

*Salvator Rosa* by Helen Langdon

Review by Jennifer Higgin

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In Salvator Rosa's self-portrait of 1647, the 32-year-old artist depicts himself inscribing a skull with the Greek words: 'Behold, whither, eventually'. He's a romantic figure: intense, with tumbling black locks and a poet's beard, his soft hands emerging from the sleeves of a voluminous white shirt. He's crowned himself with a cypress wreath – an emblem of mourning. By his side, is a book by the stoic philosopher Seneca; the sky behind him is gloomy.

Despite the melancholy scene, Rosa's life was anything but; he found fame as a 'philosopher-painter', poet, musician and actor. From the opening lines of Helen Langdon's fascinating new biography, which zips along in crisp, readable prose, it's impossible not to be entertained by the man who was 'spiritoso', 'stravagente' and 'bizzarro', an 'artist and phenomenon'. He leaps off the page as someone who was charming and maddening in equal measure. His biographer describes him as 'vain, often boastful and tirelessly self-assertive [...] possessed by an overriding love and thirst for glory, and an inordinate desire to claim a place as "the first man of the century"'. His self-portraits were less exercises in introspection than the 'dazzling publicity campaign' of a showman. In his etching *The Genius of Salvator Rosa* he pictures himself as the personification of painting.

One of the most charismatic characters of the Baroque, Rosa was constantly on the search for new subjects. He excelled not only in self-portraits but in history painting, picturesque landscapes, battle scenes and esoteric themes, including witchcraft, magic and divination. As famous for the wit of his conversation as he was for his skill at the easel, we get a glimpse of his character via his letters, which have recently been made available in English. 'Nothing remotely like them', writes Langdon, 'is available for any other artist and they are invaluable to an understanding of the art world in 17th-century Italy.'

Rosa's ambition was, perhaps, understandable, given the poverty of his childhood. Born in the village of Arenella in 1615; he grew up in Naples. When Rosa was 17, his father died, leaving his mother and siblings dependent upon him but he learned fast; he was soon making a living from his virtuoso brush. He met the Spanish painter Jusepe di Ribera, who had fled to Naples to escape his creditors. 'From him', writes Langdon, 'comes the younger artist's fascination with horror, his expressive power and the brutal naturalism of his large-scale figure paintings.'

Rosa moved to Rome, where, as well as painting, he wrote and acted in satirical plays, mocking, amongst others, the sculptor Bernini, who became his enemy. He moved to Florence – where he was briefly a Medici court painter. He painted tumultuous landscapes and wrote satires on music, poetry, painting and war. Langdon writes that he ‘saw himself as [...] the moral mentor of his age, virulently denouncing the corruption of modern times. [...] Men clustered around him, competing for his attention; cardinals and princes came to watch him work, and to listen to his pronouncements.’ Such was his confidence, that he turned down invitations from four heads of state – King Louis XIV of France, Queen Christina of Sweden, Archduke Ferdinand Karl of Austria and Emperor Ferdinand – in order to maintain his professional freedom.’

But none of this, it would seem, was enough. The whirlwind that was Salvator Rosa died at the age of 57, filled with ‘a terrible fear of damnation’. A friend wrote an account of the artist’s final days. Crying out that ‘this is what happens to people who want to paint and write for the sake of eternity’, he rebutted exhortations to Stoicism with the words: ‘Make another Salvator, because this one wants to moan.’

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