

Francesca Bacci **Sculpting the immaterial,
modelling the light: presenting
Medardo Rosso's photographic
oeuvre**

The first half of Medardo Rosso's biography is stereotypical of any nineteenth-century sculptor's. A student at the Brera Academy in 1883, Rosso was soon expelled for disruptive conduct, and six years later he moved to Paris, where he was to live for most of his life. There he interacted with powerful critics, art dealers, patrons and artists such as Zola, Rodin, Degas, Edmond De Goncourt, Paul Alexis, Henri Rouart, Georges Petit and Adolphe Goupil, among others.

Then, inexplicably, something happened. In 1906, after completing a portrait of a child of the Mond family, *Ecce Puer*, he stopped creating new subjects. Puzzled scholars at one time considered this period 'inactive' or 'non-creative', but in fact Rosso was highly productive. From 1906 until his death in 1928, he focused intently on writing his art theories and on producing sculptural replicas and photographic reiterations of his own sculpture. This work has been read as repetitive, and the multiple casts have generated a series of problems regarding their attribution, chronology and authenticity.¹ This article will demonstrate how, contrary to the opinion of previous scholarship, the second half of Rosso's career was dedicated to the achievement of his artistic goals through the creative medium of photography. As will be explained below, Rosso created sculpture which he intended should be seen exclusively from a unique vantage point – the same as that from which the artist received his 'first impression' of the subject – so that the observer could share his emotion. This viewing modality is the visual equivalent of observing a flat object. Because a photograph is an exact two-dimensional representation of an image perceived from a unique point of view, the best visual translation of Rosso's aesthetic theory lies in the photographs of his own sculpture, which were crucial in securing his place in the history of art.

One of Rosso's peculiar demands on the observer is that he or she should consider his sculpture as if it were a painting. 'My work must be looked at as a painting, from the optical distance, where it recomposes itself with the collaboration of your retina'² and 'a work of sculpture is not made to be touched, but to be seen at such or such distance, according to the effect intended by the artist. Our hand does not permit us to bring to our consciousness the values, the tones, the colours – in a word, the life of the thing. For seizing the inner significance of a work of art, we should rely entirely on the visual impression.'³ Often presented to the public in vitrines, Rosso's sculpture appeared to be visually contained in a sort of frame provided by the glass case's lead joints, which marked

the frontier between space within and space without. The equivalence claimed by Rosso between a painting and his sculpture is not limited to the appearance of the work, but is instead of an ontological nature. From the Renaissance onwards, the painted surface had acquired the status of 'window', open onto a reality that continues beyond the physical limits of the canvas. When confronted with, for example, Degas' *Place de la Concorde* (1875, Hermitage), one notices that the *flâneur* with a walking stick, while observing Monsieur Lepic, is literally entering the painting from the left side. Degas portrayed only half of his body, to convey this sense of movement and urgency, but the observer invariably remembers having seen the whole figure, with the missing left side supplied via mental completion. This instinctive process functions very effectively for representations in two dimensions, and it has been reinforced by the modern practice of looking at photographs. Everyone knows, in fact, that reality continues beyond the portion encompassed by the camera's viewfinder. Rather than just providing the finishing touch, the frame becomes the conceptual place that marks the transition between the physical edge of the painting and its mental continuation.

However, the visual completion of partially represented figures does not occur spontaneously when observing a sculpture. Just as a sculpture according to Rosso is a three-dimensional equivalent of a painting, so he established a conceptual three-dimensional equivalent of the frame by encasing the sculpture in a glass cage. And as a painting comprises all of the elements which are encompassed by its frame, so Rosso's *oeuvre* is all that is contained by the 'cage':⁴ the sculpture and the air surrounding it. The vitrine makes the substantial sameness of matter and air almost physically tangible, actualizing one of Rosso's tenets: 'nothing is material in space'.⁵ The lead joints of the glass case become, by analogy, the sculpture's frame, beyond which reality continues limitlessly.⁶ With this formal solution, Rosso brilliantly resolved the theoretical problem of the continuity of space that the material nature of sculpture poses.

