

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

L'Umana Fragilità by Salvator Rosa



Title:	L'Umana Fragilità (Human Frailty)
Maker:	Salvator Rosa (1615-1673)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	c. 1656
Dimensions:	h. 199.1 x w. 133.1 cm
Museum No:	PD.53-1958
Gallery:	7

The Artist

Salvator Rosa has been described as one of the most original artists and extravagant personalities of the 17th century. His biographers describe him as a painter, draughtsman, etcher, poet and actor. Filippo Baldinucci and Giovanni Battista Passeri, both of whom knew him well, paint a picture of a man of fiery temperament, immense ambition, wide learning and vivacious wit.

Born in Naples, Rosa was first taught to paint by his brother-in-law Francesco Fracanzano and then possibly by Jusepe de Ribera. The influence of the latter is certainly seen in Rosa's expressive brushstrokes and the brutality of his early altarpieces and figure paintings. In 1635 Rosa moved to Rome and by 1639 he had established himself as a central figure amongst the poets, actors and artists of the day, founding a company of actors in which he participated. As an artist, he painted battle scenes, landscapes and genre scenes.

Rosa moved to Florence in 1640, having rashly insulted Gianlorenzo Bernini, the most powerful artist in Rome at the time. In Florence he worked for Giovanni Carlo de' Medici who was at the centre of the literary and theatrical life in Florence. The Medici house was a meeting place for poets, historians, philosophers and scientists. He began to write satirical poetry and became increasingly interested in Stoicism, the philosophical movement which rejected wordly vanities and criticised the wordly corruption of the city.

In 1649, tired of the restrictions of the Florentine court, he returned to Rome and began to concentrate on a series of large and intellectually complex pictures. The predominant theme in both his writing and his paintings throughout the 1650s becomes the vanity of human endeavour. The works received some recognition from aristocratic patrons such as Cardinal Flavio Chigi.

The 1650s were troubled for Rosa - personal tragedies as well as professional controversies induced an increasing melancholy and sense of persecution. In the 1660s he continued to produce works on a large scale and also began to make etchings. He moved towards more dramatic compositions and renewed his interest in macabre and occult subjects. In 1669 his ambition of seeing one of his works hung in a Roman church was achieved and he died in 1673, finally marrying his mistress of 30 years, Lucretia, on his deathbed.

The Subject

In 1655 a devastating plague swept through Naples - Salvator Rosa's son, Rosalvo, his brother, his sister, her husband and five of their children all died. The painting undoubtedly reflects the artist's own personal tragedies but equally its universal theme of the transience of human life is one that echoes the dark stoicism of the age.

The painting was originally in the Chigi palace in Rome and belonged to Cardinal Flavio Chigi, nephew of Pope Alexander VII. For the patron the message would also have a personal resonance - that human glory is ephemeral and his wordly position would not necessarily help him in the life to come.

The main scene of the painting shows a child sitting on his mother's lap writing onto a scroll the words in Latin 'conceptio culpa, nasci pena, labor vita, necesse mori' - 'conception is sin, birth is pain, life is toil, death a necessity'. A huge winged skeleton looms behind the pair and directs the infant's hand as he writes. Even if one cannot translate the Latin, the message of this painting is made clear through a host of symbols. The closer one looks into the darkness the more the artist reveals which makes it an excellent painting to use when teaching. For more information and an interactive deconstruction of the composition of the painting see the Museum's website at www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos.

The Symbolism

Bubbles - fragility, brevity of human existence. The image of the child blowing bubbles was common in engravings from the 16th century and was often shown with the inscription 'Who will escape?' The expression 'homo est bulla' - 'man is but a bubble' was also well known at the time.

Spent rocket - it, like life, has been beautiful but is now over.

Winged skeleton - common symbol of death. In the 16th century it was usually just a winged skull but by the 17th century it had developed into a full skeleton. Durer had used the same idea in his *Melancholia* prints (Museum No: P.3098-R).

Sphere that the mother is sitting on- the terrestrial globe, earth.

Burning flax in the cauldron - the extinguishable quality of life and a reference to papal ceremony.

Owl - night and obscurity, wisdom.

Butterflies - in Christian art butterflies are a symbol of the resurrection as they are 'reborn' out of the chrysalis.

Roses in the hair of the mother- a reference to the artist's name.

Classical figure (on right hand side in the background) - Terminus - Roman god of death.

Obelisk in upper left hand corner - the emblems on this obelisk refer to an influential 17th century book *The Hieroglyphica* by Piero Valeriano. Each emblem has a specific meaning: the head of a child - youth; the head of an old man - age; falcon - the vitality of life, virtue; fish - hatred and death; dog-like creature which is in fact a hippopotamus - discord in nature.