

'Greatest religious painter of 20th century' receives new interest, rare exhibit

by [David Van Biema](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue

What can a nearly forgotten set of 58 masterful etchings by a man once called one of the great artists of the 20th century tell us about the state of religious art in America?

At a rare showing of *Miserere et Guerre (Mercy and War)*, a series by Georges Rouault, the pious and the curious will have a chance to judge for themselves. Rouault completed his expressionist landmark in the 1920s. New York's Museum of Modern Art, among other top-notch museums, owns one of the 450 initial copies of the work and repeatedly celebrated an artist it called "the greatest religious painter of the 20th century."

Yet the Parisian artist's reputation has faded drastically in the course of a few decades. His last big American museum exhibit was in 1979. Not one of MOMA's many Rouaults is up on its walls. Rouault's entry in the standard text *Janson's History of Art* has shrunk from a page and a half in 1971 to nothing by 2007.

Some see this as a consequence of the contemporary art world's distaste for explicit religious images.

St. Louis University's Museum of Contemporary Religious Art shows its copy of the series every four or five years. The complete series of etchings [will be on display until May 8](#).

Although St. Louis University is a Roman Catholic school, displays at the museum—founded by Terrence Dempsey in 1993—have been eclectic, featuring Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist works, among others, as long "as it's not a satire or a critique, but a genuine engagement" with faith, Dempsey said.

The school's Jesuit identity, however, was the reason it was given a set of the Rouault series in 1956 by a brother of a Jesuit priest.

The two-foot-high etchings march down eight walls, showing the poor and downtrodden: the dreary dead-end grind of Paris's industrial suburbs that Rouault,

who was from the working-class redoubt of Belleville, called “the old district of Long Suffering.”

He portrayed threadbare laborers, hard-pressed families, and the sick, the jollity of itinerant clowns and prostitutes, as well as a stream of refugees—from where, it is never clear. The trauma of World War I appears retrospectively in the form of skeletons with soldiers’ hats.

Although Rouault’s subjects are stripped of vanity, he gave them great dignity. A contemporary called him “a vivid and brutal draftsman, infinitely rich despite the closely spaced variations of his selected themes.” Apprenticed to a glazier in his teens, Rouault translated the thick lead outlining of stained glass into a powerful, muscular line and invented new etching techniques to make his compressed black and white figures glow from within.

None glow more so than Jesus, whose image recurs, in foreground or background, 16 times in the series. Not Jesus triumphant, but Jesus mocked and debased, often on the cross, his downward gaze echoing that of the poor.

According to William Dyrness, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, the work originally included a resurrection plate. But Rouault canceled it. The final image in the finished series is of Jesus’ head crowned with thorns, which Rouault labeled: “It is through his wounds that we are healed.”

The title for another panel is a quote from the polymath Blaise Pascal: “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world.”

This emphasis on Jesus as eternal co-sufferer and of suffering’s redemptive aspect is part of mainstream Roman Catholic theology. But in his writing, at least, Rouault drifted toward a philosophy known as Dolorism, which elevated suffering into the only truly ennobling experience.

The hint of this theme in *Miserere* may help explain its fall from popular grace, suggests Sandra Bowden, an artist and collector who rents out her own full set of the series.

“You can’t deny that a strong and visible faith was at work in the production of Rouault’s art,” she said. “And that’s not PC.”

Passion theology has never been a big part of Protestantism, and its more fervent mystical expressions have receded in American Catholicism, except during Lent.

But there are some signs that, for whatever reason, interest in Rouault and his *Miserere* is rekindling.

Jean-Yves Rouault, the artist's grandson and chair of the Georges Rouault Foundation, wrote from Paris, "There are definitely more *Miserere* exhibitions than 20 years ago." He said the foundation communicates with several collectors in the United States, who bought Rouault works "in the last few years. We are confident that there will be more activity in the near future."

Dempsey pointed out the relevance of Rouault's acute social vision at a time when "there's so much suffering on the global scene. All I can think of when I look at his refugees is those Syrian migrants coming in from Turkey and Greece."

The museum director also has a personal connection. Decades ago, after his mother received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's, Dempsey recalls sitting before one of the artist's heads of the suffering Christ.

"I asked the usual questions," he recalls. "'Lord, how can this be helping anyone? This is a good woman. She did so much for us, she held our family together.' And there's this head with these big wide eyes and blood dripping down the side of his face, and what I heard in my heart was: 'I understand. You're not alone.' There was no miracle. No healing. But I realized I wasn't alone.

"There's power in Rouault's art for me. And that power has not diminished over all these years —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on March 15, 2016.*