

Media release

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Medardo Rosso Inventing Modern Sculpture

March 29–August 10, 2025, Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau

Curators: Heike Eipeldauer (mumok) and Elena Filipovic (Kunstmuseum Basel)

Sculptor, photographer, and master of artistic staging, rival to Auguste Rodin and a role model for numerous artists: around 1900, Medardo Rosso (1858 in Turin, Italy–1928 in Milan, Italy) revolutionized sculpture. Although exceptionally influential, the Italian-French artist remains too little known today. *Medardo Rosso: Inventing Modern Sculpture* aims to change this. Featuring around fifty of his sculptures and two hundred and fifty photographs and drawings, the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel offers a rare opportunity to discover Rosso's oeuvre in a comprehensive retrospective. It invites the audience to learn more about his pioneering activities in turn-of-the-century Milan and Paris as well as the significance of his art in a contemporary perspective, while at the same time providing the basis for a new investigation of the history of modern sculpture.

The exhibition, which was produced in cooperation with the mumok (Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien) and co-curated by Heike Eipeldauer and Elena Filipovic, helps visitors understand Rosso's radical explorations of form (and its undoing), material, and technique across media. The extraordinary and lasting impact of his oeuvre is revealed by encounters with works by over sixty artists from the past one hundred years including Lynda Benglis, Constantin Brâncuși, Edgar Degas, David Hammons, Eva Hesse, Meret Oppenheim, Auguste Rodin, and Alina Szapocznikow.

Medardo Rosso and his art

"Medardo Rosso is without a doubt the greatest living sculptor," Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in *L'Europe nouvelle*, a magazine published in Paris, after visiting the artist's studio in 1918. The influential art critic and poet's words suggest how appreciated Rosso's work was in its time. Born in Turin in 1858, Rosso moved to Paris in 1889 and spent the next three decades in the art metropolis; he only returned to his native Italy in his final years. Except for a year of studies at the Accademia di Brera (Academy of Fine

Arts), Milan, where he attended drawing classes in the Scuola di Anatomia (School of Anatomy), Rosso was self-taught. He also composed a number of inventive and stylistically idiosyncratic essays in art theory.

In Paris, he not only socialized with the Impressionists but also met Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), who had already made a name for himself as an artist. The two began working on a radical redefinition of the sculptural medium. To overcome obsolete ideas about representation, production, and perception, Rosso was adamant, a fundamental change was needed that would “breathe life” into sculpture: “There is no painting, there is no sculpture, there is only a thing that lives.”

The human scale and the fragmented staging, both of which lend Rosso’s work an air of intimacy, and the agitated and blurred edges of his figures, go against all the aspirations to eternity embodied by the sort of heroic monumental sculpture that was conventional at the time; they were also at odds with longstanding sculptural traditions. On the level of his motifs and materials, Rosso pursued similar aims, eschewing narratives of valor and glory to turn his attention to working class people and create works that sought to capture the fleeting essence of a moment in time.

Rosso’s creative process

To make his figures, Rosso used bronze as well as more modest and less durable materials like wax and plaster, which sculptors before him had typically used only for maquettes or in auxiliary functions. In their suppleness and malleability, they conveyed an ephemeral impression—one reason why his work has also been celebrated as a sculptural version of Impressionism. However, this is a designation that only describes one aspect of Rosso's groundbreaking work, which is difficult to categorize in many respects. Over time, the artist came to concentrate on a small repertoire of motifs, which he kept returning to in different materials and media, varying them to produce changing effects.

Beginning in 1900, when photography was still a nascent medium, Rosso systematically integrated photography into his creative process. He photographed his figures and exhibited the pictures, arranging them in ensembles together with his sculptures as well as works by contemporaries and copies of works of art from past eras. This sort of staging made the space surrounding the works part and parcel of the overall sculptural effect. As Rosso himself wrote: “We are nothing but the consequences of the things that surround us. Even when we move, we are always connected to other objects.”

Rosso placed importance on building a rapport with his environment, engaging it in “conversation,” as he put it: he wanted to record the special instant when the motif

suddenly came to the fore and attained affective force. In light of today's increasingly urgent debates around the relationship between individual and society, between human being and technology, Rosso's work thus seems "alarmingly alive," as the British artist Phyllida Barlow (1944–2023) described it while admitting her fascination with the sculptor and his oeuvre.

The exhibition in Basel

Twenty years after the first and only previous retrospective in Switzerland, the comprehensive exhibition *Medardo Rosso: Inventing Modern Sculpture* puts special emphasis on reconstructing Rosso's experimental and intermedia approach. It is based on yearslong research and preparations by Heike Eipeldauer (mumok); the enlarged version in Basel was co-curated by Elena Filipovic. It gathers around fifty bronze, plaster, and wax sculptures by the artist, including key pieces, and hundreds of photographs and drawings. Many of these works have rarely been on view outside Italy in the past several decades.

