

# Quarterly

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Above: Falcone, *Battle Scene*, Burghausen Gallery (see p 5)

Right below: Copy by Rubens of Leonardo da Vinci's *Battle of Anghiari* (see p 4)

Cover: Detail from Rosa, *Cavalry Battle*, Auckland (see p 7 for a reproduction of the complete work)

## A battle picture by Salvator Rosa

*Michael Dunn*

Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) has been known largely as a painter of landscapes, battle-pieces and bizarre scenes of witchcraft. As a landscape painter Rosa was a contemporary of Claude (1600-1682) and Nicolas Poussin (1593-1665); and like these artists he spent much of his active life in Rome.

Rosa is generally credited with starting a vogue for 'wild' landscapes in which nature is shown subject to storm and fury: opposite in manner to the calm majesty of Claude. Rocky cliff faces, gnarled trees and threatening skies are typical of Rosa's mature landscapes. These became highly popular in eighteenth century England, and played a considerable role in formulating the taste for the picturesque. English writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tended to see landscape in terms of the paintings of Rosa and Claude.<sup>1</sup> Early visitors to New Zealand and

Australia could see aspects of these artists' works in the new lands.<sup>2</sup>

Although Rosa saw himself as an individual genius, unconcerned with the demands of patrons,<sup>3</sup> he usually painted landscapes with figures making allusion to classical or biblical stories: for example his *Landscape with the finding of Moses* (c1650, Detroit Institute of Art). In so doing he was following the example of the classical landscape painters Claude and Poussin, with whom he is usually contrasted. And not infrequently the structural arrangements of Rosa's 'wild' landscapes and battle scenes bear a marked similarity to the classical one.<sup>4</sup>

Such a structure can be seen in the Auckland battle picture, which has a foreground frieze of battling figures; middle distance, framing columns and rugged cliffs, followed by a background view of a distant town. This battle picture can be seen

as a landscape with figures, since, although the figures occupy the foreground <sup>7</sup>one, they are integrated into the larger scene of the valley and town beneath a stormy sky. The landscape in fact partakes of the mood of the figures and contributes to the effect of violence.

Scenes of battle such as this one doubtless led to the story that Rosa himself was a soldier as well as an artist. One of Rosa's earlier and less reliable biographers, De Dominici (1684-1750), appears to have been the popularizer of the story that Rosa, who was Neapolitan by birth, had taken part in the revolutionary uprising of Masaniello against the Spanish overlords of Naples in 1647.<sup>5</sup> But now we know that Rosa never returned to Naples in 1647, for his letters of that year show that he was in Pisa and Florence. Rather, his concern took a poetical form in the satire *La Gnerra* of that year. Rosa's involvement was that of reflection, not of physical violence. Even less credence can be given to the romantic tale of Lady Morgan, who wrote an influential life of Rosa in 1824. She saw Rosa as a captive of the wild banditti of the desolate Abruzzi, and

made much of his 'fearless enterprises' among them.<sup>6</sup> This story is now rejected out of hand. Even Lady Morgan had her doubts about it, but accepted the story for the romantic fabric of her book.

But if Rosa cannot be correctly viewed as a revolutionary or soldier it says much for the efficacy of his battle-pieces that he was cast in this role. Rosa did not, of course, invent the battle-piece as an artistic genre. Its history goes back to classical Greece and beyond. However, the battle-piece was revived in Italy during the Renaissance, most notably by Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) who made a series of battle-pieces for the Medici in 1454-7.

These fantastic scenes of fighting are distinguished more for the curious application of perspective to the doll-like forms than for the dramatic qualities sought after by Rosa. On the other hand, the frieze of foreground figures mounted on horses, for example, in the *Battle of San Romano* (c1456, London, National Gallery), the rearing steeds and fallen bodies of the slain, all look forward to Rosa's battle scenes.



By far the most significant precedent for Rosa's pictures, however, was supplied by one of the most famous pictures of the High Renaissance: Leonardo da Vinci's *Battle of Anghiari* (see p 3).

The *Battle of Anghiari* was commissioned for the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence in 1503 and the cartoon was finished in 1505. Leonardo never completed the final painting, which he attempted in an experimental technique. The design was known among artists by a series of copies and engravings mainly of one section now known as *The Battle of the Standard*. Rubens made a copy of this section of the cartoon which adequately shows the revolutionary character of Leonardo's work. Horses and men are shown in a tight interlocking design. Both man and beasts are brought to a level. There is one main impression - that of total physical commitment. Every muscle and sinew is strained in conflict; eyes bulge, mouths are open screaming with violence. This emphasis on expression is typical of Leonardo's method, and is followed by Rosa, for example in the foreground figure on the left in the Auckland picture.

