

# **Responding to the challenge of *DIGNITY* & *A Person's Worth* via Rousseau**

**Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame  
Study guides for gallery visits, Jan. 15-March 11, 2012**

## Art in the service of humanity

2012 is the tricentennial of the birth of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Geneva, 1712—Paris, 1778). The University of Notre Dame has partnered with Amnesty International to launch the American debut of *DIGNITY*, a photographic exhibit on poverty and human rights first unveiled in Paris in 2010. Alongside the *DIGNITY* show (featuring portraits from Mexico, Egypt, India, Nigeria, and Macedonia) there is an exhibit called *A Person's Worth* which shows how the poor have been represented in 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. *A Person's Worth* includes drawings and photographs by artists such as Cochin, Goya, Millet, Kollwitz and Nadar. These study guides are designed to reveal linkages between the two exhibits and the writings of Rousseau.

**Q: Why is Jean-Jacques Rousseau relevant today?**

**A: He is a pioneer of humanitarian thought.**

**The study guides provide teachers and students with Rousseau quotes that are “good to think with” and engage us in the work of creating a more humane world.**

For a complete gallery of images, see DIGNITY @ ND:  
<http://www.nd.edu/~dignity/slideshow/index.html>

## 1. (Ir)Responsibility of Authority

a. Rousseau quote:

“For the vices that make social institutions necessary are the same ones that make their abuses inevitable.”

-- *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755)<sup>1</sup>

b. Visual tie-in to DIGNITY:

*MEXICO*, “Soldier at checkpoint, 48th battalion of the Mexican army” (2008, photograph by Guillaume Herbaut). The soldier peers at observers through the slats of a checkpoint blocking travelers on a road in Guerrero. His battalion is suspected by human rights groups of committing rape, torture and summary executions against indigenous peoples. His cold look represents the corruption of authority.



“Soldier at checkpoint”



*The Alms Giver*

c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”:

*The Alms Giver* (18<sup>th</sup> century, engraving by Pier Leone Ghezzi). A well-dressed priest looks off indifferently as a beggar pleads for help. The traditional full-body portrait of the alms giver contrasts with the truncated portrait of the beggar who is represented only by his feet and crutches lying on the ground.

d. Key themes: authority; government; corruption; force; poverty; charity; religion

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 77.

## 2. Pity: Virtue or Instinct for Mutual Preservation?

### a. Rousseau quote

“Pity is a natural sentiment, which...contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species. Pity is what carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering. ... Pity is what will prevent every robust savage from robbing a weak child.”

-- *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755)<sup>2</sup>

### b. Visual tie-ins to DIGNITY:

i. *MEXICO*, “Modesta Cruz Victoriano” (2008, photograph by Guillaume Herbaut). Modesta Victoriano holds a photo of her late husband Lorenzo Fernández Ortega’s dead body. Ortega was assassinated in 2008 at the age of 39 after being kidnapped and tortured for his activism on behalf of the Me’phaa people. The woman’s lowered head, the red and black of her clothing (symbolizing blood and death), and the stark lines, which form a cross behind her, sanctify the loss of life. This portrait incites a feeling of pity and sorrowful compassion among viewers.



“Modesta Cruz Victoriano”



“Maria”

ii. *MEXICO*, “Maria” (2008, photograph by Guillaume Herbaut). Maria, age 10, holds a portrait of her father. He was assassinated by the military in 1998 while attending a meeting on behalf of local indigenous communities. She never got to meet him.

### c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”

*Überfahren (Run Over)* (1910-13, soft ground etching, by Käthe Kollwitz). In this image of a dead child being carried by two hunched adult figures, the public crowd follows and mourns, filling the entire frame. You can feel the movement of the scene in the flowing lines of the

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 55.

woman's dress and the horizontal lines of the background. The lowered heads and the white of the child's clothing sanctify the people's mourning.



*Überfahren (Run Over)*

d. Key words: children; pity; compassion; violence; murder; activism

### 3. A Call to Action

#### a. Rousseau quote:

“Frequency of physical punishment is always a sign of weakness or torpor in the government. There is no wicked man who could not be made good for something. One has the right to put to death, even as an example, only someone who cannot be preserved without danger.”

