams and concealed desires. It is significant for anticipating the themes of **female agency and psychological drama** that would her later work. The monumental, strong-willed women of her own childhood, turn the kitchen into a "theatrical" space for storytelling.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
(1780-1867),
The Turkish Bath,
1852–59, modified in 1862,
Oil on canvas glued to wood,
108 cm × 110 cm,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Turkish Bath*, 1960, collage with oil paint, paper and ink on canvas, dimensions not confirmed, private collection

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), 1852–59, modified in 1862, Oil on canvas glued to wood, 108 cm × 110 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

- Another early collage work. This is after she had left the Slade. She juxtaposes **French and British newspaper clippings** of cosmetic advertisements with **erotic imagery** taken from:
- (CLICK) Jean-Auguste-Dominique **Ingres'** 1862 painting ***The Turkish Bath***. The work demonstrates Rego's preoccupation with the **objectification and degradation of women**. She employed collage to characterise how women were subjected to dehumanising treatment in advertising and society.(CLICK)
- The figures represent **voyeurism, repression, and female bodies fragmented by patriarchal scrutiny**. The disjunction of space symbolises psychological tension.
- **By 1957 Rego and Willing had left London to live in Ericeira** (pronounced "eri-cy-ra"), Portugal. They **married in 1959 following his divorce**. Three years later **her father bought them a house** in London in Camden Town. Rego's time was then divided between **Britain and Portugal**.
- At this time, she was experimenting with semi-abstract art partly because **abstraction dominated avant-garde** circles at the time, putting figurative art on the defensive. She was also **reacting against the Slade's strong emphasis on anatomical figure** drawing. Under Victor's encouragement she had kept a

secret sketchbook of free-form drawings that would have been frowned upon by tutors. Her acknowledged influences included **Jean Dubuffet** and **Chaim Soutine** (pronounced "ha-EEM soo-TEEN").

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
**Salazar Vomiting the
Homeland**,
1960,
collage,
94 × 120 cm.,
Centro de Arte Moderna,
Gulbenkian

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland*, 1960, collage, 94 × 120 cm., Centro de Arte Moderna, Gulbenkian

- In the 1960s her work became increasingly politically charged. This collage expresses **violent criticism** of Portugal's **dictator** (António de Oliveira) **Salazar** who ruled from 1932 to 1968. The Estado Novo ("New State") regime censored free expression ruthlessly and circumscribed civil liberties, particularly for women. He forced the country into **stagnation for four decades**.
- This collage needs some explanation:
 - **Salazar is the white and red bulbous figure** on the left that is vomiting Portugal from his mouth, symbolising authoritarian corruption and national suffocation.
 - **The yellow, pear-like shape** in the centre some see as a vulva with a giant, hairy testicle below it. The fusion of organic and sexual imagery indicates **the perversion of the family unit** and gender roles.
 - **On the right is an ape-like figure** with breasts representing the regression of civilisation into primal, animalistic oppression.
 - **Finally, the crescent shape at the back is the ship of state sinking**, subverting Portugal's maritime history.
- The palette is muddy browns and sickly yellows representing the sickly state of society.

- In Portugal at this time the **elite lived in virtual exile in their own country** and Rego was a member of that elite. Upper-class women were **admired for doing nothing** at all. The young Rego was conscious of the power structure and violence that subdued women and gave them no role in society.
- The secret police created a society of informants and suspected individuals were held indefinitely without trial and subjected to **sleep torture** for weeks until they suffered a psychotic breakdown. Many were sent to a concentration camp called **The Camp of Slow Death** where they were made to work in extreme heat and disease with zero medical care. Education was viewed as a threat and Portugal had the highest illiteracy rate in Europe in the 1950s. Every newspaper, book and play was censored.