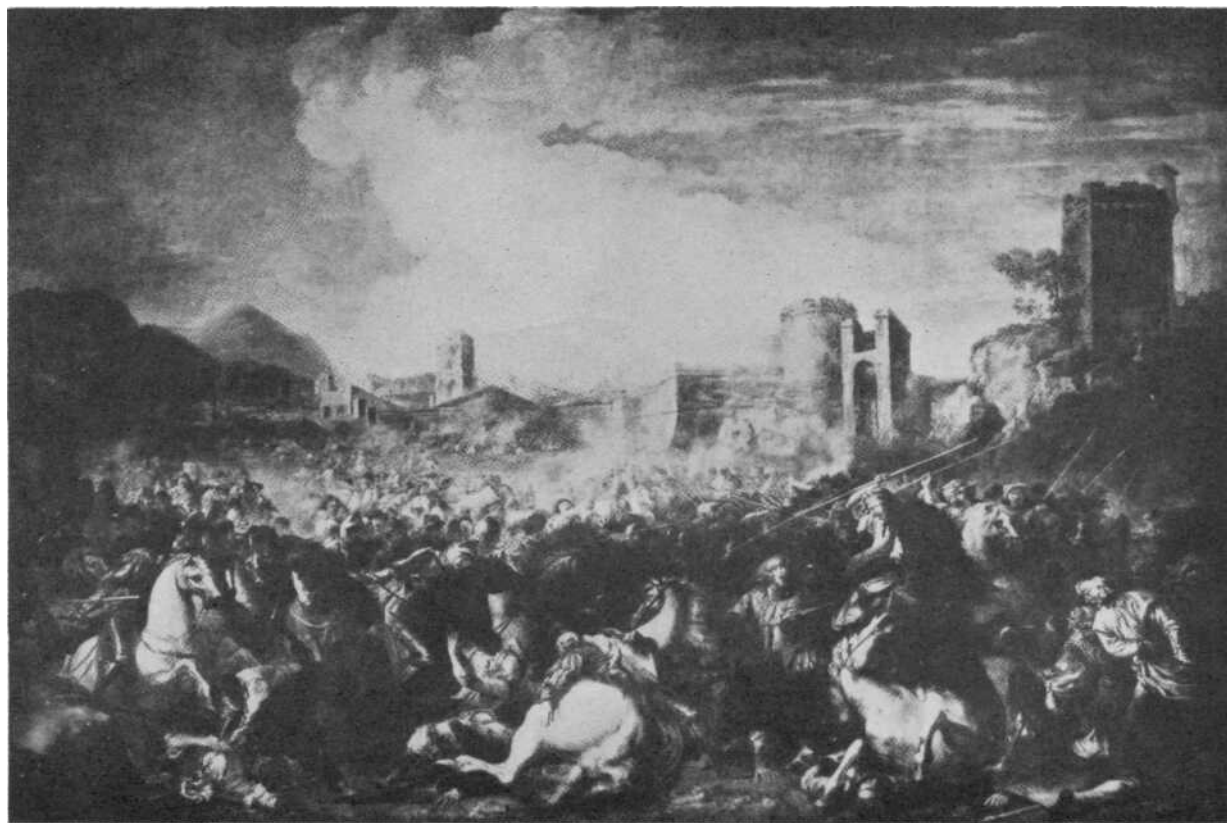
Leonardo also has a group of figures fighting on the ground beneath the rearing horses: a motif used by Rosa in the Auckland picture. In



Above: Leonardo da Vinci, Study of a warrior's head for the *Battle of Anghiari*

Right: Detail from the Auckland *Cavalry Battle*.

Below: Rosa, *Battle Scene*, Pitti Palace, Florence.





Leonardo's written account of how to depict a battle we read: 'Some might be shown disarmed and beaten down by the enemy, turning upon the foe, with teeth and nails to take an inhuman and bitter revenge.'<sup>7</sup> This could be a description of the foreground fighting figures of the Auckland picture.

If the *Battle of Anghiari* must be seen as the ultimate influence on Rosa, undoubtedly the lesser works of Aniello Falcone (1600-1665) play a formative role. Falcone was a minor painter of battle pictures who worked in Naples and was, for a time, the teacher of Rosa.<sup>8</sup> Salerno feels that Rosa would have been with Falcone for possibly three years, between his seventeenth and twentieth years, that is between about 1632 and 1635.

Falcone was a careful student of Leonardo's figures of shouting men and horses, and F. Saxl has shown that Falcone was familiar with Leonardo's studies for the *Battle of Anghiari*.<sup>9</sup> However, Falcone was unable to add to Leonardo's mighty conception, and, comparatively, his works are spiritless to the point of being devoid of action. F. Saxl saw the distinctive features of Falcone's battle scenes in their comparative restraint and the absence of a hero.