-- *On the Social Contract* (1762)<sup>3</sup>

#### b. Visual tie-in to DIGNITY

*MEXICO*, “Raúl Lucas Lucía” (2008, photograph by Guillaume Herbaut). Raúl Lucas Lucía, a leader of the Organization for the Future of the Mixtec People (OFPM), shows the position that he was forced to hold when soldiers beat him in November 2003. His testimonial explains the situation in the *DIGNITY* catalogue. On February 22, 2009, the body of Raúl Lucas Lucía was found at Ayutla de los Libres with the body of another human rights defender. They had been abducted by armed men posing as policemen during a public demonstration. A short time before, Raúl Lucas Lucía had met a delegation from Amnesty International.



“Raúl Lucas Lucía”



*Paris Catacombs*

#### c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”

*Paris Catacombs* (1862, albumen print, by Nadar). The revolutionary patriots buried on this spot had been shot by royal troops near the Pont Neuf during spontaneous political demonstrations in August 1788. Nadar was the first person to photograph underground, and to bring republican memorials such as this one to light. Originally named Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, Nadar sympathized with the socialists of the Second Empire, many of whom he photographed.

#### d. Key Themes: revolution; violence; government; activism; murder; punishment

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 160.

#### 4. Government and Development

##### a. Rousseau quote:

“Recall that town walls are made from the mere debris of rural houses. With each palace I see being erected in the capital, I believe I see an entire countryside turned into hovels.”

-- *On the Social Contract* (1762)<sup>4</sup>

##### b. Visual tie-in to DIGNITY:

*NIGERIA*, “Workman in front of offices of Mike Adenuga” (2008, photograph by Michaël Zumstein). This juxtaposition of a working man holding a shovel in front of the giant, new corporate headquarters of a wealthy real estate investor captures the growing disparity between rich and poor in Lagos. The skewed perspective makes the building seem huge from all angles. As the catalogue explains, developers are destroying hovels to build up wealth and thereby forcing people to move into already overpopulated slums.



“Workman in front of offices of Mike Adenuga”



*La Rue de Marmouset*

##### c. Visual tie-ins to “A Person’s Worth”:

*La Rue de Marmouset (Old Paris)* (1862, etching, by Maxime Lalanne). In this etching of pre-Haussmann Paris (before old neighborhoods were razed to make room for new boulevards), archaic buildings loom over a human figure dressed in black. The buildings crowd the narrow street and create a claustrophobic feeling.

##### d. Key Themes: Urban life; government; suffering; poverty; housing; overcrowding

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 194.

## 5. Crimes of Property & Movements of Resistance

a. Rousseau quote:

“The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: ‘Do not listen to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!’”

-- *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755)<sup>5</sup>

b. Visual tie-ins to DIGNITY:

i. **NIGERIA**, “Residential neighborhood, Maroko, Lagos.” (2008, photograph by Michaël Zumstein). Maroko is one of the largest slums in West Africa. Forced evictions are frequent in places like this, as oil companies buy up the petroleum-rich land and rob the poor of their homes.



“Residential neighborhood, Maroko, Lagos”

ii. **INDIA**, “Abhay Sahoo (activist and member of the Indian Communist Party) speaking to a demonstration of villagers against the POSCO project” (2008, photograph by Johann Rousselot).

iii. **INDIA**, “On the forest path that leads to the home of the Dongria Kondh tribe. Kalahandi District, Orissa” (2008, photograph by Johann Rousselot).

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 60.



“Abhay Sahoo”



“On the forest path”

These two images reveal the importance of the land for indigenous peoples of Eastern India, and the efforts they are making to protect their ancestral home from industrial development and the environmental ravages it leaves in its wake.

c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”:

*The Great Shepherdess* (etching, by Jean-François Millet, circa 1862). This portrait of a simple shepherdess suggests the relationship between the woman and the earth she depends upon for work. It raises questions in the eyes of viewers: Who does she work for, her family or distant landowners? Does her serene attitude in this bucolic setting capture the woman’s actual state of mind, or is it an idealization imagined by the artist?



*The Great Shepherdess*

d. Key Themes: Injustice; property rights; land; civil society; protest

## 6. The Shifting sands of power and need

### a. Rousseau Quote

“Since nothing is less stable among men than those external relationships which chance brings about more often than wisdom, and which are called weakness or power, wealth or poverty, human establishments appear ... to be based on piles of shifting sand.”

