

## **Casa das Histórias Paula Rego Collection**

**Curator: Catarina Alfaro**

4 November 2021 to 19 June 2022 (Rooms 1 to 7)

The Casa das Histórias Paula Rego (CHPR) Collection, under the ownership of Cascais Municipal Council, first made its appearance in the Portuguese museum world in September 2009. Since then, it has come to be regarded, both nationally and internationally, as one of the most significant collections for the knowledge of the artist's work. Consisting of the donation that the artist made of all her print work and more than two hundred drawings, this Collection reflects much of her creative universe. Her various donations to the museum date from four different periods: the main core of the collection was donated in 2009, while, in 2016, 2019 and 2020, the museum received the remaining prints produced between 2009 and 2020. The collection also includes thirteen works belonging to private and public collectors (paintings, sculptures and textiles) that have been deposited at this monographic museum dedicated to the most famous contemporary Portuguese artist.

CHPR has held more than twenty exhibitions dedicated to the work of Paula Rego since 2009, which have either taken a closer look at specific periods in the course of the artist's vast production (1960s, 1970s, 1980s) or have chosen to present her work in accordance with specific thematic criteria (sometimes displayed in a close relationship with works by other artists linked to her figurative universe) or even based on the particular technique that she used, as was the case, for example, with the exhibition *Looking In*, dedicated to the artist's print works, in 2019. These temporary exhibitions have always included works from the CHPR Collection, together with other works loaned by public and private collectors.

In Rooms 2 and 3, this new exhibition of the Collection displays a fundamental group of paintings deposited at the Museum from private and institutional collections. These works have since been incorporated into the institution's collection, celebrating the fruitful collaboration between the collectors and the museum itself. They have helped to fill some of the gaps in the collection and contribute to the overall view of the artist's pictorial production from the 1960s to the 2000s. Prior to this exhibition, some of these paintings were displayed only sporadically or even not at all. *September Afternoon* (c. 1960-61) formed part of the artist's first solo exhibition, in Lisbon, in December 1965, at the Modern Art

Gallery of the Sociedade Nacional de Belas-Artes. For some decades, this work was kept far from the public gaze, later reappearing at the Carmen Miranda Municipal Museum in Marco de Canaveses. *Hello. How are you?* (1960) also dates from the early beginnings of Rego's artistic career. During that period, her apparently chaotic figurative approach served her need to express her emotions. The use of a multimaterial technique, in the sense that it involves the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials — paints, pieces of paper cut out and stuck onto the canvas, outlining the figures and leaving other areas seemingly suspended — reflects the artist's need to respond honestly to the complex demands of her psyche. The three-dimensional quality afforded to these works proves to be indispensable for providing concrete problems with an existence of their own, while the corresponding material thickness gives them tangibility in the painting. Her personal imagery is thus created, which she uses to express her extreme emotions and sensations, reflecting the complex dimension of the questions that she was faced with when growing up and at the beginning of her adult life: the rigidity of the political and social reality of a dictatorial regime that was manifestly patriarchal and Catholic. These issues inevitably brought her feelings of fear, anxiety and rage, which she felt the need to respond to, or sought to confront through painting.

*The Siege* (1976) is one of the main highlights of this exhibition. According to the information provided by its owner, the painting has never before been exhibited and its presentation here together with works from the 1960s and 1980s allows us to accompany the artist's creative evolution and the way in which her figurative language gradually changed shape. Referring to an episode from Portuguese history — the Siege of Lisbon in 1384, imposed by the Castilian forces — the work transmits a tragic tension that reflects Rego's personal history, her artistic isolation and the disappointment that she felt in the aftermath of the revolution of 25 April 1974, in Portugal. In her correspondence with Alberto de Lacerda, Rego noted the anachronism of the artistic and literary pages of the Portuguese newspapers, which published edifying analyses about neorealism. The false actuality of this artistic movement aroused a sense of tiredness in the artist: "There is only talk of demystification and I think it would be a good idea to demystify Neo-realism. Is it even possible to produce 'realistic works'?" Rego expresses a way of life in Lisbon and the country itself that is marked by ideological repression, by another form of control and atavism. Financial problems and the worsening of her husband's disease also contributed to her sadness; she felt increasingly isolated, nurturing the hope of returning to London on a definitive basis. This was, in fact, to happen during the course of 1976, when she was awarded a two-year scholarship by the