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
The Firemen of Alijo,
1966,
mixed media on canvas,
153.9 × 184.3 cm.,
Tate

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *The Firemen of Alijo*, 1966, mixed media on canvas, 153.9 × 184.3 cm., Tate

- In 1966 a difficult year arrived. Both **Rego and Willing's fathers died**. Willing was also diagnosed with **multiple sclerosis**. To keep the Rego **family electrical business**, Willing put his **own art career on hold** and took it over. Despite his efforts the **business collapsed in 1974** during the Portuguese **Carnation Revolution** when production works were taken over by revolutionary forces, even though the family had been supporters of the political Left.
- This painting, ***The Firemen of Alijo*** (pronounced "ah-LEE-zhoo"), represents **volunteer firemen that she saw trying to keep warm in the bitter winter of 1965**. They huddled together outside and were so poor they had no shoes on their feet. The painting was an act of sympathy and admiration for their unsung heroism. The fragility of the firemen, who are typically seen as strong and powerful mirrored the decline of her father, a formerly powerful figure who was dying of cancer. The death of her father left her "just lost for years".
- The figures marks her **shift toward narrative** complexity, embedding personal tragedy in symbolic staging and driving Rego toward more emotionally charged figuration.
- In 1973 Rego started seeing a **Jungian therapist regularly** to help cope with **depression**. She continued to **exhibit both in Britain and Portugal** throughout the 1970s despite the turmoil.
- To Rego's mind **traditional folklore was not wholesome but a collection of**

scary and terrible narratives that helped expose **unconscious desires and shared malice**. She was devoted to making the darkest and deepest of individual psychology visible. She was a dedicated member of **The London Group**, an independent organisation **established in 1913** to help artists with practical matters like securing exhibitions. Though not officially part of the School of London movement, she shared their **commitment to figurative art exploring psychology**.

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
The Policeman's Daughter,
 1987,
 acrylic on paper on canvas,
 213 x 152 cm,
 Saatchi Gallery, London

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *The Policeman's Daughter*, 1987, acrylic on paper on canvas, 213 x 152 cm, Saatchi Gallery, London

- **We move on to 1987** and we see what could be called **classic Rego**—the use of **naturalistic figures** in a **surreal environment** representing deep personal and social issues.
- Here a young woman sits alone except for a **black cat**. Her arm is **thrust deep inside her father's jackboot** as she cleans it. The boot symbolises the **police state**, rigid and **phallic**. Cleaning, that is putting a symbolic shine on society was the job of women.
- Although the state presented women as “**little saints**” the truth was very different. Women could not travel abroad, open a bank account or sign a legal document without their husband’s written permission. A man could legally kill his wife if he found she had committed adultery and he received only a light sentence. There was no conception and no abortion but Rego often hints at incest and paedophilia behind the closed doors of the home.
- Most of the population lived in extreme poverty and domestic servants were vulnerable to sexual exploitation by the “man of the house”.
- This painting symbolises **dysfunctional family relationships**, particularly between fathers and daughters. Many critics link the girl's pose with a **sexually explicit Robert Mapplethorpe photograph** showing a fist thrust inside a man but Rego denies it. The model was her daughter **Caroline "Cas" Willing** (born in 1957) and she said to her daughter “**Don't just cuddle the**

boot, just shove your hand down into it, just shove it in."

- An earlier drawing shows it **began more innocently** - a younger girl cradling the boot with a toy castle symbolising security at her feet. In the painting the castle became a mistrustful cat scratching blindly at the wall.
- The **military boot** carries heavy symbolism of **authoritarian power**. The white dress suggests virginal innocence juxtaposed with the sinful black boot. Her body twists away from the freedom of the outside world towards the claustrophobic interior. Critic Robert Hughes interviewed Rego about this work and it is clear it conveys her **simmering anger, isolation and helplessness in Portugal's male dominated society**.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mapplethorpe: MAP-ul-thorp

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
The Family,
1988,
acrylic on paper on canvas,
213.4 x 213.4 cm,
Private Collection

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *The Family*, 1988, acrylic on paper on canvas, 213.4 x 213.4 cm, Private Collection

- In this work the subversion is even more disturbing.
- **Two female figures dress or undress a man** seated on a bed. A small girl stands by the window. A Portuguese **retablo**, a personal shrine, featuring **Saint George slaying the dragon** hangs in the corner, with an engraving of the fable of **the stork and the fox** beneath. Are the women helping or hurting the man? Is he **the dragon** to be killed to protect the young woman or is he the fox saved by the stork after it removes the bone from its throat? The narrative clues are deliberately ambiguous. **The gestures combine care, coercion, and ritual** and in interviews rego suggests it is concerned with brother-sister incest although she always avoided pinning down specific meanings.
- Critic Suzie Mackenzie wrote that Rego's subject is the **apparently familiar - the bourgeois, domestic, family relations** - but somehow metamorphosed into the grotesque, into the everyday fantastic. As Rego said, she is "**making the darkness conscious**,"
- Most of her pictures dramatise desire and guilt but desire for what and guilt about what? The figures hold onto their secrets. The bed is in disarray. The warm colour scheme - pink curtains, pink bedcover, pinkish cream carpet, red table runner - juxtaposes against the cool, detached attitudes the figures have towards one another, adding unease.
- This was painted in **1988, the year Victor Willing died**. He was extremely

