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The making of Paula Rego's 'The Nursery Rhymes'

Abstract

This article looks at the series of etchings and aquatints entitled *The Nursery Rhymes* that Paula Rego made in 1989 in collaboration with printer Professor Paul Coldwell. Whilst she had already had some printmaking experience, *The Nursery Rhymes* constituted her first major engagement with printmaking. The article considers the circumstances under which the prints were made, both in terms of her personal circumstances and her professional standing, and examines their reception and continuing popularity. It also gives personal insights and commentary on the series, looking at both her iconography and her connection to a wide range of graphic work. It does so from the author's unique perspective as the printer and collaborator in the project and offers insights into the working relationship between artist and printer.

The making of Paula Rego's 'The Nursery Rhymes'

Paul Coldwell

Paula Rego has always identified with the least, not the mighty, taken the child's eye view, and counted herself among the commonplace and the disregarded, by the side of the beast, not the beauty... Her sympathy with naiveté, her love of its double character, its weakness and its force, has led her to Nursery Rhymes as a new source for her imagery.

(Warner 1989)

Paula Rego was born in Lisbon in 1935 and attended the Slade School of Art in London between 1952–56 where she met her husband, the painter Victor Willing. In 1957 she returned to live in Portugal with her three children, living between London and Portugal for a few years before finally settling in London in 1976. Both her family life and her experience of living in England and Portugal have had a profound effect on her work, drawing on personal experience to inform her practice which includes work made in collage, painting, pastel, etchings, lithographs and sculptural installations. She is widely regarded as one of the most important artists working today and over her stellar career has had numerous exhibitions throughout the world in addition to the creation of a museum dedicated to her work in Cascais, Portugal. Amongst her many numerous awards and honours, she was created a Dame of the British Empire in 2010.

In 1989 Rego embarked on her first major sustained printmaking project, *The Nursery Rhymes* for which, over a period of three to four months, she produced over 30 etchings and aquatints. This series of prints have achieved both critical acclaim and widespread popularity, rare for contemporary prints, with the exception of perhaps David Hockney's series *Rake's Progress* (1961–3), or Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* (1967).

This paper looks at the circumstances that led up to the series, how the prints were made and how they were viewed. It also reflects on the imagery both in terms of personal iconography and its references to a wide range of graphic work. It does so from my unique perspective as the printer and collaborator in the project. As Rego herself explained:

I had made some etchings in the 1950's and 1960's, and some lithographs in the early 1980's but it was only in the late 1980's that I took up etching seriously. Paul Coldwell, who ended up printing most of my etchings, had set up a little studio in his kitchen. He had married Charlotte Hodes, who had been my tutee at the Slade and who I was friendly with, and he said, 'Why don't you come and do some prints?' So I did.

(Alfaro et al. 2019)

1989 can be seen as a particularly significant moment in both her personal and professional life. She had had a critically acclaimed exhibition at the Edward Toteh Gallery in 1987 for which she had made a series of five prints with me under the title *Girl and Dogs*. The prints were made towards the end of the preparations for the show and served as a foretaste for *The Nursery Rhymes*.

These were notable in particular for the way in which her approach to pictorial space was changing, from a flat space in which the gestural mark was foregrounded (as in the series of large acrylic paintings based on *Operas* made in 1983 and the *Vivian Girls* series of 1984), to one where form, light and most importantly shadows grounded the figures in space and gave them volume. The increasing status of her work had also been acknowledged with a retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 1988, which according to the critic John McEwen, was '*the best attended and most widely reviewed in the Serpentine's Gallery's 18-year history, (with the exception of the exhibition in honour of Henry Moore's 80th birthday history).*' (McEwen 1989)

Most significant, however, was the personal impact of the death of her husband in 1989 after a long struggle with multiple sclerosis. In the months following his death, Rego embarked on an ambitious painting in her new realist style, *The Dance* (which is now in the permanent collection of the Tate Gallery). This depicts a cycle of life, portraying various stages of womanhood, from young girl, to one romantically entwined, pregnant and then finally alone. The figures are seen dancing on a beach at night under a full moon.

