Rouault Paintings Stir Emotions, Portray ‘The Passion’ Of Christ

By ROBERT ZELENKA

Roger Ortmeyer, professor of Fine Arts at Southern Methodist University, introduced the collection of Rouault paintings entitled “The Passion” in the Rice Memorial Chapel on September 19.

The intensity of Rouault’s art, he said, is due to its nature as a celebration, with the artist as celebrant. It is Rouault’s vocation to be the celebrant of the constant presence of holiness in life.

He presents his art to mankind, sacrificing before the altar of the common people. His is a living, a direct painting of the state of man.

ROUAULT IS in touch with the holy, as an idea and a reality. He recognizes the existential dimension of the observer, a partaker in the art before him. Rouault is a painter of icons, of direct, explosive, vital presences in a world where Christianity is no longer to be accepted. He affirms God in a world where it has been shouted “God is dead.”

Stated Ortmeyer: “Rouault would listen to God when all that could be heard was the silence of God.”

IN THE WORLD of today there is a dangerous division between the secular and the religious; this separation, believes Rouault, should not be. The Christ and the prostitute are therefore painted together, as are the figures of clown and judge. They are part of the same world; the unity of the world is thereby affirmed.

Rouault’s work is in the Byzantine style; his paintings are not illustrations but confrontations. The icon calls the viewer into communication with the artist; it is free and real, removed from any system of essence. It exists and brings about harmony between the visible world and the world of inner light.

THE WORLD before Rouault’s canvas was not preconceived. His paintings exist by virtue of three qualities: intensity, spontaneity, and surity. The painting evolves in the act of painting, giving us not truth, but awareness. The truth of Rouault’s work is in its presence; he deals neither with abstractions nor with philosophical constructions, but with statements of reality.

Rouault was a believer, but not a believer in ideas. His was a world of immediate existence, and it was this constant presence of the world, of life, and of holiness that he sought to portray. He worshiped through experience; his life itself was an act of worship.