





# PAULA REGO

# There and Back Again



PAULA REGO, *Crivelli's Garden*, 1990-91

## Prelude:

### The Rehearsal Room Hall 1

#### Rehearsing

Round the back of this wall is *Time—Past and Present*, in which the artist depicts 'herself' as a young girl drawing away under the protection of her father. At the same time, with the encouragement of her grandfather and others, she was learning to enjoy dressing up. Playing different characters, abetted by her wardrobe, and making drawings out of her secret world could be seen as rehearsals for life. Yet, being shy, she found it easier and more fun to let go on paper. Rego was not an evangelist, but she was a passionate observer. She retreated into the safe place of her studio. By the time she came to paint *Crivelli's Garden* in the National Gallery, London, she was able to tap the rich trauma from the lives of martyred women to produce a hard-hitting critique of her time.

#### *Crivelli's Garden*, 1990

The lives of the female saints depicted in this mural, as first told by the Church, then recorded in the book of *The Golden Legend*, and now retold by the artist, echo the way Paula Rego worked throughout her life. Saint after saint repeats a tangential narrative. She was fed stories at the knee of her father, her aunt and others, and then when alone with a piece of paper in front of her, she let these stories bubble up. She would work on a story and produce a series from it, but as John Berger said, "Never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one." The words could have been written for Rego, who has shown quite how futile the attempt to draw a straight line is.

*Crivelli's Garden* is one of a very few commissions by the National Gallery in London. It was made in 1990 and 1991 while Rego was the first Associate Artist at the National Gallery.

#### *Time—Past and Present*, 1990

It all starts with a young girl drawing on a blank piece of paper on the desk within the protective circle of a gentle father figure. The strength of the relationship shown here kept Paula Rego painting until her death this year. She found space in which to work at a very young age. Of course in her long life her sense of working from a safe place was constantly under assault from living under fascism, having to leave her own country, and more importantly the ravages of her own emotions. But she went back to the studio, time and time again.

## Act 1:

### Role-Playing and Storytelling Hall 2

Stories, in Rego's work, are alive. They go hand in hand with the life she led, much of which took place in her head and heart. As a child her grandfather used to show her off to her friends and she had to dress up in clothes which linked up with her fantasies ever after. She started making theatrical productions in her studio, so that reality and dream could merge in her paintings. By the 1990s she took on Disney's *Fantasia*, but of course her Ostrich ballerinas are far more down to earth than Walt's. The women she painted, though shy in one way (they never look at you), are coming to terms with their bodies and their dreams about themselves. They are not going to be pinioned by Degas's gaze.



PAULA REGO, *Angel*, 1998

Maria Paula Paiva de Figueiroa Rego was born in Lisbon on 26 January 1935, during the Estado Novo dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar. Her mother studied painting at the Lisbon School of Fine Arts; her father was an electronics engineer from an ardently anti-fascist, anti-clerical family. Between 1936 and 1937, Rego was looked after by her beloved paternal grandparents, and she was reunited with her parents when she was two and a half. Rego and her father shared a passion for the Italian operas of Puccini and Verdi, and together they went to the São Carlos Theater in Lisbon to watch performances. To escape the repressive rule of the Estado Novo, Rego was sent by her Anglophilic father to the Grove finishing school in Kent, but moved after two terms to the Slade School of Fine Art in London (1952-56). There, at the age of 17, she met her future husband, the painting student Victor Willing (1928-88). In 1954 she won the annual Slade Summer Composition competition with the oil painting *Under Milk Wood*. Between 1956 and 1961, she gave birth to her three children: Caroline (Cas), Victoria, and Nick. In 1957 the young family moved to Casal da Ribeira da Baleia, her grandparents' farmhouse in Ericeira. In 1961, Rego exhibited for the first time with the London Group, alongside David Hockney, Michael Andrews, and Frank Auerbach. In 1965 she held her first solo exhibition at the Modern Art Gallery of the National Society of Fine Arts in Lisbon, presenting nineteen collage paintings. In 1972 the family settled permanently in London. The Carnation Revolution of 1974 ended the Portuguese dictatorship. In 1983, Rego returned to Slade as a visiting tutor of painting. She participated in numerous exhibitions, including at Arncliffe in Bristol and at the Camden Arts Centre. Her first solo exhibition in the United States was held at the Art Palace in New York in 1985. In 1987 she started working with models, primarily Lila Nunes, Willing's studio assistant and carer. In 1988 her husband Victor Willing died 22 years after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. That same year, Rego held a major retrospective exhibition at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, which traveled to Casa de Serralves in Porto, and her first major solo exhibition in London at the Serpentine Gallery. She finished *The Dance* and started working on the series *Nursery Rhymes*, inspired by the traditional rhymes she read to her grandmother. In 1990 she accepted the invitation to be the first associate artist in residence at the National Gallery in London. During this residence, Rego conceived the monumental tableau *Crivelli's Garden*, which reinterprets the masterpiece of the National Gallery. In 1993 she moved to her last studio in Camden Town (recreated here). Inspired by the work of the Spanish Baroque painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo in the Dulwich Picture Gallery collection, Rego painted *Angel* (1998), an avenging symbol of female strength. At the same time, after a referendum in Portugal failed to legalize abortion due to low turnout, Rego started working on a series of large pastels on the topic. Her pictures were subsequently used in the Portuguese press in support of the second referendum in 2007, which led to the legalization of abortion. In 1998 as well, Rego designed costumes for *There and Back Again*, a ballet inspired by her *Nursery Rhymes* series for the 1998-99 season at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In 2007 a major retrospective of her work was held at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, and it traveled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., the following year. That same year, Rego endured a difficult period of depression during which she produced a series of twelve pastels on the theme; they remained locked in a drawer in the artist's studio for ten years. In 2009 the purpose-built museum *Casa das Histórias Paula Rego*, designed by the architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, opened in Cascais, Portugal. It hosts a permanent collection of Rego's work, alongside temporary exhibitions. An intimate look at her life and work is presented in Paula Rego, *Secrets & Stories*, 2017 a documentary directed by her son Nick Willing, which was broadcast by the BBC. A major retrospective was held by Tate Britain (2021), and it traveled to the Kunstmuseum Den Haag in The Hague and the Museo Picasso Málaga. Paula Rego died on 8 June 2022 in Hampstead, London.