In keeping with the principle of comparative vision espoused by the artist himself, the exhibition presents his works in "conversation" with more than sixty historic and contemporary photographs, paintings, sculptures, and videos. In encounters across the generations, Rosso thus meets artists from his own time to the present including Francis Bacon, Phyllida Barlow, Louise Bourgeois, Isa Genzken, Alberto Giacometti, Robert Gober, David Hammons, Hans Josephsohn, Yayoi Kusama, Marisa Merz, Bruce Nauman, Senga Nengudi, Richard Serra, Georges Seurat, Paul Thek, Rosemarie Trockel, Hannah Villiger, Andy Warhol, and Francesca Woodman (see the complete list in the appendix). The Basel version of the exhibition expands on the one in Vienna by adding works by Umberto Boccioni, Miriam Cahn, Mary Cassatt, Giorgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp, Peter Fischli / David Weiss, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, Henry Moore, Meret Oppenheim, Simone Fattal, Giuseppe Penone, Odilon Redon, Pamela Rosenkranz, Kaari Upson, Andra Ursuța, and Danh Võ.

The exhibition begins in the Kunstmuseum Basel Hauptbau's courtyard, where Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* (1884–1889) come face to face with a work by Pamela Rosenkranz. From the Hauptbau, the visitors proceed through the underground concourse and past an expansive work by Kaari Upson to the Neubau, where a monographic presentation of Rosso's art is on view on the ground floor.

The exhibition continues on the second floor with the juxtapositions with works by other artists. These encounters are arranged along thematic foci such as "Repetition and Variation," "Process and Performance," "Touching, Embracing, Shaping," "Mise-en-scène," "Forms Undone," "Anti-Monumentality," and "Appearance and Disappearance."

The works on view are drawn from the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the mumok, Vienna, as well as international collections including the Albertina, Vienna; the Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Milano, Milan; the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo; the Kunst Museum Winterthur; the Kunsthaus Zürich; the S.M.A.K., Ghent; the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main; and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; others are provided by the artists themselves or other lenders. The exhibition was produced in collaboration with the Medardo Rosso Estate. The scenography has been designed by Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge and her team.

Catalogue

The most comprehensive publication about Rosso to date, with essays by Jo Applin, Heike Eipeldauer, Georges Didi-Huberman, Megan R. Luke, Nina Schallenberg, Francesco Stocchi, and Matthew S. Witkovsky, was released in conjunction with the exhibition.

Ed. by Heike Eipeldauer, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Cologne, 496 pages, 450 illustrations, ISBN 978-3-7533-0612-4

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www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/media

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Artists featured in the exhibition

Medardo Rosso with

Giovanni Anselmo (1934–2023)

Francis Bacon (1909–1992)

Nairy Baghramian (b. 1971)

Olga Balema (b. 1984)

Phyllida Barlow (1944–2023)

Lynda Benglis (b. 1941)

Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916)

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010)

Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1890–1960)

Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957)

Miriam Cahn (b. 1949)

Eugène Carrière (1849–1906)

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926)

Paul Cezanne (1839–1906)

Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978)

Edgar Degas (1834–1917)

Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985)

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)

Raymond Duchamp-Villon (1876–1918)

Luciano Fabro (1936–2007)

Simone Fattal (b. 1942)

Peter Fischli (b. 1952)

Loïe Fuller (1862–1928)

Isa Genzken (b. 1948)

Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966)

Robert Gober (b. 1954)

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996)

David Hammons (b. 1943)

Eva Hesse (1936–1970)

Jasper Johns (b. 1930)

Hans Josephsohn (1936–1970)

Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015)

Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945)

Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929)

Maria Lassnig (1919–2014)

Sherrie Levine (b. 1947)

Matthijs Maris (1839–1917)

Sidsel Meineche Hansen (b. 1981)

Marisa Merz (1926–2019)

Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920)

Henry Moore (1898–1986)

Robert Morris (1931–2018)

Juan Muñoz (1953–2001)

Bruce Nauman (b. 1941)

Senga Nengudi (b. 1943)

Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985)

Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947)

Carol Rama (1918–2015)

Odilon Redon (1840–1916)

Auguste Rodin (1840–1917)

Pamela Rosenkranz (b. 1979)

Richard Serra (1938–2024)

Georges Seurat (1859–1891)

Erin Shirreff (b. 1975)

Edward Steichen (1879–1973)

Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973)

Paul Thek (1933–1988)

Rosemarie Trockel (b. 1952)

Kaari Upson (1970–2021)

Andra Ursuța (b. 1979)

Hannah Villiger (1951–1997)

Danh Võ (b. 1975)

Andy Warhol (1928–1987)

Rebecca Warren (b. 1965)

David Weiss (1946–2012)

Francesca Woodman (1958–1981)