This is consistent with Rosso's opinion that 'nothing in this world can detach itself from its surroundings'.⁷ The space within the 'cage' should be understood as the circumscription of a specific portion of space, a paradigmatic *pars pro toto* to be multiplied infinitely. The artist's selection can be defined as abstract, in the original meaning of the word – to abstract as in to 'pull out of' – as he pulled out from the flux of time a fleeting image and the space it encapsulated and by which it was surrounded, the two forming an indissoluble unity. His photographs develop two-dimensionally Rosso's work on space and selection. The glass case is staged and recreated in the photographs through several different interventions. Frequently the edge of the paper coincides conceptually with the lead structure of the glass case. Almost all of Rosso's photographs have been cut irregularly all around the edges, often leaving a big fraction of the original image out, as one can see by comparing them with the original plates they were printed from. In some cases, this idea is stressed by leaving dark borders of wholly exposed photographic paper at the margins. In these interventions one senses the frustration posed by the unavoidable presence of the physical limits of the image.

Furthermore, photography was useful to Rosso to enhance the intended effect of his sculpture. As already remarked, most of Rosso's photographs present an

unusual shape and irregular edges, obtained either by cutting with a pair of scissors or by tearing the paper manually. Often the two vertical or the two horizontal edges are not parallel. Consider, for example, his photographs of *L'uomo che legge* (1894, figs 1 and 2). With this sculpture Rosso created a challenging perspective through which he conferred the illusion of a vision from a vantage point situated above the street level and made the space tense with movement. The photographic work on this subject greatly enhances this space-activating effect through the irregular cutting of the prints. These, in fact, are cut with either the left or right margin parallel to the ideal line running from the head to the toes of the walking man, while the other edge is cut diagonally in several different ways.

The 'motion effect' that the photographs by Rosso impart to his sculpture can be simply explained as the result of the visual application of a simple law of physics. When two forces pull a given body in different directions the result is that a body's motion has intensity equal to the vector sum of the two forces. The divergence between the two directions represented by the cut margins of the photographs is crucial to the effect of motion. In these prints, Rosso used this simple principle to interpret the sculpture according to two different dynamic effects. When the photograph is cut narrower at the bottom and wider at the top, the observer senses a forward movement of the man's torso, wedged in an ascending space, as if seen from above (fig. 1), while, when the photograph is cut wider at the bottom and narrower on top, the emphasis is on the fan-shaped movement of the legs, as if the energy of the stride were setting in motion the footpath below (fig. 2). This idea was to be more fully realized nearly twenty years later, in the representation of movement by Giacomo Balla (*Dynamism of a dog on a leash*, 1912), in the work of the Futurist photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia (*The bow*, 1911), and in Marcel Duchamp (*Nude descending a staircase*, 1912), among others.

Rosso's manipulation of the photographic image is not limited to modifications of the finished prints, but encompasses interventions carried out during the printing process as well. One notable instance of this is his use of contrast and luminosity, determined by his leaving the negative and sensitized paper under the light for a shorter or a longer time than necessary. When printing, the longer the paper is exposed to the light, the richer and blacker the dark tones are going to be; the less the paper is exposed the fainter these areas are going to turn out. Photographers use this characteristic of the printing process to compensate, at least partially, for a weak or excessive contrast of the negative through a longer or shorter exposure time. Rosso, instead, used this technique to achieve a reduction or exaggeration of the dominant tones, or the softening or disappearance of the lighter ones.

