

# The Mysterious Iconography of William Balthazar Rose

By Peter Davies, Art Historian and Critic

June 2012



The first thing to say about William Rose's often sumptuous paintings is that they are both distinctive and idiosyncratic yet art historically eclectic. Rose is a knowing and self-critical artist, widely travelled and well informed. His subject-matter is familiar yet disarmingly elusive and enigmatic, the narrative frozen into a number of thematic innuendos and conceptual cul-de-sacs. Typically the paint is lush, the colour rich and multivarious and the forms robust—not unlike Brangwyn and Sickert from the past or Stephen Conroy, Bill Jacklin and Chris LeBrun from the present. The

forms become ciphers for stylistic paraphrase or experiment—groups of musicians, cooks or street congregations flattened into compounded cubist silhouettes or subverted into disquieting de Chiricoesque juxtapositions.

Utilising familiar and everyday material Rose presents mysterious scenarios that, courtesy of an almost fortuitous post-modern pluralist mix, touch on surrealism, metaphysical painting, realism, and symbolism. The pictures do not buy into the ephemeral mini-trends of post-pop, post-feminist, new image work but rather draw inspiration from the past in order to make sense of the present. The dalliance with the past has an Italian ring to it and it comes as no surprise to learn that since purchasing a home in Sansepolcro, Tuscany—the revered Piero della Francesca's birthplace—in 2003 Rose has painted undulating Umbrian and Tuscan landscapes







and genre scenes both in terms of observational verisimilitude and of invented theatricality. Rose's metaphorical adaptation of Quattrocento and Italian Primitive imagery engages with today and heeds the late art critic Peter Fuller's call for a new and radical traditionalism where novelty resides less in a restless present than in a creative re-casting of the past.

The paintings are nonetheless couched in a veritable vernacular for, as Fiona Forman writes, the "theme of reflecting elements of contemporary society continue through Rose's paintings."<sup>1</sup> The reoccurring chefs with their tall white hats, for example, reflect current obsessions with celebrity chefs. The costume for Rose "seems magical, theatrical, and suggests, at times, the robes of a priest . . . the cook creates more vastly than any other figure in the

arts."<sup>2</sup> But there can also be sinister connotations: the meat cleaver, white uniform and tall caps taking on malign military associations. The recurring headgear recalls Cecil Collins' fools hats or Philip Guston's early Klu Klux Klan helmets. Thus Forman continues by describing Rose's work as both "humorous and terrifying" and the artist's dealer, Brian Sinfield, similarly touches on "the ability to disturb and at the same time, to make one smile."<sup>3</sup>

The different imagistic layers we see in such stylistic parodies as 'The Musicians: A Study in Cubist form' and 'Lovers, Sansepolcro' (2009) amount to a semi-abstract 'frieze' of figures, horses, musical instruments and architectural elements 'flattened' and rearranged into a new synthetic ensemble. In 'Lovers, Sansepolcro' a pair of gaunt Picassoesque blue period lovers stand out against the profiles of a white horse derived from Piero della Francesca. A modern day bicyclist stands by and looks on as if a present witness.



<sup>1</sup> Fiona Forman. 'Michel's Private Collection'. *Michel Roux's Seasons*. Winter 2011.  
<sup>2</sup> William Rose. Statement in catalogue for Brian Sinfield Gallery exhibition. 2011.  
<sup>3</sup> Brian Sinfield. Introduction to 'William Balthazar Rose'. 2011.



In the artist's own words the composition 'Red Trumpeter' is "very self consciously" adapted from Piero's 'Resurrection' though Rose's recurring white horse has its source less in naturalism than in the abstract derivation of equestrian sculpture. The iconographic relationship of Rose's paintings to previous art on the one hand and to natural observation on the other is critical to our understanding of a form of picture-making informed, indeed made possible, by Cézanne, cubism and the expressly plastic redefinition of art.

The compounded mysteries of Rose's work also owes something to a cosmopolitan and itinerant background. Born in Cambridge, an eminently apt location given the auspicious circumstances of an intellectual and artistic family background, Rose moved to the United States as a young child where he lived until moving back to Britain aged 30 in the early 1990s. His education during the 1980s was long and varied, incorporating fine art degrees at the University of California and masters in architecture at Princeton, New Jersey. Clearly, his use of architectural themes as invented or adapted 'stage

props' in his crowd scenes or as elements of topographical fidelity in the observed Tuscan landscapes owe as much to this training as to the hold on his sensibility of Italian culture in general. Though later describing how he was 'very sad to give it up,'<sup>4</sup> the discipline of architecture proved too demanding and even creatively nullifying to offer Rose a vocational way forward.

---

<sup>4</sup> William Rose in conversation with the author. Somerset, England. May 2012.



And so an artistic, rather than architectural, career beckoned, providing what became a lifetime mission. In fact Rose's return to Europe was the catalyst, notwithstanding the fact that the conceptual rigours and eternal present of the American tradition had exerted its inevitable hold on the young artist at a formative stage. Indeed, despite a declared preference for the older European tradition, Rose made early professional inroads on the West Coast



which saw him meeting the leading American painter Wayne Thiebaud whose hyper real serialized depictions of cakes and food items suggested the culinary thread later used in Rose's chef compositions. Thiebaud, described by the younger British artist as a "straightforward man"<sup>5</sup> typified the hard headed pragmatism and rationalism of the modern American artist, a world apart from the eccentric and introspective romanticism of the English 'school', and there is no doubt that Thiebaud inspired Rose's acquisition of a detached professional persona.



As part of his American baptism Rose enjoyed two early solo shows, in 1992 and 1995 at the Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco, a gallery run as its name suggests by Wayne's son. The older American artist became intrigued by the opaque luminosity of Rose's lead white grounds which, as became the case with L.S. Lowry's famous northern industrial scenes, yellowed with time. The antique veneer of 'old' Europe, its sense of patinated age and beauty, was promoted both by such faded colour as by a deep, rich naturalism. These Californian shows strengthened his confidence and identity even if later on he declared being 'so young I didn't appreciate my good fortune'<sup>6</sup> but as his curriculum vitae developed courtesy to solo shows in Italy and in Bath and the Cotswolds, Rose saw his work acquire new audiences. In 2010 he was elected a member of Bath Society of Artists.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



As a Roman city before a Georgian one Bath seamlessly links his British and Italian bases. Obligatory, even clichéd Bathonian images like Pulteney Bridge and the Holburne Museum reflect the saturated cultural tourism of the Roman city yet also speak of a redolent classicism that, in turn informs the creative and formal integrity of his literally timeless work. At times Rose conjures late Sickert, Beckmann, Balthus, Morandi, Manet, and Cezanne, variously inimitable and idiosyncratic painters who provide an oblique benchmark for Rose's inherent individualism and privileged position on a post-modern pluralist parapet.