One of Rosa's early dated works of 1637 is a battle in the manner of Falcone (Mostyn-Owen collection, London)<sup>10</sup> which shows a group of equestrian soldiers fighting in the right foreground. Behind, on lower ground, further figures can be discerned, leading the eye back diagonally to the far distance. This work, done when the artist was only twenty-two, already shows Rosa's interest in violent expression, here used to greater effect than in Falcone. The handling of the landscape is unsatisfactory in that the gap between foreground and background is not adequately bridged, while the structure lacks the authority and balance of later works, such as the Auckland picture.

According to Baldinucci in his *Life of Rosa*: 'The first large picture which he did in Florence was a fine battle-piece.'<sup>11</sup> This is the picture now in Florence (Pitti Palace).<sup>12</sup> Salerno sees here 'a decisive evolution: the scheme of Aniello Falcone is abandoned and the landscape with a city in the background has a new, epic tone'.<sup>13</sup> This picture can be dated c1640.

Now the fighting figures extend across the entire foreground, as in the Auckland picture, and the intermingling of men, fallen horses and

fighting groups has taken on the complexity of the later battle pictures. The town extends across the middle distance forming another zone running parallel to the frieze of fighting figures.

From the Pitti battle-piece to the fine *Great Cavalry Battle* of 1645 in Vienna<sup>14</sup> is a short step. The frieze of fighting figures is retained in the foreground, but a spacious middle distance leading back to impressive mountains replaces the somewhat constricting townscape of the Pitti picture. A Corinthian temple frames the fighting figures on the right, while a tree performs a similar function on the left. The picture now leans on the classical landscape structure for a balance and authority previously absent. A curve of fighting horsemen links foreground, middle-distance and background. The influence of Claude appears likely. Salerno correctly notes that 'The frontal vision and balanced equilibrium show evidence of research and the influence of classicism'.<sup>15</sup>

At this point many of the features of the Auckland picture have been evolved: but the architecture on the right has a larger area of the composition than in the Vienna picture, and boldly reaches to the top of the canvas. This gives an effect of greater grandeur, which is enhanced by the stormy sky and wind-swept tree behind the columns. These features suggest to me that the Auckland picture is a late work and dates from after the Vienna *Cavalry Battle*. Fortunately we have a later dated battle-piece by Rosa with which to gauge the evolution of his composition. This is the justly famous *Heroic Battle-piece*, painted for the King of France in 1652 and now in the Louvre.<sup>16</sup>

Rosa was pleased with this picture and wrote to Ricciardi, 19 October 1652: 'My picture sets off for France tomorrow, where I have only to hope it will succeed as well as it has done in Rome, which I may swear to you is as much as any modern . . . picture ever did . . .'<sup>17</sup>

In arrangement the Louvre canvas retains the frieze of fighting figures and the mountain backdrop of the Vienna *Cavalry Battle*, but the ruined Ionic temple on the right has been brought closer to the foreground and now reaches almost to the top of the picture. Also a tree with blasted trunk has appeared to both break the line of the architecture and introduce the landscape element effectively into the foreground. We have here the beginnings of a direct relationship between the mood of the landscape and the battle. Com-



SALVATOR ROSA (1615-1673) *A cavalry battle*

Oil on canvas, 58 x 86 ins.

Signed *S. Rosa* on tree trunk to left

*Collections:* Hotel de Montcalm, Montpellier (Catalogue 1836, p 69, no 119). Sold in 1848 to the Earl of Normanton, in whose family the painting has remained to the present. Purchased with the aid of a grant from the National Art Collections Fund.

paratively, the degree of relationship between landscape and battle in the Auckland picture is much greater, suggesting a later date. Salerno sees the 'participation of sky and rocky cliffs in



the dynamic effect' as indicating a date late in the 1650s for the *Heroic Battle-piece* in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>18</sup> Using similar stylistic criteria, plus the compositional factors alluded to above, a date in the mid-1650s seems the earliest possible for the Auckland picture. The columns in the Auckland battle-piece also resemble those in Rosa's late altarpiece *The Martyrdom of Ss. Cosmas and Damien* (1669, S. Giov. dei Fiorentini, Rome)<sup>19</sup> more than they do the Corinthian and Ionic ones of the earlier periods.