Let us consider two of Rosso's prints of *La Portinaia* (figs 3 and 4). Twenty of the prints of this subject were obtained from the same original shot, which has been re-photographed and reprinted several times. Rosso worked on printing with progressively shorter exposure times, so that in the end the print in figure 4 appears to look like a drawing rather than a photograph. Its reddish, almost sepia, hue enhances the effect further. This 'drawing effect' obtained by the



1. Medardo Rosso, *L'uomo che legge*, post 1894, original print, 103 × 29 mm (overall)
(photo: Private collection, Italy)



2. Medardo Rosso, *L'uomo che legge*, post 1894, original print, 138 × 64 mm (overall)
(photo: Private collection, Italy)

manipulation of the contrast and luminosity of the image constitutes a strong visual statement of Rosso's theoretical belief that 'for me, what is important in art is to make one forget matter'.⁸ The ambiguity between the material nature of the three-dimensional sculptural object and its photographic rendering is well summarized in one anecdote, which recurs several times in the literature on



3. Medardo Rosso, *La Portinaia*,
post 1883, original print,
82 × 35 mm
(photo: Private collection, Italy)



4. Medardo Rosso, *La Portinaia*,
post 1883, original print,
122 × 63 mm
(photo: Private collection, Italy)

Rosso, describing the visit of Degas to his studio. When Rosso showed him a photograph of the destroyed work *Impression d'Omnibus* (1884), Degas asked whether it was the photo of a painting. When confronted with prints such as the one in question, it is easy to empathize with Degas' perplexity. Rosso was extremely proud of the misunderstanding, feeling that he had achieved his stated artistic goal.⁹

Rosso also produced an assortment of photographs of his own drawings, which, on several occasions, he signed and mounted on a cardboard background, both to prevent them curling and also to serve as a *passe-partout*. When presented in such a fashion, these photographs were difficult to distinguish from the original drawings, and thus acquired the status of finished works in their own right. Comparing visually these drawing-esque photographic renderings of Rosso's sculptures with the prints of his actual drawings, one feels that they share a common territory, in which the materiality of the object is lost in its ambiguous appearance and becomes irrelevant.

Another principle of Rosso's aesthetic theory asserted that one had to sculpt 'the dominant', the essence of the vision which remains visible after all the rest has been eaten away by strong lighting.¹⁰ As result of this rarefaction process, his sculptures present a consistent exclusion of detail to focus on the main features of the subject. The treatment of the eyes, the ears, the hair and lips of the characters represented is one of contour-less suggestion rather than literal depiction. Yet the essentiality of these wax and plaster visions is pushed even further by means of photography. What happens, in fact, when one plays a strong directional light over these already detail-less sculptures? Through this double filter, which dramatically reduces the range of greys into two or three dominant tones and unifies more subtle tonal distinctions into a single tone, Rosso could extract the very essence of the image. The dramatic contrasts, in Rosso's print of *La Portinaia* (fig. 5), confer on the picture the expressive strength of a woodcut. Rosso himself evaluated the effectiveness of his lighting by means of pushing all of the greys towards blacks or whites. He did this by producing series of photographs of a photograph of a photograph, which resulted in something similar to a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy. There is indeed an analogy between this *modus operandi* and the production of sculptural replicas, obtained by taking casts of casts. In the case of sculpture, though, the further the replica is from the original, the more blurred the detail will become, while the photographic work often grows more iconic with every passage.

5. Medardo Rosso, *La Portinaia*, post 1883, original print, 116 × 87 mm (photo: Private collection, Italy)



At the same time, besides satisfying Rosso's artistic aims, his print in figure 5 is actually the clearest possible two-dimensional representation of the old woman's face. The human ability to recognize faces presented as images where black and

white contrasts have been maximized has been studied by cognitive psychologists for almost half a century. Such representations are currently called 'Mooney faces', from the name of the scientist who created them in the first place.¹¹ These are defined as 'thresholded' photographs of faces that can be perceived either as a face or as a collection of unrelated blobs. Recognition depends on the observer's awareness of the nature of the image presented. If informed that it is a face, he or she will see it immediately. A good example of the Mooney face effect is a self-portrait by Rosso, now lost (fig. 6). This phenomenon explains why Medardo Rosso's sculpture aroused such controversy among the public. Reading reviews and newspapers articles ranging from the 1890s to the 1920s, one often finds comments such as 'the adoption of generalization cannot excuse Medardo Rosso's figures, bruised, and too similar to sculptures in mud and snow . . .',¹² or 'some blocks of bronze, without a doubt badly extracted from their mould, seem to me to represent merely a formless mass whose purpose I cannot divine'.¹³



