**Honoré Daumier and Paula Rego; Graphic Work.**

**Paul Coldwell**

Whilst there can be very few artists for whom drawing does not feature significantly in their practice, for many it is a preparatory process and left at that point of initial recognition, to be developed and refined through another media, painting or sculpture. There are a few however that have been able to see drawing as a vehicle for the realisation of their vision. Paula Rego and Honoré Daumier are in this category and in their own distinct ways have developed bodies of work through a rich understanding and total commitment to the power of the drawn image. Drawing provides the artist with direct feedback, an immediate visual representation of their thoughts and observations in the moment of coming into being, metamorphosed from electric thoughts in the brain to physical material, such as graphite on paper. In drawing, the artist whether by choice or practicalities operates within a limited range, exploring what’s possible with a pencil, pen and ink, charcoal or crayon, and like a musician seeks to explore the range possible with their chosen instrument. Drawing can also be seen as the most direct means available to the artist to record thoughts and feelings, a means of leaving an immediate trace of the movement of the eye, translated into an impression onto paper as a record of thoughts

If drawing is a means to give the artist direct and immediate feedback, printmaking demands intermediary, processes, which must be mastered in order for the results to accurately reflect the artist’s intention and endeavour.

This exhibition sets up a dialogue between two artists, Rego and Daumier, for whom printmaking has become as direct a means of expression as drawing itself. Furthermore they have both in their own ways, used and mastered printmaking to bring their visions, stories and politics to an audience beyond that associated with painting and sculpture and exploited this more democratic art form to make multiple images which can get out into the world and effect change. For Daumier it was principally the process of lithography that provided him with not only with a steady livelihood and income but also the means through which he could disseminate his advocacy of the common man, the outcast, and the dispossessed. For Rego it has been etching and lithography that have provided her with a complement to painting and a means to engage a wide audience with her unique female narratives.

The two processes, lithography and etching, are fundamentally different, one a chemical planographic process, the other a physical intaglio process. Etching can be traced back to the 15th century and developed out of engraving and the craft of decorating armour. At its simplest, etching requires a metal plate, usually zinc or copper, covered with an acid resistant wax ground into which the artist draws with a needle or sharp implement, which in turn then exposes the metal. Once the drawing is complete, the whole plate is immersed in acid and, where the metal has been exposed, the acid bites into the plate leaving an incised line. The longer in the acid, the deeper the line and the darker the subsequent print. The plate is washed, the wax ground removed and printing ink rubbed into the surface and cleaned leaving the ink trapped in the etched lines. A dampened sheet of paper is placed over the plate and then put through a press under great pressure, transferring the ink from the plate onto the paper. The resulting print carries the embossed mark of the whole plate and the drawing, originally drawn with the needle, are now evident as black inked lines on the paper. The print is a mirror reversal of the original drawn image. In order to get tone, either a web of cross hatched lines can be drawn or using the technique championed by Goya, namely aquatint, a fine layer of rosin dust is fused onto the surface of the plate which when etched gives areas of tone.

Lithography was developed later, invented by [Alois Senefelder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alois_Senefelder) in 1796. Originally used to reproduce sheet music, artists such as Delacroix and Gericault and then Goya in his series *The Bulls of Bordeaux* 1828 had shown its potential as a creative medium, but its real success was in the commercial world where it could be printed quickly and cheaply and in conjunction with type, making it idea for newspapers and other such publications. Lithography had an additional advantage: the artist drawing onto prepared limestone blocks could work directly with the minimum of technical expertise. Drawing on the stones was like working directly on paper and the drawing materials, litho crayons and inks were similar to those used by artists in their studios. Furthermore the artist could see the drawing develop on the stone, making it a more direct means of working than intaglio. Once complete, the stone was processed to fix the drawing and this could then be rolled up with printing ink and impressions taken.