## Act 2:

### Confronting the Human Condition Hall 3

In commenting on the way we are, Rego does not spare herself. Among a kaleidoscope of characters, she gives us her own personal endings, the most poetic being *The Dance* (1988), which reveals her and others dancing with her husband. He is modeled by her son Nick, who also sits in for the depiction of his father's tragic exit in *The Family* (1988) (we only have drawings of it here). He died slowly of multiple sclerosis. The approaching death of her husband coincided with a dramatic change in the paintings. At the beginning of the 1980s, she hardly ever painted human beings. Everyone appeared as animals. In her goodbye to her husband in her paintings, she pins down his features, though she does obscure his face.

Rego does not flinch. She shows the harsh cruelty of multiple sclerosis. When it came to her 80th birthday she made a frightening series of self-portraits in 2017. Her lovers did not escape either. While she was making *Crivelli's Garden* at the National Gallery, she was in the company of Botticelli's great *Venus and Mars* (1483), in which the goddess of love stares predatorially at the sleeping god of war. Rego captures this in her depiction of *Joseph's Dream* (1990). Her model for the sleeping dreamer is Rudi Nassauer, who has no defenses against her eagle eye and heart: it is a neat reversal of the male gaze. She takes this further when, in *Painting Him Out* (2011), she portrays herself squeezing Anthony Rudolf out of the canvas.

## Act 3:

### Battles: The Triumph of the Underdog Hall 4

From the 1950s to 2022, Rego battled against male supremacy, fascism, colonialism, and depression. When she lived under the dictatorship of Salazar, she painted brave critical work against him. As recently as 2007 and 2008, she made the triptych *The Human Cargo* to show that we have not dealt with the legacy of colonialism. We still traffic in human beings.

When the Portuguese people voted in the first referendum not to legalize abortion, Rego made a frightening series of works to show the result, the horrors of backstreet abortion.

Then there is the other family enemy, depression. Paula Rego's father, her husband, and she herself were all laid low by depression. She only confronts this head on in her work in 2007. Her depression looks like being tied down to the bed or couch by an invisible spider. She drew herself out of this web, thread by thread, line by line. She kept these works hidden in a drawer for years.

Role play and stories were the two weapons she used in the main struggle that runs through all her work, that between domination and rebellion. Her *Dog Woman* series perfectly illustrates the tilting balance of power. She was invariably determined that the underdog should win.

## Finale:

### There and Back Again Hall 3

There are hundreds of finales in Rego's work. Many of them involve role play, particularly by women. The ways to undermine patriarchy are myriad. *Barn* (1994) is perhaps the most extreme proof of how a masochist prevails over the sadists, but it brings into focus the underlying theme of how the underdog outwits the "master". Her husband, fellow artist Victor Willing, concludes an essay on her saying that her work contains "a note of hilarious triumph. It defies the pain."