6. Medardo Rosso, *Rosso dessiné par lui même*, ante 1898, published in *Le Journal*, 6 June 1898. Present location of the original unknown

It was necessary, for their correct interpretation, that viewers looking at these sculptures for the first time should have some expectation of what they were supposed to see. The perception of Rosso's sculptures as senseless blobs is physiologically natural, when these are observed from the wrong angle and in the wrong light. The patches of tone, when formed by the correct lighting and considered exclusively from the correct angle, do conjure up perfectly recognizable faces once one knows they are there. No wonder that most of Rosso's admirers were people who took the trouble to understand the pieces and who followed the sculptor's viewing instruction regarding angle of observation and lighting, what Rosso defined as 'the unique point of view'. Once grasped, the vision remains present in its entire efficacy in one's consciousness, to be enjoyed repeatedly.

Other noticeable features in the photographic work of Rosso include graphic interventions such as pencil marks, pen strokes and graffiti, both on the prints and on the negatives. The function of these interventions goes beyond their aesthetic value. Once Rosso had elaborated his theory of unity, which claims the existence of an indissoluble continuity between the figure and the surrounding space, he found any empty spaces between his sculptural figures to be inconsistent with it. Because such spaces have a chromatic value, they have to be represented through solid matter. In the photographs, where present, these spaces are filled in graphically. For example, in two prints of the lost sculpture *Paris la Nuit* (1895), the space between the plaster figure of the single passer-by and the group of a man and a woman to his left is concealed by means of brushstrokes of white paint, in one case, and by scratching away the photographic film in order to reveal the white of the paper beneath, in the other (fig. 7).

In other instances pencil marks were used to maintain continuity between the different planes within the context of one single figure. A print representing *Malato all'ospedale* (1889) is a clear example of an unsuccessful photograph (fig. 8). The lighting did not in fact succeed in conveying the result that the artist sought. Rosso believed that, rather than composing a sculpture considering its volumetric nature, one should instead produce planes of tone that would appear to advance or recede visually. In this case, the white behind the sick man's figure seems awkwardly to come further forward than is physically possible. Rosso tried to subdue it, first, by concealing a shadow running across the background and finally by filling it in with grey pencil strokes (fig. 9). This did not work, as it was not dark enough to recede when contrasted with the deepest shadows of the man's figure, themselves so much blacker. All of the other prints of the *Malato all'ospedale*, in fact, feature a background significantly darker than the figure, so that the latter can gain visual prominence by contrast. In this photograph, since the shadowy areas of the man's body are off-black, the darkest possible background would not have produced the desired effect. Indeed it would have flattened the image completely by the tonal uniformity of the background and the shadows within the figure. It is not surprising that the artist never selected this specific picture for publication.



7. (above) Medardo Rosso, *Impression de boulevard. Paris la Nuit*, ca. 1895–96. Original print mounted on paper, 96 × 144 mm overall; (below) Medardo Rosso, *Impression de boulevard. Paris la Nuit*, ca. 1895–96. Original print mounted on card, 95 × 136 mm (photo: Private collection, Italy)

Repetition is another characteristic of Rosso's photographic work. There are three processes that the artist used to create sequences of analogous – but never identical – images. The first involved re-photographing an existing print and then printing a series of pictures from this new negative. This operation was most often motivated by the need to obtain a negative glass plate of an image that the artist considered successful in conveying his intention. In Rosso's case, the original print might often be a newspaper clipping or a print by a professional photographer, who would for obvious reasons have kept the negative in his archive in order to ensure for himself the lucrative business of reprints. In order to avoid the cost of reprints, Rosso obtained a new negative by photographing the original professional print. He also deployed this method to make copies of portraits of himself for which he had posed at the photographer's studio.