diminished in his final year. Rego painted this **while he was dying**. Recognition came late for Rego. Her 1988 exhibition at the Serpentine was celebrated and she was **able to stop worrying about money**. She was **fifty-three**. Her husband had died of multiple sclerosis only months before.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

retablo: ray-TAH-blow

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
The Dance,
1988,
acrylic on paper on canvas,
213.3 x 274.3 cm,
Tate Collection, London

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *The Dance*, 1988, acrylic on paper on canvas, 213.3 x 274.3 cm, Tate Collection, London

- Eight figures dance on a moonlit beach. This was the **largest painting Rego had created at that time**. It took **six months to paint** and was completed after Willing's death on 5 June 1988. On the **left is a self-portrait** of the artist standing alone. On the right **she dances with her husband Victor**. He appears twice - in the middle dancing with a blonde lover. In the background the three figures represent the three stages of life, young girl, mother and grandmother.
- Victor was in bed and couldn't model so **Rego asked her son Nick** who at the time looked very much like his father. Nick wore one of Vic's suits and shoes. When Vic died that summer, **Nick said the grief was intense**. He could see his mother was distraught and the only way she could deal with it was to **fling herself into her work**. She said they had to carry on with the picture. For Nick it was one of the toughest summers of his life. For his birthday she gave him a drawing of him posing as Vic. He still has it on his wall. Every time he looks at it, it looks exactly like him but he only sees his father.
- While the scene could represent memories of Portuguese festas, it has **profound symbolic meaning**. The dance represents **stages from childhood to old age**. Rhythmic movement contrasts with the stillness of the setting, suggesting balance between perpetual change and essential continuity. The work has an **eerie dreamlike quality** typical of Rego's work referring to childhood fears and fantasy. Before his death Willing left Rego a note telling her

to **trust herself** and she would be **her own best friend**. She called it a very kind gift.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

festas: FESH-tas

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Little Miss Muffet,
Nursery Rhymes series,
1989,
etchings

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Nursery Rhymes series*, 1989, etchings, various sizes, various collections

- In 1989 to 1990 she became **Associate Artist at the National Gallery** in London. She was the first in this new role which replaced an earlier Artist-in-Residence scheme and it was a significant turning-point in her career.
- She immersed herself in **studying fairy tales** which became influential for her art. The **Nursery Rhymes series** explores the strangeness and **cruelty of traditional British children's songs**.
- Rego was fascinated with storytelling throughout her career. She took inspiration from art history, weaving **references** to old masters such as **Hogarth and Velazquez** into paintings where protagonists are women exploring their struggle and journey towards emancipation. She used her storytelling prowess to create compelling pieces. Traditional folklore to her was not twee but scary and terrible narratives **exposing unconscious desires**.
- Rego put her own distinctive storytelling spin on the nursery stories and fairy tales. Here, she presents the **story of Little Miss Muffet**, specifically when **'along came a spider, who sat down beside her, and frightened Miss Muffet away'**. By making the spider enormous and giving it a human face, Rego completely alters the tone of the rhyme and makes it altogether more **sinister**, as the spider's leg strokes Miss Muffet's groin while holding her shoulders.
- Children's verses become psychologically charged scenes where anthropomorphic animals, domestic interiors, and stiff poses **expose violence**,

gender roles, and childhood fears. The series uses illustrative idioms to challenge mythologies of innocence and recast familiar stories as morally ambiguous fictions.