The painting was demanding both from a technical perspective in terms of scale and composition, but also emotionally charged, with its clear autobiographical references and depiction of widowhood. Evidence of the struggle to resolve the painting can be seen in numerous sketches which show how the composition changed and evolved. As a further indication of the importance of this work, Rego donated the series of 11 preliminary studies for *The Dance*, drawn in ink and wash, to the Tate Gallery, where they have been shown in conjunction with the finished painting.

This was the backdrop to her mental and physical state when she commenced work on *The Nursery Rhymes*. She says the effort she spent on resolving the painting seemed to create a 'damming up' of images that she was unable to engage with until the painting was complete. She said, '*That painting had taken me six months, and [making the Nursery Rhyme prints] was a relief for so many ideas to come out one after the other.*' (Alfaro et al. 2019)

Studio work

In 1985 I set up a small etching studio under the name *The Culford Press* with my wife, the painter Charlotte Hodes, primarily to produce our own etchings. We first invited Rego to work on an etching *Young Predators* 1997 for a folio for the Royal College of Arts, and then made five prints that formed *The Girl and Dog* series in the same year. This series was significant in a number of ways. It established a working method that changed little over the next 20 years of our collaboration, and it established protocols for her print production.

In terms of working methods, I would prepare copper plates with hard ground that were smokedⁱ so that there was a good black surface for her to draw into. She would work on the initial line drawing on the plate in her studio and then arrive at my house with the plate drawn. We would discuss how to etch the plates; whether she would prefer a single tone or a progressive bite for various intensities of mark.

Prior to her arrival, I would prepare a test plate with aquatint to assess the exact strength of the ferric chloride and provide her with a test print with a range of tones from white through to darkest black. In addition, I had a stack of paper dampened and ready for proofing. The studio was very cramped so it was essential to plan ahead.

Once the line drawing had been etched and a proof taken, I would prepare the plates with aquatint. Initially, for the *Girl and Dog* series we just used hand-shaken aquatints, with a variety of meshes to offer a range from smooth to coarse. By the time we began on *The Nursery Rhymes*, I had constructed an aquatint box which enabled smoother, more even aquatints to add to the repertoire.

For Paula, the business of making the prints seemed to come alive with the aquatint. She would work in stages, initially identifying the areas that were to remain white, and painting on a solution to prevent the ferric chloride from etching those areas of the metal. This process (called stopping-out) was repeated in between dipping the plate in acid to deepen the corrosion in the metal, in order to produce a range of tones, until only the areas that were to be black remained exposed. It shouldn't be underestimated the skill and concentration to work in this manner, particularly as she would often be working on three or four plates simultaneously and each at differing stages of completion. Her levels of concentration were remarkable and she would often hum to herself, a clear message for her not to be disturbed. Once the etching was completed and, in most cases, this involved at least five or six stages, immersing the plate each time, I would print a proof and she would begin the process of reflection and evaluation.

One particularly unusual approach would be to view the prints from afar. Given that *The Nursery Rhymes* were relatively small (either 32 x 21 cm or 22 x 21 cm), most printmakers working on this scale would be inclined to examine their images from a close distance. As she herself said, "*You put them at a distance to see whether they're reading properly as images. I want them to read biff-bang*". (McEwen 1989)

This approach was vindicated when the complete series were shown in the cavernous space of the Saatchi Gallery, the then disused paint factory in St John's Wood, London, where the likes of Anselm Kiefer and Richard Serra had shown

monumental works. In this location *The Nursery Rhymes* made an impact when viewed from a distance as well as drawing the viewer in for closer examination.

From the outset Rego wanted to avoid uniformity within the series. On one level, the series can be seen as a systematic discovery and exploration of a wide range of etching techniques. These include hand coloured prints, (*Ride a cock-horse*), line and cross hatching (*Ladybird, Ladybird*), hand-shaken aquatints (*Three Blind Mice III*), aquatint with no line (*Who killed Cock Robin? II*), line and aquatint (*The Grand Old Duke of York*) and chine collé (*Ring-a-ring o' Roses*).