Paula Rego certainly did not hate men, but given that she lived in a male-dominated world, they had to take the bulk of the blame for what she saw. She unleashes her female gaze on Rudi in *Joseph's Dream* and emasculates Tony in *Company of Women* (1998). But Paula's daughter Cas Willing does issue a warning, saying that "her 'models' were playing roles. I once asked her if she'd ever painted Tony, as I thought that might be interesting, and she said not really. Not him the person, though her feelings about him sometimes come through. Tony is no Mr. Rochester, but to Paula, Vic certainly was. So Tony was a stand-in for two characters at once in [the *Jane Eyre*] series."

The most dramatic finale to the show comes from the same series as *Company of Women*, inspired by the corruption in Queiroz's novel *The Crime of Father Amaro*. The *Angel* (1998) looks out at us, with a sword in one hand and a sponge in another. She is judging the roles we have played. She is looking beyond our little antics.

"I'M INTERESTED IN SEEING THINGS FROM THE UNDERDOG'S PERSPECTIVE. USUALLY THAT'S A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE", claimed the Portuguese-British artist Paula Rego (1935-2022), Grande Dame of an uncompromising vision, a true tender narrator for our complex times of a psychological and physical anguish, and an unrivalled storyteller, heralded as a feminist icon. Her groundbreaking oeuvre tackled upon systems of power and control, fascism, women's rights, abortion and human tragedy, giving visibility to the underrepresented, fighting political injustices, and at the same time, redefining painterly traditions. The themes of violence, poverty, political tyranny, gender discrimination, and grief were in the centre of her challenging work. Courageously questioning the political myths and subtly although with a brutal honesty and dignity investigating human relationships, Paula Rego's art - remains more relevant than ever as an evidence of resilience and an unparalleled subversive and rebellious strength.

Paula Rego. *There and Back Again* is the first institutional solo exhibition of Paula Rego in Germany, and comprises over 80 art works (paintings, drawings, prints, as well as costumes). Its title is borrowed from the ballet *Pra lá e pra cá* [There and Back Again] which the English composer Louisa Lasdun composed in 1998. The ballet, presented in the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, was inspired by her seeing Paula Rego's *Nursery Rhymes* prints, and for which Rego designed the costumes.

Paula Rego sadly died this summer aged 87. She started drawing at least 84 years ago. As an only child bombarded with stories which she loved by her family she found her own space drawing. Rego saw much joy in the world, but also many injustices. She fought the latter all her life. Against the spirit of her times she was not tempted to draw one limited,

## Role Play: THERE AND BACK AGAIN

"MY GRANDFATHER USED TO SHOW ME OFF TO HIS FRIENDS. I HAD TO PERFORM AND GET DRESSED UP; FROCKS, VERY PRETTY FROCKS WHICH I LOVED, AND LITTLE COATS, THINGS THAT HAD BEEN BOUGHT SPECIALLY FOR ME. TYROLEAN CLOTHES WERE FASHIONABLE AND TARTAN SKIRTS AND PINAFORES. I SOMETIMES FIND MYSELF PAINTING THE CLOTHES I WORE INTO MY PICTURES NOW."

An only child, Paula Rego, though shy, learned precociously how to play along with adults. Role play became a weapon. As she admitted, "THE GREATEST PROBLEM ALL MY LIFE HAS BEEN THE INABILITY TO SPEAK MY MIND ... THEREFORE THE FLIGHT INTO STORYTELLING." Storytelling and role play were linked throughout her life. Initially she was a leading actor, often taking a masochistic position, as the only place of safety she could find. From the 1980s onwards there is an explosion of the cast, as the oil well of stories flow out of her. Despite everything being done to women in these stories, somehow women are at the center. Women prevail.

The finished version of *The Rehearsal* (1989) has no obvious rape scene, but *Study for The Rehearsal* (1989), has reduced the rehearsal to just that, a woman being raped by three men. At the other side of the picture is girl watching with her hands over her ears and a young mother and daughter, both looking on in horror at their fate. Life is seen as a constant rehearsal where we are forced to play a succession of parts. In the final version it is the men who look foolish. As her family expanded, she became a director of others, so that for her last years her grandchildren joined in the dressing up with more regular models such as her loyal assistant Lila Nunes, who often took Paula's place in a central role.

Dressing up was not the only way she escaped the shuttered Portuguese rooms of her childhood. She would sit on the floor and draw. Her mother would know all was well with Paula when she heard a gentle moan. She made a noise like a little motor. Sometimes she would sit with her silent father, as she



PAULA REGO, *Love*, 1995

continuous line of dissent. That had been the status quo of a male-dominated world for far too long. Again and again she came back to a starting point of protest: there and back again.