Daumier made over 4000 lithographs in his lifetime, publishing between 2-3 a week primarily for *Le Charivari*, the publication of the editor Charles Philipon, which began in 1832. Prior to that, Daumier had been a regular contributor to the political publication, *La Caricature*, drawing incisive caricatures attacking the monarchy under Louis-Philippe. His infamous satirical print *Gargantua* 1831 pictured the king, enormous and seated upon a commode while his diminutive subjects filled baskets with produce which were then carried up to his mouth via a ramp in an attempt to satisfy his insatiable appetite. This earned Daumier a six month prison sentence and later, as a result of censorship and the September Laws, which severely limited the freedom of the press, Daumier ‘ *was forced to abandon the political field and shift his emphasis to subjects in the social field.’* (Ramus, 1978: xiv) [[1]](#endnote-1)

The work in this exhibition is predominantly from *Le Charivari* but, throughout his career, Daumier in his graphic work, is always in the role of the caricaturist, the observer of the human comedy who exaggerates failings, aspirations and the affectations of society.

Daumier would draw directly on the stones without preliminary drawings and then the editors would add the captions. ‘*Numerous redundant prints exist without captions, never used by the newspaper, and they imply that Daumier simply drew one or two figures in an appropriate situation, according to a given theme, and the editors of Le Charivari then added the text.’* (Symonds, 2004: 11) [[2]](#endnote-2)

Rego’s prints cast a wider net and most importantly places women at the centre of her dramas and while Daumier was able ‘*to translate in his studio, things seen, which were recorded in his memory into sketches that seem to be directly taken from life*.’ (Le Men, 1999: 35) *[[3]](#endnote-3)* Rego has increasingly moved away from a position of introspective invention and imagination to a practice predicated on observation and the use of models and props.

Of course these are starting points for both artists, the scenes observed in the streets, courts and chambers by Daumier were then filtered through his imagination to form images that encapsulate a particular moment of drama caught in a remembered gesture or posturing. *‘… the role of a caricaturist was a noble one, conjuring up the image of a fearless campaigner battling against unjust authority.’* (Symonds, 2004: 6) [[4]](#endnote-4)

While Rego, as the quintessential storyteller, is continually receptive to narratives in which to immerse herself. Interestingly, while she has an extensive set of references, much quoted, beginning with the surrealists, Dubuffet, and Goya, and including outsider artists such as Henry Darger as well as Beatrice Potter, Cruikshank and Hogarth, Daumier is often overlooked. She is a great admirer of his work and indeed has two fine lithographs, one a delicately hand coloured print *Les Divorceuse* and one from the series*Les Canotiers Parisiens* in her private collection. What she particularly sees in his work is that ability to ‘*capture a gesture which conveys a state of mind’*.(Rego, 2013)[[5]](#endnote-5)

The pairing in this exhibition of these two artists, Rego and Daumier, separated in time by some 125 years, is inspired and reveals a wide range of common concerns and approaches. There are themes and compositions that offer fascinating moments of comparison and most importantly, they are both involved in visual storytelling. Rego takes the role of the storyteller, possessing a story and transforming it through the telling so that it becomes a highly personal narrative drawing upon her own experience and with the intention, as she famously stated, *of giving fear a face*. As for Daumier, he is the astute observer of his times, catching moments and inflections, and serving through his prints to reflect society back to itself.

*Regrets* (p. ...) is from a series consisting of over fifty prints, (Parisian Types) which appeared in the *Le Charivari* between October 1840 and January 1843. In this lithograph Daumier pictures an old man looking wishfully down through an open window at a young girl outside. The rather spidery plant in the flower pot that divides the image and falls between the old man from the girl, speaks of a narrow fettered life, impotence and regret for what might have been. If regret is the subject of Daumier’s lithograph, melancholy seems to be the sentiment in Rego’s etching *Old King Cole*, one of the Nursery Rhyme series. Here, she pictures her friend the writer, Rudi Nasseur, as a forlorn rather than the merry old soul of the rhyme. While Daumier’s figure suggests a scrawny physique under his nightshirt, King Cole by contrast is large portly figure, being serenaded by the fiddlers three. He too however is far away in his own thoughts, oblivious to the attempts of the musicians to get his attention and perhaps raise his spirits. In both cases, the artists use scale to great effect to construct space, Daumier makes the girl appear as small as the potted plant, while the figure of Rego’s King Cole fills half of the image. The manipulation of scale is also clearly evident in Rego’s etching *Melancholy* (p. ...)*;* the girl seated on the floor, head in hands is almost too big for the picture, literally squeezing herself into the very rectangle of the etching plate. Here the small dog provides a contrast to the leaden form of the girl while the moths that surround her contrast her weight and give the print a sense of the macabre.