Rosa's battle-pieces need not be related to any

specific action or event. He conceived these pictures as belonging to a specialised genre in which his aim was to excel all other artists'. . . It is one in which I have set my heart to excel all the painters who may desire to enter the lists with me.<sup>20</sup> The fighting figures and rearing horses are standard property to all his battle pictures, as is the romantic costume which defies specific categorization. Rosa's combatants fight out their deadly struggle like actors on a stage before a back-drop of mountains and sky. The expression of energy, of violence and movement, takes pre-



## Landscape with a rock and an etching by Salvator Rosa

SALVATOR ROSA *Landscape with a Rock*  
Oil on canvas, 7 x 17 ins  
Purchased 1964

Although Rosa had ambitions as a figure painter he is today most admired as the creator of highly personal landscapes. It is obvious from the tiny *Landscape with a Rock* that Rosa was able to make an affecting landscape from a few simple elements, such as the rocky cliffs of this picture, the glimpse of water, a framing tree and the sky. These little scenes were sought after by collectors in Rosa's day, although the artist himself affected to place little store by them.

The key to Rosa's landscapes lies in his early receptivity to the coastline around Naples which supplied him with the basic elements of his pictures. Grottos, waterfalls, rough rocky cliffs, wind-swept trees, the sea and the sky, were all experienced in his formative years, and are lovingly recollected later in his life. Fortunately, in his letters we can find ample evidence in written form of Rosa's passion for landscape, which reinforces the evidence of his canvases. In a letter

to his friend Doctor Baptista Ricciardi, a Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Pisa, written late in his life in 1662, his unabated love of landscape is evident. He writes: 'At Terni ... I saw the famous waterfall of the Velino, the river of Rieti. It was enough to inspire the most exacting brain through its horrid beauty: the sight of a river hurtling down a half-mile precipice and raising a column of foam fully as high. Believe me, nowhere did I look or move without thinking of you.'<sup>1</sup>

This passage shows Rosa's taste for the dramatic elements in nature. In the same letter he refers to the pleasing effect of variety in a landscape which is the result of a mixture of the flat and the precipitous. Such a mixture can be found in the *Landscape with a Rock*, where the rugged cliffs on the left of the picture contrast with the smooth plane of the water. A precisely similar observation can be made concerning the etching *A Rocky Landscape with Figures*, also in the Auckland collection. The precipitous cliffs on the right give interest to the banks of the river, as do the tiny figures in the foreground. Figures such



as these are usually found in Rosa's landscapes, which frequently have a biblical or mythological theme. Apart from their narrative function, the figures give a sense of scale to the landscape, enabling us to relate to it more readily.

Rosa's debt to the so-called classic landscape tradition is evident not only in his use of figures, but also in his compositions. In *Landscape with a Rock* the framing tree on the right and the winding course of the river indicate the structural similarity between Rosa's landscapes and those of Claude. But the feeling of the landscape is very different, and reflects the individual taste of Rosa, who was able to set up a comparatively wild and untamed vision of the Italian landscape as an alternative to the calm Arcadian one.

Rosa painted small landscapes throughout his

career. *Landscape with a Rock* almost certainly belongs to the late Roman period on stylistic grounds. It can be compared, for example, with the *Little Landscape*<sup>2</sup> in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, which Salerno attributes to Rosa's final stylistic phase. It has the same confident brushwork and sketchy feel. The etching *A Rocky Landscape and Figures* must date to the same period, since Rosa did not begin etching until 1656,<sup>3</sup> and did most of his etchings between 1662 and 1664. The etching shows the stylistic features of the late period in the vigorous and free hatching in the dark areas of the rocky cliffs. The somewhat summary drawing of the figures, tree and clouds adds to the impression of spontaneity, giving a pleasing vitality to this small print.

M.D.

'Letter of 13 May 1662 from Battari, Giovanni, *Raccolta di lettere sulla Pittura, Scultura ed-Architettura . . .*' (Milano, 1822), vol i, p 450. See also Haskell, *Patrons and Painters* (Oxford, 1963), p 145.

<sup>2</sup>Reproduced L. Salerno, *Salvator Rosa* (Club del Libro, Milan, 1963), plate 77. See also note to plate p 133.

<sup>3</sup>See Bartsch, *Le Peintre-Graveur* (Wien-Leipzig, 1803-43), vol xx, p 265 seq, and Salerno, op cit, p 149.

SALVATOR ROSA *A Rocky Landscape with Figures*  
Etching 3| x 8j ins (Nagler 91)  
Purchased 1962



New Zealand Paintings  
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LOCATION: The new entrance to the Gallery is off Kitchener Street via the Sculpture Garden and the Edmiston Wing

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GALLERY HOURS: Monday to Saturday 10 am to 4.30 pm. Friday remains open until 8.30 pm. Sunday 2 pm to 4.30 pm. Art Gallery Bookshop open daily.

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