The second case of serialization is that of several prints obtained from the same negative. These are often so different that sometimes it is only the comparison with the original negative glass plate that discloses a relationship between the prints. It is worth keeping in mind that every photographer chooses the framing of his image twice: initially when shooting, by looking in the viewfinder, and for the second time when printing, by positioning the paper in such a way that it receives selectively what has been captured on the plate. In Rosso's work, there are two further framing actions: the first one performed when composing the sculpture within verticals and horizontals (borders of a vitrine or other visually interesting elements, such as a window sill or a stove pipe); the last one by cutting the print with scissors, or tearing its paper by hand and affixing it to a piece of cardboard to frame it à la *passe-partout*, as already described.

Of the many irregularly cropped photographs, not all have been cut after having been printed. There are numerous examples of contact prints produced on paper of a format significantly smaller than the negative they were obtained from. In relative darkness, the artist has moved the sensitized paper under the glass plate until he has positioned it in the best way to capture the 'impression'. The rest of the detail remains out of the picture. In the early years of photography, a very large negative would sometimes be positioned behind the shutter, so that the entire image brought in by the lens would be captured indiscriminately. This resulted in a big circular negative, as the lens was round, which permitted the printing of fifteen or twenty smaller, conventionally rectangular and different

8. Medardo Rosso, *Malato all'ospedale*, post-1889, original print, 140 × 97 mm (overall)
(photo: Private collection, Italy)

9. Medardo Rosso, *Malato all'ospedale*, post-1889, original print, 141 × 100 mm (overall)
(photo: Private collection, Italy)





10. Medardo Rosso, *Ecce Puer*, post 1906, three original prints, 170 × 79 mm, 109 × 84 mm, 54 × 37 mm (overall) (photo: Private collection, Italy)

views. It was in producing these small prints that the photographer finally framed his shot.

Among the photographs of *Ecce Puer* (1906), a series of three prints illustrates clearly the practice just described (fig. 10). These prints were all obtained from the same negative glass plate. From the comparison between the negative and the prints, it is evident that two of them, centre and right, were cropped much smaller than the plate. This resulted in three totally different compositions. While the print on the left is dominated by the striking contrast between the infantile roundness of the child's face and the severe dark vertical and horizontal frames (represented by the sculptor's easel and by the stove-pipe), the one in the centre opens a visual dialogue between the four vertical rasps hanging on the wall and the delicate vertical marks on the child's forehead. The figure seems to be pushed towards the tools by the stove-pipe, which is no longer recognizable as such, and serves as a *repoussoir*, at the right edge of the image. Finally, the print on the right moves in on the boy's face, which appears to be turning towards his right side in a circular movement that has a strong volumetric effect.

The third case of serial production of pictures occurs when the artist takes a succession of shots of the same arrangement, varying slightly the angle or the distance, or some details in the composition of the image. An example of this procedure is provided by two prints in figure 11, which represent *Ecce Puer* set in the artist's atelier. These carefully composed shots feature the child's portrait placed on an easel. The background is enriched by the uneven colouring of the studio wall, a semi-circular niche containing a

bowl and two pieces of fruit, a saw, some cable hanging vertically from the wall, and some foliage to the child's right. By shifting the shooting angle by only a few degrees, Rosso obtained a completely different interaction between figure and background, sculpture and surrounding objects. In the print on the right, the saw appears no longer to touch the head, while one of the cables disappears behind it and the foliage is almost totally obliterated. This leads to a greater focus on the sculpture, although the efficacy of the play of lights and shadows on the portrait itself is greater in the print on the left. Such experiments helped Rosso to study the relationship of his works with the surrounding space, made vibrant through the presence of the niche, which functioned both as a volumetric and as a chromatic area that echoed the rotundity of the child's head, making it appear to project forward.