*Les Cinq Sens (The five senses)* was a series of lithographs, which were published in *La Caricature* between July and September 1839 and later in *Le Charivari* as part of the series *Types Parisiens*. This image pictures a small child being roughly chastised, in a composition reminiscent of Goya and later in the scandalous painting by Max Ernst *The Virgin spanking the Christ Child* 1926. It is entitled *Le Toucher (*Touch); the others in the series are *Smell, Sight, Taste* and *Hearing*. It’s ironic that the touch here is the birch and any sense of gentleness absent. The quality of the drawing in this print is rich and sonorous, exploiting the full range of tone from the bright highlights through to the dark deep shadows. Daumier presents a failed attempt at control, a theme echoed in another series *Professors et Moutards* where the teacher is portrayed as being clearly inadequate and unable to maintain discipline as the children run amok. Rego, likewise displays a similar sense of chaos in her lithograph from *Jane Eyre,* entitled *Schoolroom*, drawing no doubt from her own experience at a girl’s public school. Here Rego creates a scene of violence and disorder, while the diminutive figure of Jane stands on a stool, head bowed caught in silence. Rego’s connection to Daumier in this print is identified in T.G.Rosenthal’s ( 2003) commentary, ‘*But it is the element of Daumier which makes it so much more than a conventional attack on the savageries of nineteenth century school like. Each girl has an individual facial expression as they watch the victims of the moment. Fear embarrassment, avid interest, sorrow, pain –all these are visible in this schoolroom from hell.’* [[6]](#endnote-6)

In her etching *The old woman who lived in a shoe*, made earlier as one of *The Nursery Rhymes,* instead of the schoolroom, we are presented with what appear to be a children’s brothel, with the old woman attempting to keep some sense of control and discipline. But while some children line up for punishment the others are not deterred and chaos reigns. The aquatint was worked beginning by stopping out the areas of white and then progressively protecting each subsequent area of tone until black was finally achieved. Rego’s extraordinary ability to orchestrate tones through aquatint in this way demonstrates her mastery of the process.

*Émotions de Chasse (Hunting emotions)* was a series consisting of 34 lithographs, which appeared in *Le Charivari* between November 1854 and November 1858. In this series Daumier lampoons the petite bourgeoisie with their new hobbies such as fishing and hunting, and the risk of being caught without a permit. The men in this series are inevitably portrayed as being out of step with nature, timid, angular and appearing more like the hunted than the hunter. In many ways these images can be seen as the precursors of the cartons of the aspiring middle class golfers, where despite the right equipment, effort and ambition only serve to highlight their lack of ability and coordination. The landscape is rendered economically, providing just enough information to place the figures within a setting. Similarly, in Rego’s *The Children Crusade*, the landscape serves to ground her drama without distracting. She developed the series of twelve delicately hand coloured etching based on this event, an ill fated enterprise whereby a crusade led by a 12 year old shepherd boy with some 20,000 followers attempted to reach Palestine, resulting in the majority being lost at sea while the few survivors were sold into slavery. This has all the ingredients of a story to tempt Rego, a heady mixture of fantasy, faith and that nether world between children and adults. She says (2003) ‘*… all children want to rebel against their parents and leave home; they want to both leave home and they want the comfort of coming back. These children weren’t able to come back and it’s a child’s worst fear to be out in the cold, with nowhere to return to.’ [[7]](#endnote-7)*

*On the hill* (p. XX) is a particularly fine image, richly handcoloured print, the contrast of the crowd being addressed, while in the foreground all the characters are locked into their own anxieties. It also demonstrates her ability to compress and range of characters and incidents within the narrow framework of this relatively small etching.