NOTES

- She was appointed the second artist-in-residence at the National Gallery after the scheme restarted, following Jock McFadyen who was first in 1981. This prestigious appointment marked growing recognition. Her prints possess extraordinary imaginative power and reflect innovative possibilities through experimentation with etching, lithography and aquatint, often employing hand-colouring.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Brancaflor: bran-ka-FLOR

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Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Crivelli's Garden*, 1990, acrylic on canvas

- In her role as Associate Artist the national Gallery commissioned this masterpiece. It reimagines the lives of female saints and biblical figures.
- (CLICK) It references this work by the Italian Renaissance painter **Carlo Crivelli**. Rego combined references to old masters with her own narrative vision.
- (CLICK) She shows the saints as ordinary women and used the gallery's female staff and her own family as models.
 - At the top left is Diana and Actaeon with Actaeon already turned into a stag.
 - At the top of the fountain is princess Europa taking charge of Zeus in the form of a bull.
 - The wall behind and the wall of the fountain have scenes from Aesop's fables and Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in blue and white like the two-tone tiles used to decorate Portuguese building.
 - In the niche is Mary Magdalene surrounded by mystical wares.
 - Sitting on the step is the figure of the Storyteller looking over a young girl drawing a snake.
 - Lying down behind are Samson and Delilah with Delilah on top seeming to stalk her prey.
 - On the right is a depiction of Judith and Holofernes, the Assyrian general she beheaded. It looks as if she is showing the young girl the

severed head.

- On the column on the right are Leda and the Swan, Daphne and Apollo and the sorceress Circe.
- (CLICK) Saint Marha is sweeping while Mary Magdalene sits in contemplation at her feet.
 - On the pedestal behind is Catherine of Alexandria, wielding a sword after decapitating the Roman Emperor Maxentius as vengeance for his ordering of her torture.
 - Saint Cecilia is set in a niche surrounded by episodes from her torments and accompanied by a hawk to symbolise her nobility.
 - Saint Mary of Egypt is shown shrouded in her own hair which grew so long that it covered her nakedness. She became a hermit in the desert after renouncing her life as a prostitute. Here she is accompanied by a lion: the animal that eventually buried her.
 - The small figure behind is Saint Margaret who, according to the Golden Legend, was swallowed by the devil in the form of a dragon that she had befriended, before erupting from his stomach. She became known as the patron saint of women in labour. She holds a lead that is tied to a large frog which represents the dragon demoted to a subordinate state and is symbolic of the saint overcoming her own misfortunes.
- (CLICK) In Rego's Visitation, the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, are pregnant with Christ and John the Baptist respectively. John the Baptist stands beside them holding a lamb
 - Various scenes from the life of the Virgin are shown on the large wall within the painting, including the Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt, the Dormition and the Assumption of the Virgin among others.
 - Finally, the small seated figure is 'the reader', Rego said '**she is certainly the start of it all, really; the anchor figure**'.

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Crivelli: kree-VEL-ee

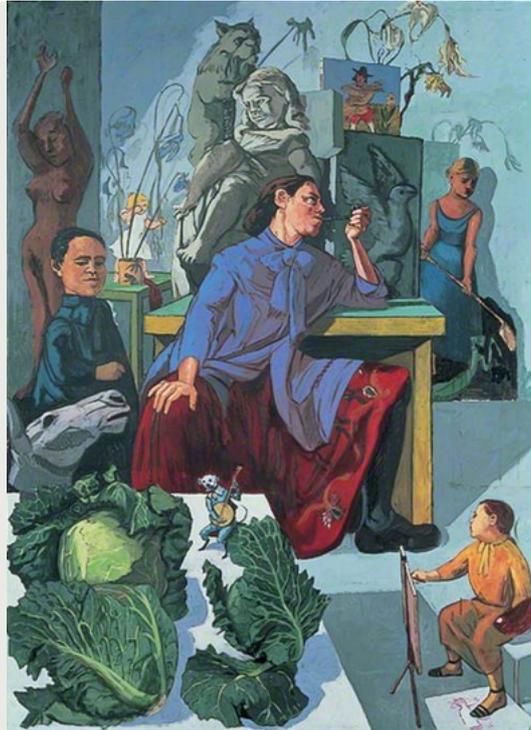
Holofernes: hol-oh-FUR-neeZ

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
The Artist in Her Studio,
1993,
acrylic on canvas,
dimensions not confirmed,
Leeds Museums and Galleries

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *The Artist in Her Studio*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, dimensions not confirmed, Leeds Museums and Galleries

