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Two *noirs* with religious themes

CITATION

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, 'Two *noirs* with religious themes',
in *Odilon Redon and Andries Bonger: 36 works from the Van Gogh
Museum collection*, Amsterdam 2022

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Two *noirs* with religious themes

Cats. 18–19

Cat. 18 Odilon Redon, *Religion or Mystical Veil*, c. 1892. Various charcoals with fixative application on cream wove paper, 49.1 × 35.7 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1061N1996

Cat. 19 Odilon Redon, *Temple with Barbarian Idols*, 1898. Various charcoals, black pastel and fixative application on cream wove paper, 51.2 × 37.8 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1062N1996

Charcoal drawings with religious themes by Odilon Redon are multilayered in both composition and technique, heightening the mysticism of the motif and sometimes even surpassing it. This is certainly true of *Religion* and *Temple with Barbarian Idols*, which ended up in the Van Gogh Museum via Andries Bongers's collection. The spatial effect of these two drawings is complex and impenetrable, with the result that viewers lose themselves in another dimension, far from the visible world.

The technique is also difficult to fathom. As he did in his earlier drawings, the artist applied countless layers of black and brown oiled charcoal. This method explains the dozens of pinholes at the edges of both drawings. Redon seems to have pinned up the sheets again and again in order to apply fixative, which, after drying, allowed him to go on drawing without smudging his work.¹ By applying black pastel over the greyish and brown oiled charcoal in *Temple*, he made the subtly drawn figures more distinguishable in the darkness of the temple's arches (fig. 7c). In some places the multilayered charcoal can no longer be seen beneath the black pigment of the pastel, but it is precisely these concealed passages that Redon felt added depth to the image and enhanced its spiritual dimension.

In addition to applying new layers, Redon created sparse lighting effects in the drawings by removing some of the drawing material.² In *Religion*, the subtle tree that emerges at the bottom of the sheet is the result of Redon's use of a fine needle to lift some of the drawing material. He made the mysterious patterns that wind across the bottom of the image by using his fingers moistened with fixative to dab away the charcoal. By drastically erasing the charcoal in a couple of carefully chosen places in *Temple*, Redon produced a dramatic contrast of light and dark, which is highly reminiscent of the etchings by Rembrandt that he so admired (fig. 7d).

Redon owned a large collection of photographic reproductions of works by Rembrandt and seized every opportunity to study the master's work.³ In the correspondence between Redon and Bongers, the subject of Rembrandt often came up. Indeed, Redon's perception of Holland largely coincided with his admiration of the Old Master, whose temperament and talent he saw as inextricably linked to his native northern climate.⁴ Bongers sent Redon a number of reproductions for his collection.

¹ Technical examinations carried out 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

² From the 1890s on, Redon continued to remove drawing material, but not nearly so much as before: minimally, but very effectively, and with a dramatic impact. See Harriet Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials 1870', in Douglas W. Druick et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal Academy of Arts), 1994–95, pp. 353–77, p. 364.

³ In Redon's correspondence with Andries Bongers, the 'communal admiration of the great spirit of Rembrandt' forms a red thread (Odilon Redon, letter 57 to Andries Bongers, 25 October 1898, Paris). Rembrandt crops up dozens of times in their letters. The two men sent each other postcards with reproductions of the master's work, and on numerous occasions Bongers sent Redon high-quality

reproductions and other Rembrandt memorabilia.

⁴ See Pierre Pinchon, "'Je suis né dans le Midi, avec un brin d'âme du Nord". Théorie des climats et déterminisme chez Redon d'après sa correspondance avec Bongers', in Dario Gamboni and Merel van Tilburg (eds.), *'Sans adieu'. Andries Bongers – Odilon Redon, correspondance 1894–1916*, 2 vols., Paris 2022, vol. 2, pp. 719–53.



Cat. 18 Odilon Redon, *Religion or Mystical Veil*



Cat. 19 Odilon Redon, *Temple with Barbarian Idols*



Fig. 7a Cat. 18 in a reconstructed matting and its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 7b Cat. 19 in its original frame by Boyer

In response to such a delivery, Redon explained in 1895 how his appreciation of Rembrandt was founded primarily on the ‘moral life’ with which he managed to imbue his shadows. Redon wrote: ‘Thank you for sending this Rembrandt, a work of old age, no doubt, but still beautiful. It goes to expand my collection, to which you have already contributed. I often look at it. Rembrandt, along with Leonardo, is the greatest. He gave shadow a moral life, as Michelangelo did in statuary. And everything that has come of chiaroscuro since is owing to him. He is one of the very greatest’.⁵ When he sold *Temple* to Bonger in November 1902, Redon described the work in his account book as a ‘chiaroscuro drawing’, and that expression, by his own account, could only have come from Rembrandt.⁶ Thus Redon must have thought that the ‘moral’ importance of this drawing derived primarily from the abstract interplay of light and dark, and only secondarily from the imaginary scene of ‘barbarian’ idols, demons and priests in a dark temple. These images, which are difficult to place – seemingly both churchly and pagan – heighten the mystical sensation created by the dramatic effects of light, without being anchored in the Bible or the Christian tradition, or even a specific religion.⁷

Religion, on the other hand, offers clear points of reference to the Bible. From the 1890s on, the artist increasingly made use of iconography rooted in the Christian tradition. This made his drawings somewhat more accessible and therefore recognizable to a broader public.⁸ Thus the ‘mystic veil’ could very well be the sudarium that Veronica used to wipe the perspiration from Christ’s face during his painful

(eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), 2011. Referred to as ‘Interior of temple with barbarian idols. Chiaroscuro drawing’ (*Intérieur de temple avec des idoles barbares*. Dessin de clair obscur’).