*Pendle Witches,* a series of etchings made in response to Blake Morrison’s poems, are here represented by the etching *Winnie Moor*. This series marked a change in Rego’s studio practice, moving away from memory and imagination, towards working directly from the figure in the studio, accompanied by a myriad of costumes and props. This change, which initially occurred in her painting, was also reflected in her approach to printmaking where she would now draw directly on the etching plate from the model in the studio, and use that as the initial design. That said, her *modus operandi*with etching (with few exceptions) has remained straightforward; to draw directly into the hard ground, etch the linear drawing and then give the drawing flesh through the use of aquatint.

Both lithography and etching provide the artist with a full range of tones, beginning with the luminosity of the paper itself when left undrawn, through to deeply etched aquatints or areas of rich lithographic blacks. Night scenes obviously allow the artist to use this full range, as can be seen in Daumier’s delicately drawn image from his series *Croquis de Chasse (Hunting Sketch)*. Here, as with the series *Émotions de chasse*, *(Hunting Emotions*) he pictures a would be hunter returning late as darkness draws in, his bravery rapidly giving way to fear and imaginings (*Une Émotion Noctune*/ *A Nocturnal Emotion*, p. XXX). The bent-kneed trembling hunter looks into the dark and his imagination does the rest. This is a wonderful example of lithography, the crayon drawing picking up on the texture of the stone to give an overall misty impression. The hunter, drawn with an exaggeratedly large head, tapering down to his small feet, has the impression of hardly being able to support himself; his dog meanwhile is transfixed. Rego by contrast in *Tilly in Kensington Gardens* (p. XX) is at one with the witches and the dark; this is indeed the witching hour. Her women dance with spirits and she transforms the sedate setting of Kensington Gardens, a royal park in the centre of London, into an imagined coven. Here the sprit of Goya can be felt deeply and the blackness of the dark aquatint is used to set off the pale figures, as if caught by moonlight. While Daumier undoubtedly drew his characters from people seen and remembered, Rego likewise brings friends and acquaintances into her assemble; Tilly is her close friend, the painter Natalie Dower.

Over the years, Rego’s studio has increasingly ressembled the backstage of a theatre, with props and racks of clothes for her models to dress up and pose in. She has often spoken about the secrets of skirts and dresses and these become powerful emblems in many of her compositions. Discussing her painting *The Fitting*, 1990, which features a girl having the final fitting for a giant ball gown that almost envelops her, John McEwen (1992) writes that ‘*for Paula* The Fitting *has a redemptive message too, in that she sees the dress as a chrysalis from which the young girl emerges into the butterfly freedom of adult life.*’[[8]](#endnote-8) This feeling is apparent in *Night,* 2002, a particularly striking lithograph, picturing Jane Eyre wrapped by a cloak and dress, as if she is a sad Madonna against a starry sky. This was one of the last prints for this series and made just after Rego’s mother had died. giving the stark image an added poignancy. A dress features prominently in Daumier’s *L’Hiver a la Campagne* (*Winter in the Countryside*) which pictures a couple alone but for their dog, estranged. All three are downcast, the woman looking out to a winter landscape as if the coldness of the season reflects her circumstance. The woman is seated, in a drab formless dress as if being absorbed into it. The light is beautifully rendered, pale crayon work with the snow flakes picked out through scrapping back into the stone.

Further variations on the subject of the dress can be seen in Daumier’s *Les Bas-Bleus,* where the rather emaciated woman admires herself in her new gown. It has the deliciously cutting caption:

*Isn't it strange how this mirror flattens my waist and reduces my bust... but what does that matter?... Mme de Stael and Mr de Buffon clearly said: genius has no sex.*

The rendering of the mirror reflection is beautifully realised and the softness of the drawing induces a feeling of pathos rather than blunt satire.