One series of five small square photographs of the *Rieuse* resembles film frames and produces the effect of a woman in motion turning her face towards us (fig. 12). While Rosso was behind the camera, a studio helper held up a black cloth to serve as a backdrop for the sculpture. By looking at the position of the base of the *Rieuse* in relation to the easel, one can tell that it is the piece which has been moved, rather than the photographer. It is precisely because this sculpture was still so much in the round that it permitted a variety of points of view that Rosso considered it inferior to his later work. According to the artist, the *Rieuse* was still too objective and it lacked a sense of emotion, of unification of light, space and air that was present in other work.¹⁴

From a technical point of view, the serial production of endless copies from a single negative glass plate was unproblematic as it could be easily carried out at home. All that was required to have a basic, but fully functional, darkroom was a source of light covered with a red glass, or a special lantern (gas, petrol or electric), with a shelf in front of it, a water tap and sink with, possibly, a wooden trellis on the bottom and ideally two more shelves equipped with ceramic basins and towels. Most photographic work at the beginning of the twentieth century consisted of contact printing from negative glass plates using a simple device called a 'printing frame', one of which Rosso owned.¹⁵ This is a glass-fronted wooden box with a hinged lid, kept shut by springs, in which 'the sensitive surface of the paper is pressed into close contact with the face of the negative while it is being exposed to the light'.¹⁶ The hinged lid allows the examination of the photograph during the printing process, and the metal springs keep

everything firmly in place, so that the print or negative cannot shift during the operation. Even though Rosso initially used it for its cost-effectiveness when compared with professional photographic services, the printing frame soon allowed him to experiment with the creation of unusual photographic prints in the privacy of his own room. When, due to health problems in his last years, he was often confined in his room in the Grand Hotel et de Milan, in the via Monte di Pietá, he had it half curtained off,¹⁷ maybe, as Scolari Barr suggested, to separate his working space from his living space, but probably also to provide him with enough darkness to handle the unexposed sensitized paper without spoiling it.

One of the most original results of Rosso's photographic manipulation is a photo-collage from installation photographs of the 1904 Paris Salon d'Automne. On that occasion, Rosso exhibited his sculpture alongside photographic prints of his own pieces and some of Rodin's works. While apparently, according to the press, this layout was not decided upon by Rosso, he did value the occasion it provided for the public to make a comparison between himself and the French sculptor. The episode that triggered Rosso's eagerness to overtly prove his merits over those of Rodin by means of comparison was the stir caused by the latter's public exhibition of the statue of *Balzac* (1898). The story goes that, while the French master was being praised for the innovative character of his work, a member of the public screamed 'And Medardo Rosso?' insinuating that Rodin had

11 Medardo Rosso, *Ecce Puer*,
post 1906, two original prints,
124 × 81 mm, 125 × 89 mm
(photo: Private collection, Italy)





12. Medardo Rosso, *Rieuse*, post 1890–91, five original prints, each 61 x 61 mm (photo: Private collection, Italy)

adopted a figure style inaugurated by the latter. Notices started to appear in the press regarding Rodin's supposed indebtedness to Rosso for the conception of his monument. Rodin tried to ignore the matter, understanding the damage that it would do to his reputation, and did not acknowledge Rosso as an inspiration. Rosso reacted by openly demanding that the public judge for themselves through the comparison of his own works placed alongside Rodin's *Torso*, which the French sculptor had given him in 1893 in exchange for Rosso's *Rieuse*, in a gesture of friendship.¹⁸