- This **self-portrait shows Rego in her windowless Camden studio** filled with dolls, puppets, props and racks of costumes which she used to orchestrate scenes. She preferred the room windowless to immerse herself fully in her psychic world. The painting references **George Sand** was famous for smoking a pipe and leading a resolutely independent life in a masculine way, but she also had a very feminine personality.
- Rego celebrated a physical and individualistic way of being female. According to her Portuguese childhood, **wealthy women were pressed to do nothing and working-class women to do everything**. Not happy with either prescribed role, she endeavoured to depict a **different type of woman**, a master craftsperson who is in control and creates a theatre of images and feelings.
- Her model **Lila Nunes** posed for this work. Nunes had been a woman caring for **Rego's sick husband Victor** and became Rego's foremost model since the late 1980s. The pair worked almost intuitively together. Nunes interpreted Rego's thinking through poses, even acting as her surrogate in compositions. **Rego said Lila is me in many of my paintings**. Their day-to-day routine was enviably civilised - they ate homemade Portuguese soup for lunch and enjoyed a glass of Champagne at the end of the working day.
- This work came during a period when Rego took inspiration from old masters, weaving references into paintings exploring women's emancipation. Curator

Elena Crippa noted Rego's rarely created self-portraits. Most resemble picture puzzles - one renders her striking a **pointedly masculine pose**, another features a mirror showing not Rego but her model.

NOTES

- In the context of Rego's symbolism, horses frequently represent raw power, sexuality, instinct and uncontrollable energy in her work. Given the painting's themes of asserting female creative power and sexuality in a traditionally masculine domain, the horse's head would be consistent with those ideas .
- The little mouse playing the banjo in a blue suit is peeking through the cabbages on the table. The peculiarity of the mouse reminds you this scene is a constructed fantasy, not real life: just as it is absurd in real life for women to be perceived as powerful artists in our society. Perhaps it is less absurd for a mouse to play the banjo than it is for a woman to be viewed as a powerful artist.
- The still life with cabbages represent the simple and tedious task of painting such objects could reference the times in art history when women were permitted only to paint still lifes, never the human figure.

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Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Bride* from *Dog Woman* series, 1994, pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 160 x 120 cm, Saatchi Gallery, London



Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Dog Woman* from the series *Dog Woman*, 1994, pastel on canvas, 120 x 160 cm. (© Ostrich Arts, London; courtesy Ostrich Arts and Victoria Miro, London)

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Bride* from *Dog Woman* series, 1994, pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 160 x 120 cm, Saatchi Gallery, London

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Dog Woman* from the series *Dog Woman*, 1994, pastel on canvas, 120 x 160 cm. (© Ostrich Arts, London; courtesy Ostrich Arts and Victoria Miro, London)

- This is one of a **series of pastels depicting women in dog-like positions** - scavenging for food, baying at the moon, sleeping and grooming. **Rego's daughter posed wearing a 1950s raw silk wedding dress loaned by a friend.** An early idea had the model sitting on all fours but Rego turned the figure so she is **belly-up in an attitude of surrender, ready** to have her tummy tickled. Rego noted that her hands and feet are uncovered - it was vital that her extremities were exposed as they are in all animals.
- (CLICK) **This second** more startling image is a **crouched, canine female figure** whose muscular tension and exposed limbs challenge passive femininity. The hybrid form symbolises conflicted roles: **erotic, obedient, resistant.** Rego uses bodily extremity to **dismantle stereotypes**, foregrounding embodied experience and the instinctual forces underlying socially scripted female behaviour.
- **The Dog Women** series presented the **antithesis of usual feminine behaviour.** Here the bestial becomes a positive characteristic. The series acts on the beauty of vulnerability, focusing on **raw aggression of erotic vitality that women have been restrained from outwardly expressing.** Rego challenged traditional

female depictions by illustrating women in their natural state of strength and power, showing the reality of womanhood rather than trying to satisfy the viewer's gaze.

- In the early 1990s Rego began using pastels as a medium. **She continued using pastels** almost to the exclusion of oil paint until her death. She gave up working with collage in the late 1970s. The large-scale pastels of single female figures from this period are amongst her most celebrated and arresting pictures.

NOTES

- Tate caption: "Bride is one of a series of pastels which Rego made in 1994 and which were shown that year under the title 'Dog Woman'. **The pastels depicted women in dog-like positions, scavenging for food, baying at the moon, sleeping and grooming.** Rego's daughter posed for this work wearing a 1950's raw silk wedding dress loaned by a friend. An early idea for 'Bride' had the model sitting on all fours, but Rego turned the figure so that she is 'belly-up in an attitude of surrender and ready to have her tummy tickled'. Rego has also noted that 'her hands and feet are uncovered, it was so vital that her extremities were exposed as they are in all animals'."