In Rego’s, *Straw Burning* (from *Pendle Witches* 1996, p. xx ), her model Lila is dressed as a bride in her best, with a veil that shrouds her like a protective cloak, as she emerges from a demonic goyaesque scene accompanied by a cast of insects, moths, rats and a goats head. Here Rego’s roots in surrealism come again to the surface as well as her playfulness in terms of the construction and fragmentation of space.

The conversation is a subject that both artists return to again and again. For the [caricaturist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caricaturist) this is rich territory, providing endless opportunities for contrast , mirroring and of course the blank space into which editors could write their voices, while for Rego it is about the exchange of confidences and the sharing of secrets. In works such *La Comète de 1857* (p. Xxx) and *La société d’acclimation* (p. Xxx) we see figures caught in earnest conversation. The facial expressions are matched by the characters’ stance and demeanour, creating compellingly rich portraits that for all the exaggeration, are intensely believable. For Rego rather than simply conversation, it is as already mentioned, the exchange of secrets which she has returns to frequently. In *Secrets and Stories* (p. Xxx), one of her most ambitious prints, around a pool of light, groups of figures and animals are huddled in the shadows whispering to each other. The control of aquatint in this print is remarkable, orchestrating a full range of tones to create this complex nocturnal gathering. It is also in itself a hymn to storytelling and the bond that exists between the teller and the receiver.

Both artists have been prolific as printmakers, and, for both, printmaking has been an essential aspect of their practice, complementing their painting and ensuring that their work reaches a wide public. Daumier had an immediate route to the public through the various publications that brought his images immediately to the streets of Paris. Rego’s prints, developed in the studio and requiring a longer gestation, have none the less served to ensure that she is amongst the best known and loved artists working today. Her *Nursery Rhymes* series, described by the eminent critic Robert Hughes (2007) as ‘ *having every claim to be ranked amongst the outstanding feats of graphic imagination in our time.* ‘[[9]](#endnote-9) has been continuously exhibited since the etchings were made in 1989 and has ensured her work is now known world wide.

This exhibition of Rego and Daumier stands as a testament to the visual power and inventiveness of two compelling artists and how through their prints they have made some of the most memorable and accessible images of their times. There can be no greater advocacy for the poignancy of printmaking and the richness of the graphic language than in the work of these two remarkable artists.

Paul Coldwell

Paul Coldwell is Professor in Fine Art at the University of the Arts London. He is a sculptor and printmaker, exhibiting regularly; he has recently been the subject of a retrospective exhibition of his graphic work at Studio 3 Gallery, University of Kent. He writes regularly for Print Quarterly, Art In Print, & Printmaking Today and his book *Printmaking :A Contemporary Perspective* was published by Black Dog in 2010. Between 1987 and 2005 he worked with Paula Rego, printing all her etchings in his studio, The Culford Press.

1. Ramus, C,F.(ed) (1978) *Daumier 120 Great Lithographs* New York: Dover Publications Inc. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Symonds,S. (2004) *Daumier* London: Chaucer Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Le Men, Ségolène.(1999) *Daumier 1808-1879* Poitiers*:* National Gallery of Canada. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Symonds,S. (2004) *Daumier* London:Chaucer Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Paula Rego in conversation with Paul Coldwell, London 7/8/2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rosenthal,T,G. (2003)*Paula Rego The Complete Graphic Works*, London: Thames & Hudson. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Paula Rego in Rosenthal,T,G. (2003) *Paula Rego The Complete Graphic Works*, London: Thames & Hudson. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. McEwen,J. (1992) *Paula Rego* London: Phaidon. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Robert Hughes in Livingstone, M. (2007) *Paula Rego* Madrid: Centra de Arte Reina Sofia. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)