An installation shot shows the placement of *Malato all'ospedale* and a small copy of Michelangelo's *Madonna Medici* in front of a wall lined with photographs of sculptures by Rosso and Rodin (fig. 13, right half). Considering the matching frames of all of Rodin's works and the two different ones containing Rosso's prints, it is possible that the Italian might have put the latter up himself, in order to challenge the observer. Whereas this picture may faithfully represent the experience of the exhibition visitor, another print, made by Rosso using photo-collage, shows how he wanted this display to be seen (fig. 13, left half). I have overlapped these two photographs in order to indicate Rosso's ideal installation. While the artworks occupying the right portion of this combined image illustrate Rodin's, Rosso's and Michelangelo's treatment of the full-sized human figure (anti-clockwise: *Despair*, *Crouching woman*, *Dr. Fles*, *Madonna Medici*, *Malato all'ospedale*), the left side deals with the solutions adopted to represent heads and

busts (clockwise: *Head of Sorrow*, *Ortolana*, *Rieuse*, *Maestrina*, *Bimbo alle cucine economiche*). At the very centre, the focal point of the entire narrative, one can see *Balzac*, not properly a full-figure (he was rather a plastered coat) but a magnificent head. It is worth underlining that Rosso's claim regarded the originality of the monument's conception, not its artistic validity, which he acknowledged. This photo-collage is a unique case in Rosso's production, and was probably created by the artist after the press and public had noticed the provocation offered by the real photographic comparison staged on the exhibition walls.

As mentioned earlier, Rosso was flattered by Degas' comment on a photograph of *Impression d'omnibus* when, confused by the nature of the work, he mistook it for a painting. Since Rosso believed that one of his artistic missions was to make the observer forget matter, he introduced some contradictory elements in his photographs, which effectively created a clever shift between the work's two- and three-dimensional qualities. Inspired by Degas' comment, Rosso was perhaps eager for the misunderstanding to recur. The most striking example of dimensional interplay in his photographs is represented by a print of *Malato all'ospedale* (fig. 14). The image shows the figure of a sick man placed on a wooden table against a neutral backdrop. Because of the contrast between the sharpness of the foreground and the softly blurred background, the image conveys a sense of perspective and depth. This impression, though, is short-lived: the awareness that this is not a three-dimensional space but, instead, a flat photograph is enforced by the evidence of the wooden panel onto which the print was affixed to be photographed. To avoid the merging of the wood of the background panel and that of the table, as in the original print, the grains of the two woods are placed at ninety degrees to one another. To further shatter the illusion of optical depth, the

13. (left) Medardo Rosso, *Untitled*, post-1904, original print (from a photo-collage); (right) Medardo Rosso (?), *Confronto al Salon* (Parigi), 1904, original print mounted on cardboard (photo: Private collection, Italy)





14. Medardo Rosso, *Malato all'ospedale*, post-1889, original print, 169 × 172 mm (photo: Private collection, Italy)

black margins of the totally exposed photographic paper have been included in the image on the right and left edges. Finally, Rosso has torn the print irregularly by hand, to reinforce its nature as a flat piece of paper and deprive it of its capacity to function as a window onto a real scene.

Rosso's photographs gradually undermined the objecthood of his sculpture – an operation that had begun much earlier with the denial of the importance of the work's material durability through the public exhibition of wax pieces. Rosso worked to disintegrate the nineteenth-century integrity of the statue. He chose an intentionally unconventional finish that appeared to eat away the sculpture as only the passing of centuries could do, anticipating the material decay that all matter undergoes. The form had to survive beyond its creator's neglect – un-patinated, with unretouched mould lines and holes, and sand-filled and

unrefined surfaces. By reducing the three-dimensionality of the sculpture to the two dimensions of its photographic rendering, Rosso subtracted the form from its materiality, hence from the flow of time, thus preventing it from changing. For the first time in a sculptor's work, permanence was achieved not in marble or bronze, but with simple sensitized paper.