Alongside this range of techniques, there was considerable difference in the time taken to make each one. In some cases, prints were completed in a single day. One of the most beautiful prints in the series, *Polly put the Kettle on*, was one such example, made with a single aquatint which was etched with eight tones from white to black. A considerable achievement when one considers the precision of the decision-making and the reversal of the plate and the tone.

Other prints weren't so simple and both *Humpty Dumpty* and *Sing a Song of Sixpence II* were repeatedly sanded down to leave bare traces of the previous aquatint which then formed the basis for the final etching. Despite this process, I can't recall any instances where the line drawing was changed. In a number of cases, prints that I thought were resolved were returned for revision, and she was fearless in taking risks. She was constantly aware of retaining what I can only describe as an 'edgy' quality to the images and to maximise their impact. This was perhaps most evident in *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, where a miscalculation led to the ram being over-etched, giving it a demonic quality. Robert Hughes notes that *According to Rego...the blackness of the ram was an accident – the plate stayed in the acid bath too long, and overbit. If so, it was the happiest of accidents: this ram, with its dark and almost fantastically lively pelt, is probably the most imposing animal in Rego's whole output.* (Livingstone and Hughes 2007)

On the days we worked together, we would often have three or four plates at various stages of completion, and great care had to be taken to ensure a record was kept about timing the etches so that when she resumed work on a plate, she was aware what level of tone had been reached. Once the etching was complete, she required proofs to see the results, but as a result of the multi-tasking, these were invariably very rough. In the days in-between her visits, I would produce a range of well-finished proofs using a range of inks. Once the final proof was approved, I would then print the edition. Given that Rego herself was underwriting the whole project, I initially printed half of each edition and only later, once the success of the project was clear, would I finish printing the rest.

A total of 31 prints were editioned all in editions of 50. 25 of the prints were chosen to form deluxe boxed sets, which included an extra, exclusive print called '*Untitled*' and 15 of these boxsets were made. Five years later five additional prints were made with the same format and paper, to accompany an illustrated publication by Thames & Hudson which featured all the prints displayed opposite the actual rhyme. There were a small number of plates that were left un-editioned or abandoned.

It is worth reflecting at this point on why Rego would want to make the prints with me at The Culford Press when there were any number of established professional studios that would have been delighted to accommodate her. Firstly, our studio set-up was very domestic, set in the corner of a family home. Rego would work on the plates on the kitchen table, while in the adjoining room I did the technical work: etching, aquatinting, proofing, and applying grounds. Secondly, it was exclusive, which meant that she didn't need to consider others as invariably would have been the case with a more professional studio servicing a range of artists. Since she was the only artist I was working with, she had my undivided attention. But probably the most important aspect of our arrangement was that it was private. This was an era before the portability of mobile phones, and so, once in the house, there were no distractions. I should also add that Rego had a close connection with my wife Charlotte (Hodes), both as an artist and friend, and through their relationship I quickly established a close working relationship and indeed friendship too. Together, Charlotte and I became members of a trusted entourage or co-conspirators which extended over the years to include our young children.

Marco Livingstone adds '*that having just been bereaved, it must also have been a consolation to work with someone else in a convivial family environment*'. A further reason is suggested by John McEwen in his introduction to the 1990 Arts Council Touring Show of *The Nursery Rhymes*

With regards to method and technique, it is indicative of her straightforward approach to the making of art that she preferred to collaborate on the etchings with someone who is an artist first and a printer second, the sculptor Paul Coldwell.

(McEwen 1990)

For whatever reasons, it proved to be a fruitful collaboration which lasted over a period of almost twenty years and in the production of over 150 editions.

Subject matter

One aspect of *The Nursery Rhymes* was that it was initially a secret project. When Rego contacted me to ask if I would work with her on the project, I was sworn to secrecy until after we had resolved the first three or four prints and she was confident in how the project was progressing. It was only then that she involved her gallery. Rego published the prints and underwrote the costs herself. This gave her control over these works and an independence enabling her to experiment. I should add that she invariably brought bags of croissants and other pastries which we would consume over the course of the day.