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. During this decade, and above all in the 1980s, she began to use acrylic paint, which was better suited to her spontaneous working method; this material and her compulsive impulse for drawing enabled her to make a different use of colour in determining the overall sense of her composition. There now began to appear bright colours, such as purple and green, which were also typically found in the latest trends in London fashion at that time. Displayed in the background is a series of fantastic creatures in a reference to the world of dreams: these are drawn, cut out and glued beneath an architecture that is dominated by steps and houses placed on top of one another, suggesting the hill of Lisbon where the siege took place.

The CHPR Collection is mainly composed of works produced in the 1980s. During this decade, Rego expressed her desire for artistic liberation, for "doing things more directly". The presence of her emotions and her confrontation with them through painting were unleashed when she established a radically new visual language with which to tell her stories, creating a complex and ambiguous universe in which the animals are creatures with human qualities and behaviours, thrown into peculiar situations, vivid dramas that noisily invade her painting. This new creative lease of life occurred in a space of freedom and interaction with reality that she finally recovered in London, coinciding with her artistic recognition in England. In executing these works, Rego adopted a methodology of total freedom, rapidity and fluidity. She drew without any hesitation and the emotional expressiveness that she gained — freed from academic constraints — and its continuity without any possibility of self-censure brought her closer to her childhood and the visual references of that time, among which were the illustrations of the Spanish magazine *Blanco y Negro*, collected by her grandfather.

The current exhibition offers a new and stimulating look at the Collection, providing visitors with a renewed presentation of the artist's production and enhancing the value of the lesser-known works that are normally kept in the museum's reserves. Also displayed here are her loose drawings and sketchbooks, some of which have never before been exhibited publicly. Excluded from this presentation of the collection, however, are the complete series of prints that have been presented recently ("Nursery Rhymes", 1989; "Jane Eyre", 2001-02; and "Peter Pan", 1992, among others). Taking into consideration the importance of the series "Female Genital Mutilation", and the fact that it is one of the artist's latest donations, it was decided to present these works in the last room of the museum. Revealing and confronting the harsh social reality is a characteristic feature of Paula

Rego's work, and it was this impulse that lay at the origin of this disturbing series of six etchings and aquatints. Through them, the artist exposes a terrible social problem, with religious overtones, which above all affects young girls between birth and puberty, giving it an autonomous treatment through the technique of engraving. This silenced ritualistic practice is performed in twenty-seven African countries, in Yemen and Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as being commonly found in Asia, the Middle East and expatriate communities all over the world, such as England, where the artist lives. The procedure varies depending on the ethnic group, seeking to physiologically remove the source of libido and thus prevent inappropriate sexual behaviour, being considered by the societies that practise it as an effective means of keeping women away from shame and dishonour. Most of the time, the surgical act that the mutilation consists of is performed in an improvised environment, in unhygienic conditions, ending up resulting in the death of the children. This real scourge is depicted by Paula Rego in unreal images, creating the terrifying scenes that the theme demands and which obey an aesthetic construction that belongs to the world of terror or which derive from a gaze that is trapped inside the most horrible nightmare. The process is furthermore depicted in a bare setting that highlights the transfigured monstrousness of some of the characters performing the mutilation. These smiling sorceresses of death, with their fleshless skulls, are very close to the paintings and engravings by James Ensor, which are greatly admired by Rego. They exhibit their disproportionate limbs and the monstrous sex, performing the macabre ritual with the complicity of the mothers — who were themselves similarly violated at the same age. The children are completely defenceless, with a pleading look in their eyes. Those who have already been subjected to mutilation appear lifeless, stitched and bound, as in the etching that has precisely that title, *Stitched and Bound*. The only image of comfort, suggesting an apparent escape from their tragic fate, is to be found in the last of the engravings from this series, entitled precisely *Escape*.