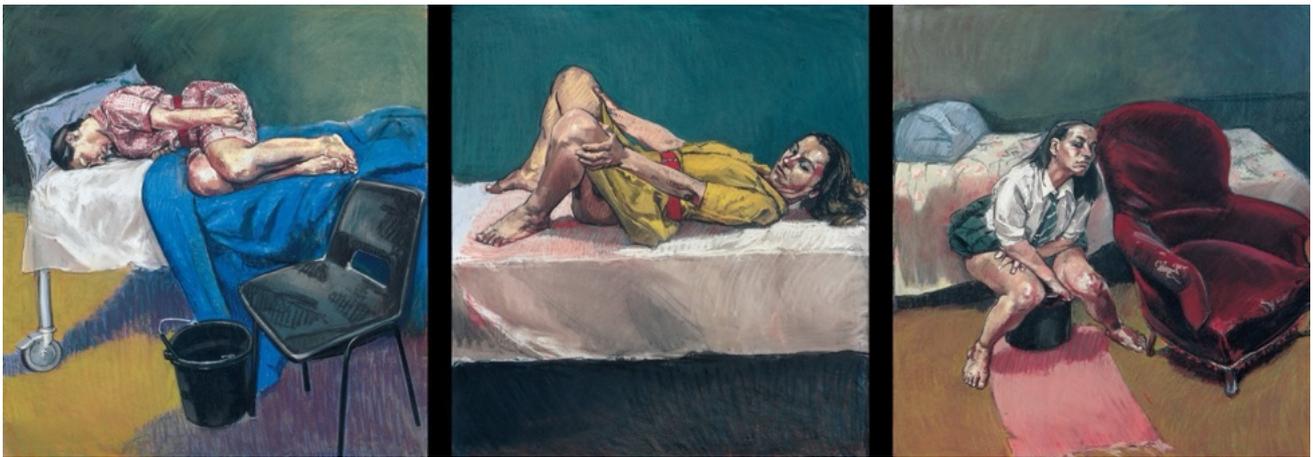
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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Triptych, from the series **Abortion**,
 1998, Pastel on paper, mounted on aluminium,
 3 panels: 110 x 100 each,
 Lakeland Arts, Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, UK

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Triptych*, from the series *Abortion*, 1998, Pastel on paper, mounted on aluminium, 3 panels: 110 x 100 each , Lakeland Arts, Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, UK

- Ten powerful pastels show women in the aftermath of **illegal backstreet abortions**. Vulnerably posed women crouch or hunch in pain, confronting viewers with their suffering forms. **In 1998 a referendum to legalise abortion in Portugal failed**. Rego, who spoke openly about her own abortions and had seen people suffer after illegal terminations, was angry with the outcome.
- She created paintings, pastels and eight etchings. **The etchings appeared in several Portuguese newspapers** leading up to a **second referendum in 2007**. They brought the debate back to women's experience, drawing attention to **dangers of making abortion illegal**. The effect was so powerful the series has been credited with helping sway public opinion. The second referendum in 2007 **legalised abortion**. The power and pain conveyed remain relevant today. Rego said it highlights the fear, pain and danger of illegal abortion which is what desperate women have always resorted to.
- Rego successfully addressed two human experiences that although extremely widespread are almost entirely unrepresented - **abortion and depression**. The **Triptych** revealed women dealing with consequences of illegal abortion. She was proud to see the work used to campaign for legalisation in Portugal. These are amongst her most celebrated works forcibly addressing aspects of female agency, resolve, suffering and survival.

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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Angel,
1998,
pastel on paper on
aluminium,
180 x 130 cm.
© Paula Rego. Courtesy the
artist and Victoria Miro

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Angel*, 1998, pastel on paper on aluminium, 180 x 130 cm. © Paula Rego. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