-- Preface to *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755)<sup>6</sup>

### b. Visual tie-in to DIGNITY:

*EGYPT*, “The Manchiyet Nasser district of Cairo” (2008, photograph by Philippe Brault). This shocking image of the bustling, garbage-strewn Manchiyet Nasser district shows the results of landslides which have destroyed many homes in the slum and killed hundreds of people.



“The Manchiyet Nasser district of Cairo”



*La Rue de Marmouset*

### c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”:

*La Rue de Marmouset (Old Paris)* (1862, etching, by Maxime Lalanne). The composition of this etching mirrors the composition of Brault’s photograph above. Together they evoke the crowded, airless squalor of urban poverty.

### d. Key themes: chance; history; power; poverty; urban life

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 36.

## 7. The Social Contract ... and the Disabled?

### a. Rousseau quote:

“The social contract establishes among the citizens an equality of such a kind that they all commit themselves under the same conditions and should all enjoy the same rights.”

--*On the Social Contract* (1762)<sup>7</sup>

### b. Visual tie-in to DIGNITY

MACEDONIA, “Purmiseva Remzija (31) and her son Abdi Durmishev (10)” (2008, photograph by Jean-François Joly). Abdi is missing two phalanges on his hand as result of his mother’s beating at the hands of the Macedonian police when he was in utero. Although Purmiseva is one of the few people to receive compensation from the European Court of Justice for the attack (3,000 euros, or about \$4,250), she remains terrified by violent memories.



“Purmiseva Remzija and her son Abdi Durmishev”



*Crippled Beggars*

### c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”:

*Crippled Beggars* (1919, woodcut by Ernst Barlach). In its stark juxtaposition of the indifferent passersby in the background and the suffering individual whose face is raised to us as he crawls along the ground, out of the frame and into our lives, this woodcut demands a response. What do we the viewers owe to people who are grappling with poverty and pain?

### d. Key Themes: children; humanity; “just” compensation; disabilities; liberty; violence; charity

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1987), 158.

## 8. Solidarity Between People: An Illusory Goal?

### a. Rousseau quote:

“We will be our own servants, in order to be our own masters. Time will fly unheeded, our meal will be our interval of rest during the heat of the day. If some peasant comes our way, returning from his work with his tools over his shoulder, I will cheer his heart with kindly words, and a glass or two of good wine, which will help him to bear his poverty more cheerfully; and I too shall have the joy of feeling my heart stirred within me, and I should say to myself—I too am a man.”

-- *Emile, or On Education*, Book 4<sup>8</sup>

### b. Visual tie-in to DIGNITY

*EGYPT*, “Ihaab on her wedding day. Ezbet Al-Haggana district, Cairo” (2008, photograph by Philippe Brault). Describing this moment, Philippe Brault wrote: “It was dark, completely dark, in the alleys of el-Haggana. The men set up the light. ... I posed the tripod while shaking the dozens of hands held out to me. I took in the groom’s eyes, proud and full of emotion. They posed for four seconds. Click. I savored the privilege to be there among them.

Ihaab and her husband were both born in el-Haggana. Like most of the young people here, they do not intend to leave after getting married because one does not leave one’s own like that. In el-Haggana, people stick together in order to survive. That night, Ihaab’s father used all of his savings to rent the garlands. The young men risked their lives to climb the massive pylons to light the party. The women filled the jerry-cans with water.”



“Ihaab on her wedding day”

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, translated and edited by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (Hanover, NH : Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 318.

c. Visual tie-in to “A Person’s Worth”

*Line of Milkmaids* (1832, pen and black ink on cream paper, by John White Abbott). This drawing of women heading to work endows the subjects with a lightness and beauty that is refreshing among the lower-class figures featured in *A Person’s Worth*. Even though some look a little tired, their faces are not devoid of pleasure. The detailed profiles and the fashionable flourishes on the women’s hats stress their femininity.



*Line of Milkmaids*

d. Key Themes: dignity, beauty, solidarity, humanity

**Cloud Categories**

dignity      beauty solidarity      humanity      injustice      property rights      land  
 civil society      social protest      children      pity      compassion  
 activism      “just” compensation      disabilities      liberty      violence      charity  
 power      chance history      poverty      urban life overcrowding  
 corruption      government      suffering      housing  
 revolution      murder      punishment      authority      charity  
 religion