Paula Rego's direct reference to the making of this work was the Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes 1951, edited by Iona and Peter Opie.....Paula Rego likes them so much because they are stories that children tell each other, like songs, in which the words are interlinked and the stories run with the smoothness that befits their imagination.

(Alfaro and all 2013)

The origins of *The Nursery Rhymes* lay in a book of drawings that Paula had made for her grand-daughter Carmen (now lost). Rego explained that she would read each nursery rhyme before going to bed; by the morning the image had formed in her mind. Fiona Bradley concurs *'that the visual ideas are the result of the traditional verses acting directly on the artist's imagination'*. (Bradley 2002). Once the project began, it was clear to see how much had been suppressed, not only by the grief of Victor's death, but also by the huge effort it had taken her to resolve the Dance painting. There was a palatable sense of release with the Nursery Rhyme project, and each Saturday she would arrive with more plates, drawn and ready.

Rego had had this series in mind for a while but wanted to wait until she was with an international gallery with the capacity to promote and distribute such a large body of prints. Further evidence of her practical, pragmatic approach was in settling upon two sizes of plates, 31 x 21 cm & 22 x 21 cm, which we agreed would work on a paper size 52 x 38 cm. This allowed for each print to be printed on a half sheet of standard size Arches paper, a fact that dramatically cut down the quantity of paper required for printing the final editions.

It was evident from the outset that Rego used her friends and acquaintances as well as her own autobiography and knowledge of art to enrich these incantations from childhood. Her long-time model and collaborator Lila Nunes became the farmer's wife in *Three Blind Mice*; Peter Snow, the then Head of Theatre Design at the Slade School of Art is transfigured into the King in *Sing a Song o' Sixpence*; the novelist Rudi Nassuer takes the role of Ole King Cole and is then again transfigured into a frog alongside the painter Euan Uglow pictured as a rat, and Paula herself as a mouse in a *Froggie He Would a Wooing Go*. I appear as a Scotsman in *Dance to your Daddy* along with my wife Charlotte and our son William, while Rego's mother is cast as the spider in *Little Miss Muffet II*. There are numerous other examples of her circle of friends and family providing her cast of characters. For the most part, her characterization is affectionately done, in the tradition of English caricature such as Rowlandson, although throughout there is a sense of undermining the power of men and putting women in control.

The nursery is conventionally the domain of women and it is through women that the oral tradition of nursery rhymes has been maintained...These are intelligent, calculating women capable of acts of great viciousness. The farmer's wife brandishes her bayonet-like knife, the blade glinting in the moonlight... there is no moral indictment of such actions, they are like the nursery rhyme, amoral rather than immoral.

(Miller 1991)

The inversion of power is clear in the etching *Polly Put the Kettle On*. Rosenthal suggests

The erotic charge is enhanced by the aura of both discipline and repression; it recalls the old fashioned English public school where the only female stimulus to hormone-stuffed adolescent boys was the occasional fleeting company of matron and the housemaids.

(Rosenthal 2003)

He adds that Rego herself said that the image came as a result of drawing one of her granddaughters' dolls which turned into one of the women, while the other is a sort of self-portrait. Marina Warner situates the scene in Portugal, as '*The uniforms of post-war Portugal return, costuming her soldier mannikins and impertable aproned Misses like national dolls.*' (Warner 1989) The little soldiers appear like play-things in a dolls' house and there is an ominous feeling that the contents of the kettle will result in their death. It's the women that certainly control the scene.

Throughout the series there are references to other graphic works, most notably Goya, for whom Rego has the utmost admiration. The pose of the farmer's wife in *Three Blind Mice* bears a close resemblance to the cleric in *Que se rompe la cuerda* (*May the Rope Break!*) from Goya's *The Disasters of War*; the horse and rider in *Ride a cock-horse* is clearly modelled on his etching of *Don Gaspar de Guzman*; and *Feminine Folly* from the *Disparates (Follies)* has more than a passing resemblance to the composition of *Ring-a-ring o' Roses*. The use of aquatint in Paula's work is always used to clarify rather than complicate the image. Whilst she revels in the deep dark blacks, she uses them as part of a broader orchestration of image-making and storytelling.