The exhibition Paula Rego. *There and Back Again* has been conceived as an opera on human condition, staged in a sequence of acts, and dramatised across a polylogue of narratives: from a Prelude (The Rehearsal Room) through Act 1 (Role-Playing and Storytelling), Act 2 (Confronting the Human Condition) and Act 3 (Battles. The Triumph of the Underdog) down to Finale (There and Back Again), featuring Rego's masterful *Angel*, 1998. The exhibition is centred around Rego's 1990 monumental masterpiece *Crivelli's Garden*, a powerful anti-patriarchal statement of an art historical revision, never seen before outside of its place of origin, the National Gallery London.

We are grateful to the family of Paula Rego, and especially to her son, Nick Willing for an invaluable support at each stage of this exhibition's conception. We would like to thank numerous lenders for the generous collaboration which brought this exhibition to fruition.



PAULA REGO, *The Dance*, 1988

remembers in *Time—Past and Present* (1990). Other times she would be on her own, but always she would be full of stories from her grandmother, her aunt, and women. When she was a student at the Slade, her teachers preached that stories were not a serious subject for an artist. Stories were dismissed as women's gossip. Rego made a contribution to bringing stories back into the mainstream of art.

Rego's father was a rock on which she built her life, but he suffered from depression, which attacked her later in life too. The depictions of her own depression are some of the bravest works she made, but then once she was drawing there was the echo of that safe place all those years ago in the room that shut out the glaring sun. And it kept her drawing despite all odds.

Rego is that rare artist who can convey the highs and lows of life at the same time. She constantly attacked the straightjacket of patriarchy. Her early and late work challenged the colonialist dictatorship under which she was brought up. Her father sent her to the Slade in London, as he wanted her to escape the fascism of their own country at the time. She was the youngest student at the Slade, yet despite the edict against storytelling she did well, winning the ... prize. She met an older student, Victor Willing, there. He was married, but she got pregnant and had an abortion. Abortions were illegal in Portugal. Her 1990s abortion series show the hor-

ror of pushing abortion under the counter. The president of Portugal admits her paintings proved critical in the campaign to change the law.

Rego was pregnant again when she finished at the Slade in 1956. She finally got up the courage to tell her father. She telephoned him in Portugal. He got in a car and drove straight to London, and then drove her back to Portugal. They played opera as they drove back. They stayed at nice hotels, and ate and drank well. He took responsibility for sending her to England, so when she said she was pregnant, rather than blame her, he reassured her. She was still terrified about what her mother and the rest of society would say. Again her father stepped up. He told her: "DON'T WORRY ABOUT YOUR MOTHER. I HAVE TAKEN HER TO THE BEACH AND SHE SCREAMED ALL SHE COULD."

Rego's use of role play is similar to that suspense of disbelief needed to dive into opera, fairy stories, Peter Pan, or Martin McDonagh (who inspired her *Pillowman* series). Peter Pan is a boy who never wants to grow up. The *Pillowman* is a sad doll who suffocates children to try to spare them the misery of adult life. "I AM AFRAID I AM RETARDED," claimed Rego. "I MEAN, YOU KNOW, ONE'S LEFT WITH CHILDHOOD ALL THE TIME WHEN YOU'RE NOT PROPERLY GROWN UP AT ALL." One can appreciate Rego's work like theater. She needed to get into another

world to speak her mind. She needed to return to the shuttered room of her childhood and the cauldron of stories boiling away in her head. This enabled her to become as hard hitting as Bertolt Brecht, Artemesia Gentileschi, Jean Rhys, or the Grimm Brothers.

Front page:  
PAULA REGO, *The Company of Women*, 1997, Pastel on paper on aluminum, 180 x 130 cm. Courtesy: CAM. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon © Ostrich Arts Ltd.

Back page:  
PAULA REGO, *Crivelli's Garden*, 1990-91, Acrylic on paper on canvas, © The National Gallery, London

PAULA REGO, *Angel*, 1998, Pastel on paper on aluminum, 180 x 130 cm. Courtesy: CAM. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon © Ostrich Arts Ltd.

PAULA REGO, *Love*, 1995, Pastel on paper on aluminum, Courtesy of Ostrich Arts Ltd and Victoria Miro, © Ostrich Arts Ltd

PAULA REGO, *The Dance*, 1988, Acrylic paint on canvas, 2126 x 2740 mm, Tate: purchased 1989

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