How black-and-white becomes color in Georges Rouault's art

By Marilyn Seven
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Some painters mesmerize me. Albert Pinkham Ryder, Mark Rothko, and Georges Rouault, for example. Their work glows, albeit in different ways. Yet it's Rouault I continue to follow.

Why Rouault? Color in painting suggests sensuality—black-and-white seeks something else. I love Rouault for his painted denizens of this benighted world—his painted Christs, too—but also for his solidarity with us, his visual participation alongside us in suffering. This is expressed most profoundly in 58 black-and-white, arm's-length-size prints conceived as *Miserere et Guerre* (Mercy and War), a work that for me represents our journey through life.

Miserere means mercy. It is a lament and a plea. Rouault's reply to suffering is the earliest Christian confession: Jesus is Lord.

My love affair with Rouault began in the late '50s. I read an article on him in *Reader's Digest* accompanied by a reproduction of a head of Christ that—for its tenderness, somberness, probing eyes, the brilliance of its sky-blue, halo-like space—I couldn't resist. All I remember of the article is that lay Catholic Rouault was called the monk of painting. Those words and that image seared my soul. They still do.

After finishing college in Texas in 1959 I became a hometown newspaper reporter but continued earlier painting experiments, reworking an otherworldly blue face of Christ, painting a mantel-size marine with a Christ-figure—both inspired by Rouault—trying to find what Rouault found. I couldn't.

In 1960 I came to New York's Union Theological Seminary, ostensibly for an M.A. in Christian education before becoming a missionary to Vienna but really to study church history. Why had my upbringing in the 19th-century Restoration Movement Church of Christ taught me that we alone were the one true church—the *only* Christians—when we'd popped up so late? What about all those other centuries? Liturgy? Music? Sermons? Nothing made sense.

The severity of my doubts, given additional power both by the inevitable culture clash of New York and by meeting new classmates, ultimately released an internal chaos so deep that, one day, sitting in the Union refectory after lunch, I felt my head almost literally breaking. I knew fellow students were just as intelligent, just as committed, as I was—but they read the Bible differently. *Thought* differently. It left an open wound.

Paintings began to pour out of me. Blue paintings. People struggling. Healing. A Christ image. Not many of those, though. Except for my love of sky-color, dark or bright, Rouault's influence on my art had gone underground. I canceled missionary plans and clung to painting for dear life.

Not knowing what to paint, after graduation in 1962 I held part-time jobs, got married, painted in my spare time—hoping to find a satisfying subject in surreal landscapes, abstraction, cloth-collage paintings, masks, Styrofoam heads refashioned into sculpture...many directions. I often felt elated. Also confused, baffled. Unmoored.

Then, in 1992, my 22-year-old nephew, my brother's only son and my parents' only grandchild, died in a car wreck. Afterward I began to spread layers of black on 50 small canvases where I had previously painted figures, transforming them into one heavily textured, all-black work, each canvas cheek-by-jowl against the next. I pored over the Museum of Modern Art's 1952 publication of *Miserere*. Finally I began to paint almost exclusively the *Miserere*. Painting became meditation.

At first I painted Rouault's 58 images side-by-side on small single canvases. Still tinier canvases got thumbnail-size images. Notebooks got ink, collage, and color. Later Union Seminary's Lampman Chapel installed my black-and-white oil paintings on tiny boards framed as one work—chamber music from Rouault's unmatched, unmatchable symphony.

In *Miserere,* black-and-white becomes color. I cannot do its radiance justice—in words or in paint. "Painting is a way to forget life," Rouault once said, "a cry in the night." And in another context: "I believe in suffering. It is not feigned in me."

Monroe Wheeler's summation of Rouault's vision in his introduction to MoMA's *Miserere* remains incomparable:

> Man’s fate upon earth is tragic. . . . As a rule his hope is folly. . . . Whole nations are predestined to hunger and thirst and fear, to invasion, devastation, displacement. The future is myth and mystery: a vague reign of alien potentates, misrule of paranoiacs, dance of death. What shall man do? . . . Where can [we] turn? To the church, the Evangels, Jesus Christ dead and buried, risen the third day.

Amen. Whether or not I understand or even believe it.