1 Recent studies have attempted to analyse the physical characteristics of Rosso's sculptures in order to establish a method of ascertaining the authenticity of a piece. This approach, although interesting for a technical understanding of the sculptor's *modus operandi*, has not proven conclusive. See H. Cooper and S. Hecker, *Medardo Rosso. Second Impressions*, New Haven, CT, 2003.

2 'Mon ouvrage doit être regardé comme un tableau, à la distance optique, où il se recompose avec la collaboration de votre rétine.' L. Vauxcelles, *Medardo Rosso*, preface to *Salon d'Automne, Catalogue des Ouvrages de Peinture, Sculpture, Dessin, Gravure, Architecture et Art Décoratif* (exh. cat.), Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1929, p. 331.

3 M. Rosso, 'Impressionism in sculpture, an explanation', *The Daily Mail*, London, 17 October 1907.

4 'Gabbie', Italian for cage, is the word that Rosso used when referring to the vitrines of his sculptures.

5 'Rien n'est matériel dans l'espace'. Quoted in E. Claris, *De l'Impressionisme en sculpture – Auguste Rodin et Medardo Rosso*, Éditions de 'La Nouvelle Revue', 1902, p. 55.

6 The Italian critic Raffaello Giolli referred to this concept when he wrote, on the occasion of the Milanese Mostra de 1900, that Rosso's wax sculptures were 'under glass, like paintings'. R. Giolli, 'Cronache d'arte – Gli omaggi dei Novecentisti', *Sera*, Milan, 29 March 1921.

7 Rosso, as at note 3.

8 'Ce qui importe pour moi en art, c'est de faire oublier la matière.' Quoted in Claris, as at note 5, p. 51.

9 See, for example, C. De Sainte-Croix, 'Medardo Rosso', *Mercure de France*, Paris, March 1896, pp. 378–91. The episode is on p. 379.

10 'Si la lumière... était quatre fois plus forte, tout serait mangé, sauf une ou deux variants. Cette dominante, cette pensée, ce qui survit, c'est ça qu'il faut sculpter.' M. Rosso, quoted in C. Aurel, *Rodin devant la femme*.

Fragment inédits de Rodin. Sa technique par lui-même, Maison du livre, 1919, p. 176.

11 C. M. Mooney, 'Age in the development of closure ability in children', *Canadian Journal of Psychology* XI, 4, 1957, pp. 219–26.

12 'Le parti-pris de généralisation n'exclut pas les figures en compotes et trop semblables aux sculptures en boue et neige de M. Médardo Rosso.' Samas [sic], *Le Chroniqueur de Paris*, 3 November 1904.

13 '... certain bloc de bronze, sans doute mal sorti du moule, m'a semblé ne constituer qu'une masse informe don't je n'ai pu discerner l'utilité...' P. Mocéna, *Tam Tam*, 22 October 1904.

14 See C. Carrà, 'La mia vita', in M. Carrà, *Tutti gli scritti*, Feltrinelli, 1978, p. 722.

15 For a presentation of the evidence proving Rosso's authorship of the photographic works here discussed, see F. Bacci, 'Impressions in light: photographs of sculptures by Medardo Rosso (1858–1929)', unpub.

PhD thesis, Rutgers University, 2004, pp. 11–38.

16 W. E. Woodbury, *The Encyclopædic Dictionary of Photography*, Arno Press, 1979, sub voce 'Printing Frame', p. 402 (1st edn: The Scovill & Adams Company of New York, 1898).

17 This information comes from M. Scolari-Barr, 'Medardo Rosso and his Dutch patroness Etha Fles', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 13, 1962, p. 249.

18 Flammèche [sic], 'Echos: Notes d'Art', *L'Estafette*, Paris, 20 December 1893. The artist is recorded as having publicly used the 'comparison pieces', including Rodin's *Torso*, on five occasions: at the Paris 1900 World Exhibition, at the Paris 1904 Salon d'Automne, at the Wien 1905 Artaria exhibition, at the London 1906 Cremetti Gallery show, and at the Florence 1910 Lyceum exhibition.