- We arrive at Rego's **Angel** (1998) is one of the **most forceful images from her late-1990s production**. Created immediately after the *Abortion Series*, it was not formally part of that group, but it **belongs to the same cycle** of works in which Rego used staged female protagonists to articulate **moral struggle, vengeance, protection, and embodied authority**. The model is Lila Nunes, Rego's long-time studio assistant and frequent surrogate, whose presence helped the artist construct psychologically charged, physically grounded figures.
- The female figure in *Angel* stands frontal, monumental, and battle-ready. The elements deliberately fuse contradictory roles: avenger, defender, mourner, saint, and executioner. Rego thus collapses familiar religious iconography—Michael the Archangel, Joan of Arc, the Virgin of Sorrows—into a single, deeply humanised woman whose authority derives from emotional ferocity rather than divine abstraction.
- The angelic wings are implied rather than literal, allowing the model's physical presence to dominate. Rego's interest lies **not in celestial mythology** but in women's capacity to hold conflicting positions: **purity and aggression, compassion and retribution, vulnerability and command**. The intense, shadowed background and theatrical lighting heighten the sense of confrontation. The figure becomes a symbolic guardian of those harmed or

silenced, a moral witness emerging from Rego's ongoing activism around women's rights.



Paula Rego (1935-2022), The Annunciation from the Virgin Mary cycle, 2002, pastel on paper on aluminium, 75 x 72 cm

- Invited by **President Jorge Sampaio** (pronounced "ZHOR-zuh sam-PIE-oo") in **2002**, Rego created this **cycle of scenes** from the **Virgin's life** for the **chapel of the presidential palace** in Lisbon. Rego became fixated with drawing the Virgin Mary. This religious series was **special to her** and she kept one work from the cycle on her bedroom wall. She said of all her pictures, these were **the most fun to make**.
- **The Annunciation**: Depicts Mary, modeled by Rego's granddaughter, as a young girl in a school uniform receiving news from an angel. Here Mary is no impassive innocent, but a vulnerable adolescent, shocked at the revelation. The Angel Gabriel is shown as a woman in a dress.
- Rego described herself as a sort of Catholic with a sense of Catholic guilt and strong childhood belief that the Devil was real. She prayed when necessary. In Portugal many pray to the Virgin Mary. Writer Maureen Murdock wrote that if the central image of Western religion were a woman giving birth rather than a man dying on the cross, the impetus in culture would rest on life and love of life rather than death and fear of death. Rego found this interesting. She wasn't trying to express love of life or fear of death - those things may come through because they are in her.
- The works show Rego's continued engagement with religious themes and Portuguese Catholic culture despite her complicated relationship with the

Church. The commission from the President recognised her status as Portugal's pre-eminent artist.

NOTES

- Rego completed twelve works in total: eight were installed in the presidential chapel, and she created four additional, slightly larger works for her own collection. The cycle includes traditional biblical episodes reimagined through a contemporary, female lens:
 - The Annunciation: Depicts Mary, modeled by Rego's granddaughter, as a young girl in a school uniform receiving news from an angel.
 - The Visitation: Features a young Virgin Mary looking out of the scene with mixed emotions while receiving news of her pregnancy.
 - Nativity: Shows Mary experiencing the physical pain of childbirth, bringing the scene closer to the human female condition.
 - The Death of the Virgin: Presents an aged, stiff body, purposely lacking the sentimentality and ethereal beauty typical of traditional art historical depictions.
 - Other titles in the cycle: Adoration, Purification at the Temple, Flight into Egypt, Lamentation, Pietà, Assumption, Descent from the Cross, and Agony in the Garden.
- Rego reimagines the Virgin as a robust, humanised mother. Drapery, posture, and symbolic blue evoke tradition, while expressive realism asserts corporeality and resilience. The figure conveys compassion without idealisation. Rego repositions Marian iconography through empathy, emphasising strength, suffering, and the dignity of ordinary maternal experience.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Nossa Senhora: NO-sa sen-YOR-a