Alongside Goya, other influences can be seen, including Honoré Daumier. In his lithograph *Regrets* (1842) an impotent old man wistfully gazes through a window at a young girl walking in the garden. Paula has transformed him into *Old King Cole*, in which a rather portly figure is cast in a trance by three young girls with their violins. John Tenniel's drawing for *Alice in Wonderland*, *Dodo presents Alice with a Thimble* seems to provide the inspiration for Rego's *A Frog he would a-wooing go I* while the influence of the delicately observed watercolours of Beatrix Potter can also be felt throughout.

[Paula] hasn't distanced herself from illustration, because she wanted to retrieve what is usually considered a humble artistic category and pay tribute to Victorian artists like John Tenniel, who created Alice, the goblin painter Arthur Rackham, and Beatrix Potter.

(Warner 1989)

The clear evidence of these influences, rather than diminishing the work, enhances them and places the prints within the oral spirit of storytelling where the story is freely interpreted by the teller. The fact that the majority of the nursery rhymes exist in a form that has been passed down through generations and that in most cases, their actual meaning has been lost, provides the artist with an opportunity to impose meaning. The art critic Robert Hughes states that Rego's *Nursery Rhymes* should be '*ranked amongst the outstanding feats of graphic imagination of our time*' adding that she '*has become a master of aquatint, whose subtlety of texture lends a finesse, drama and depth to her etchings that renders the use of colour unnecessary.*' (Hughes 2007)

Towards the end of the project there was a sense of both exhaustion and elation. Paula had completed 31 etchings over a period of 3-4 months and I was faced with the task of editing so that the work would be ready for her exhibition at

Marlborough Gallery (23 November – 22 December 1989). However, she was approached to make a large format print as part of a portfolio of twelve artists, each representing a country from the EU to which she agreed, so I prepared three plates for her, each 33x 51cm (the maximum size my aquatint box could accommodate).

On one plate she drew, *Children and Their Stories*, depicting a group of children dancing in a circular pool of light (with a reference to *Ring-a-ring o' Roses* from *The Nursery Rhymes*) which became the print for the folio. On the remaining two plates she drew *Secrets and Stories* and *The Encampment*. Together, these prints seemed to frame the overall themes of *The Nursery Rhymes*. *Secrets and Stories* show groups of children in an undistinguished space, whispering and exchanging confidences while one group is being read to. *The Encampment* is clearly located outside at night against a starry sky where groups are engaged in the act of telling, reading and listening to stories in front of a variety of tents. Both bear witness to the intensity and power of the sharing of tales. There is something both subversive and comforting about these images, and a reminder, as with all the nursery rhymes, that stories are not owned but continually changing through the role of the teller and the receptiveness of the receiver.

The nursery is conventionally the domain of women and it is through women that the oral tradition of nursery rhymes has been maintained.
(Miller 1991)

Whilst not being part of *The Nursery Rhymes* folio, these prints very much frame the project and share the pictorial language and overall feeling and were exhibited in the Marlborough exhibition. Whilst *The Nursery Rhymes* focus primarily on the relationships between two or three characters, *Secrets and Stories* and *The Encampment* have a filmic quality in which a number of interactions are taking place simultaneously.

The Nursery Rhymes were first shown at Marlborough Fine Art, London in 1989 followed by shows in Madrid & Lisbon. Between 1991-1996 The Arts Council of England toured the prints to numerous venues in the UK, while The British Council arranged a touring show from 1991 to the USA, Spain, Portugal, Malaysia, & Czech Republic amongst others. Most recently the complete set was shown in the exhibition, *Looking In* at the Casa Historias Paula Rego in Portugal in 2019 and selected individual prints formed part of *Obedience and Defiance* at the Milton Keynes Gallery 2019, which will tour to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh 2019 and then the Irish Museum of Modern Art Dublin 2020.

