

Press information

Museum Folkwang

The Personal is Political. Relentless, moving, political:
Museum Folkwang shows a wide-ranging retrospective of the
British-Portuguese artist Paula Rego

Essen, 15 May 2025 – With the exhibition Paula Rego. The Personal and The Political, from 16 May to 7 September 2025, Museum Folkwang is devoting an extensive retrospective to the British-Portuguese artist Paula Rego (1935-2022). Rego is considered one of the most important painters of our time. Her work addresses pressing issues such as political and sexualized violence, the abuse of power and social injustice, physical self-determination, and mental health. The rights of women and children take centre stage in all of this.

In her oeuvre Paula Rego relentlessly highlights social injustice. Comparable to the methods of the women's movement, she creates an awareness of the structural grievances that are innate to supposedly private problems. Her works put their finger on the grey areas and abysses of human interaction and, starting from personal elements, become images of collective experience.

Art as a political instrument

The title of the exhibition refers to the famous feminist slogan 'The Personal is Political'. In the late 1960s and in the early 1970s, it became an expression of a paradigm shift in politics and society. The phrase serves to bring together the ten exhibition sections that reflect Rego's broad range of themes and artistic perspectives.

The tour through the exhibition with a total of 130 works covering seven decades shows impressively how Rego considers her art to be a political instrument. Here, painting technique and pictorial content enter into a unique synthesis. Rego experimented with a wide variety of media throughout her life. Pastels are characteristic of her late work. She thus reactivates a painting medium that was long regarded as something for female/women amateurs, thereby granting it a greater status. She applies the pastel chalk in many layers and different textures so that her pictures develop a special luminosity.

The hall entitled The Personal is Restrained brings together representative works from the 1950s, for example. They deal with the impact the dictatorship under António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) had on Portuguese society. The works on paper from the 1970s in the section The Personal is Entangled mark a turning point in Rego's oeuvre.

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Through her preoccupation with fairy tales and folk tales, she turns to the collective consciousness. The works shown in The Personal is Territorial approach the family as the smallest political unit. They focus on female family members who are subordinate to the husband or father in patriarchal structures. In Rego's work, the women are in control. The section on The Personal is Grotesque reflects Rego's examination of the idealized characters of Walt Disney. In her pictures, Rego subversively undermines the clichés and ideals of beauty that have characterized entire generations of people.

The Abortion Series - A political statement

The exhibition culminates in Rego's major Abortion Series (1998-2000), her personal contribution to the debate on the legalization of abortion in Portugal. She produced this group of untitled pictures in 1998 in response to the failed attempt to have Portuguese law reformed. The exhibition not only shows the entire cycle of etchings that Rego created with the idea of rendering her pictures democratically accessible to all. Museum Folkwang has also succeeded in bringing together five of a total of 11 works in pastel. Almost all of the paintings are now owned by private individuals and are rarely seen in large numbers. They are said to have contributed to the public opinion that then emerged. Today, they are considered relevant to the positive outcome of the second referendum which in 2007 led to abortions being legalized in Portugal up to the tenth week of the pregnancy.

Works such as the Abortion series show that for all her criticism of society Rego had an optimistic view of the world. She believed that art could change life and even the political reality of the day. It is with this in mind that the exhibition takes Love (1995) as its title motif and its final section.

The questions that Paula Rego raises in her work are more topical than ever – to this day they characterize the personal and political lives of many women. Following solo exhibitions on Maria Lassnig, Joan Mitchell, Nancy Spero, and Helen Frankenthaler, Museum Folkwang is now devoting an extensive retrospective to Paula Rego, another key female figure in post-1945 painting.

Publication

A comprehensive catalogue will be published by Hatje Cantz in June 2025 (240 pages, 44 euros) to coincide with the exhibition. Contributors include Rego experts Ruth Rosengarten and Catarina Alfaro. Journalist and author Julia Korbik provides a guiding commentary from a feminist perspective.

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Information

Paula Rego

The Personal and The Political

16 May – 7 September 2025

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Admission

Admission: € 9 / concessionary € 5

Press images



Paula Rego
Love, 1995
Pastel on paper on
aluminium,
120 × 160 cm
Courtesy The Estate of
Paula Rego and Victoria
Miro
© Paula Rego Estate



Paula Rego
Self Portrait III, 2017
Pastel on paper,
59 × 52 cm
LMH Collection
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