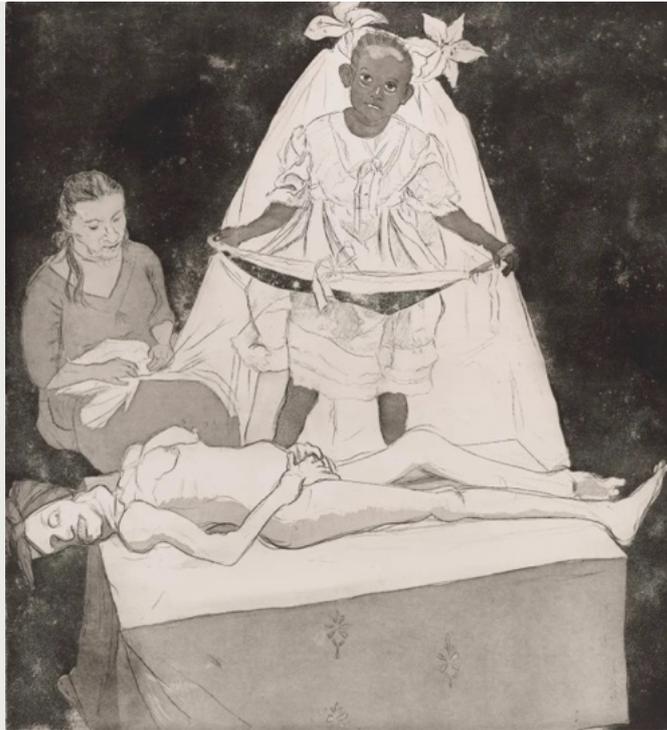
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Paula Rego (1935-2022),
Night Bride
from **Female Genital Mutilation**
series,
2009,
pastel,
dimensions not confirmed,
Royal Academy of Arts, London

Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Night Bride from Female Genital Mutilation series*, 2009, pastel, dimensions not confirmed, Royal Academy of Arts, London

- The **genital mutilation images** are more straightforward than the abortion ones in the bloodiest possible sense. They address **personal cataclysm** where choice was never a possibility. Most white women in the West will never suffer female genital mutilation literally. But what if the term isn't used only literally? Violence comes in many shapes and forms, including violence by proxy.
- The 2009 series combines all the **horrors of sexual, familial, ideological and bio-violence**. These powerful images confront difficult stories of **pain and abuse that Rego felt needed to be told**. Her tableaux, whether tender or tragic, consider complexities of human experience and the **experience of women** in particular. She is celebrated for works forcibly addressing female agency, resolve, suffering and survival.
- By this time **Rego was in her seventies and working prolifically**. In 2009 Casa das Histórias Paula Rego - **a museum dedicated exclusively to her work** designed by celebrated architect Eduardo Souto de Moura - opened to the public in Cascais.
- In 2010 she was made a **Dame of the British Empire** in the Queen's Birthday Honours and won Madrid's prestigious **MAPFRE Foundation Drawing Prize**.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Cascais: kash-KICE

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Paula Rego (1935-2022), *Self Portrait III*, 2017, pastel on paper, private collection

- Three **2017 self-portraits show a face like one from Francis Bacon**, deformed and mouth wide open. Following a **fall**, Rego decided to render the account that her **bruised face** offered. She deftly captured her own likeness, bruised and out of shape, not as a means of expressing pain but because its physical effects gave her a reason to draw herself. She said at the time: I didn't like the fall but **the self-portraits I liked doing**. I had something to show.
- Writer Deborah Levy wrote: We see an **older woman**, her mouth wide open to reveal a **snarl of crooked lower teeth**, a wedding ring perhaps on the finger of her left hand. If she is stripped of the radiance of youth, she is nevertheless radiant with the force of her own taboo-breaking gaze. The power of transformation - caused by age, accident or anguish - is one theme revealing Rego's creative inspiration and motivation, and the candour of her vision sustained across narratives, through motifs and over decades.
- In these characteristically **unflinching works Rego confronted aging, injury and mortality**. She worked until near the end of her life. **Rego died peacefully on 8 June 2022 at age eighty-seven**. She was widely considered the **pre-eminent woman artist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century**. The largest and most comprehensive retrospective of her work was held at Tate Britain in 2021, travelling to institutions in the Netherlands and Spain in 2022.

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61-13 PAULA REGO

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK



Paula Rego (1935-2022), Self
Portrait III, 2017

- Paula Rego **reshaped figurative painting**. She turned it into a **fiercely political, narrative art of female experience** and resistance, **influencing generations** of artists and debates on women's rights, from **abortion to abuse**, through psychologically charged, **storybook-rooted imagery** that exposed power, cruelty and resilience
- That brings me to the end of today's talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk



- Paula Rego was a pioneering **Portuguese-British** artist who **transformed figurative painting** by placing women — powerful, complex, and defiant — at its centre. Drawing on **folklore, fairy tales, and personal experience**, she exposed **patriarchal injustice** with dark psychological intensity. Her **abortion series** directly influenced **Portuguese law**, cementing her extraordinary social and artistic legacy.
- Thank you for your time and attention and I hope you will watch other talks in my series.