In 1994, she was invited to make some additions to the original series to coincide with a publication by Thames & Hudson of the complete set of prints. She made a further five prints: two versions of *Old Mother Hubbard*; *See-saw*, *Margery Daw*; *Rub- a-dub-dub* (all hand coloured etchings) and *Rock-a-bye Baby* which was a simple black and white etching and aquatint. Despite the five years since the original set, these prints appear to be seamlessly integrated into the series, partly due to the original intention to explore a wide range of approaches to etching and technique. That said, the two versions of *Old Mother Hubbard* offer a very distinctive addition to the series with an airy quality of sketchbook drawings. The remaining three prints have a greater sense of solidity than in the original set, reflecting the development of Rego's work in the intervening years. *Rock-a-bye Baby* pictures a single large

woman precariously in a tree with her baby against a starry night sky. Her weight threatens to bring them both down to earth, while *Rub-a-dub-dub* seems to revisit ideas that connect with the feelings in *Polly put the Kettle on*. But here, the space has more depth and is modelled using more line drawn into the forms, rather than the attention to outline as in the earlier prints. The three old men are being washed like babies by rather matronly women that seem to have them under control. The figure of Rudi Nassuer, who appeared in some of the earlier *Nursery Rhymes*, re-appears as the central figure being bathed. There is a sense that Rego is re-enacting dramas from childhood, where personal relationships are reconfigured and hierarchies are challenged and inverted. She writes

When you talk about your childhood you come to realise that you are the same person now as you were then. All's that's happened is that you have come to think that you aren't because you are grown up; and you have dismissed things like fairy tales as a part of life that is now over. But through therapy you get reconnected with childhood, with the extraordinary.

(McEwen 1990)

It was significant that *The Nursery Rhymes* was Rego's first show with her new Gallery Marlborough Fine Art, given that the gallery was so associated with painting, representing the likes of Bacon, Auerbach and Kiff. Whilst for many artists their graphic work is subordinate to their main practice, Rego's commitment and aptitude for print suggests it has equal status in her oeuvre. Furthermore, prints by painters are often a strategy for making multiples from images which have reached a state of resolution in painting form or, alternatively, as a way of communicating early drawings when ideas are still being formulated. Neither of these is the case for Rego, where, with the exception of the abortion prints (*Untitled* 1991) each of her prints is an independent resolved picture, made within the language of print, with the added advantage that from the final matrix an edition can be pulled. The capacity to produce multiple copies is more than a commercial imperative for Rego, it serves to allow her work to be seen and acquired by a wide and varied audience beyond the limited scope of wealthy collectors and museums who compete for her paintings. Furthermore, in their scale and intimacy, Rego's prints reconnect us to childhood and allows us to experience that intimate relationship between image and text which is such a feature of children's books and illustration.

The making of the *Nursery Rhymes* laid the foundations for our collaboration over a period of almost twenty years which included the coloured etchings of *Peter Pan* 1992, *The Children's Crusade* 1996-98, *Pendle Witches* 1996, *Untitled* (Abortion series) 1999 and *After Hogarth* 2000. Each project brought new challenges as her graphic work responded to the changes in her overall practice and the demands of her growing international reputation. But throughout, many aspects remained consistent, the preparation of the plates, the anticipation of the arrival of new images freshly drawn and awaiting the aquatint to shape the story and the excitement of being involved as these pictures moved purposefully towards completion.

Note;

All the Paula Rego prints referenced in this paper are reproduced in T.G.Rosenthal's *Paula Rego; The Complete Graphic Work* first published by Thames and Hudson in 2003 and revised in 2012.

All Paula Rego images are Courtesy of The Artist and Marlborough, New York and London.

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Author

Paul Coldwell

Professor Fine Art, University of the Arts London.

ⁱ Smoking a plate refers to the practice of using the smoke from wax tapers to darken and harden a wax ground on an etching plate. This provides an even black surface on which to draw with an etching needle.