⁷ See also Fred Leeman, ‘Redon’s Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism’, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/ London 1994–95*, pp. 215–36.

⁸ Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, ‘In the Public Eye 1879–1889’, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/ London 1994–95*, pp. 120–74, pp. 172–73.

⁵ Letter 22 (7 August 1895), Listrac: ‘Merci pour cet envoi du Rembrandt de sa vieillesse, sans doute, mais encore beau. Il grossira la collection où vous avez déjà placé quelque chose. Je la regarde souvent. Ce maître là est le plus grand, avec Léonard. Il a donné la vie morale aux ombres, comme Michel-Ange l’avait fait

dans la statuaire. Et tout ce que l’on a tiré du clair-obscur depuis lui, vient de lui. C’est un grandissime.’

⁶ Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d’Odilon Redon: Second cahier*, Ms 42 820, November 1902, no. 522 published as CD-ROM in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.*

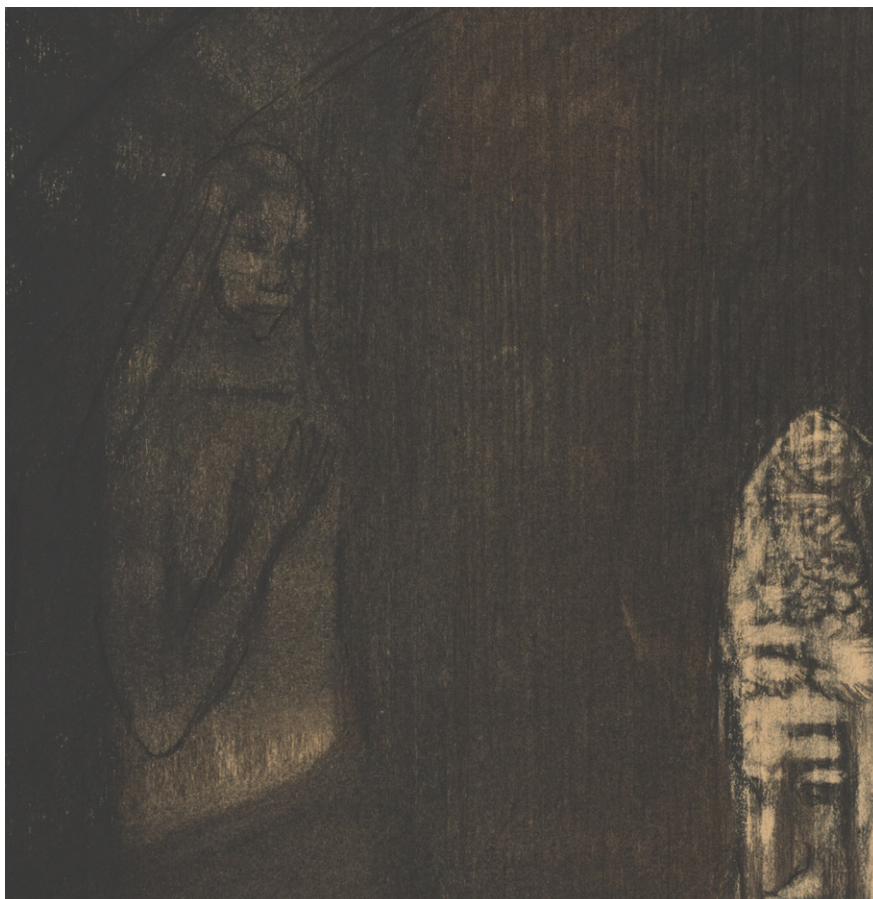


Fig. 7c Detail of cat. 19

climb of Golgotha. The composition comprising a picture within a picture is, moreover, in keeping with the pictorial tradition of this motif, as is apparent from a comparison with, for example, a French baroque painting by Philippe de Champaigne (1602–1674) (fig. 7e). But why did Redon choose to portray the face of a hollow-eyed saintly woman and not that of Christ himself? And what does the tree in the foreground stand for? The later resurrection?⁹ Redon never opted for a literal borrowing from the Bible. He selected only certain elements for his highly personal compositions, which portray a mystical state of mind or vision rather than a religious narrative.¹⁰

Andries Bongers managed to acquire the charcoal drawing in 1903 at the sale of Edmond Deman, the Belgian publisher and collector of Redon's work. He wrote to the artist immediately, to tell him that he had acquired the 'very beautiful' drawing *Mysticité*, but Redon had no idea which work Bongers was referring to.¹¹ He therefore suspected that Deman had given it that title himself. It was not until 1905, when Bongers sent the artist a high-quality reproduction that he had commissioned from the firm of Van Meurs, that the penny dropped.¹² Redon was wildly enthusiastic about this unexpected reunion with a drawing from an earlier period. In 1905 the artist was working mainly in colour, and the *noirs* were a closed chapter within his oeuvre. He was impressed by the quality of the isography, which to him perfectly

⁹ Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98, vol. 1 (1992): *Portraits et figures*, no. 401.

¹⁰ The motifs Redon derived from the Bible crop up repeatedly in other drawings and prints, but always with different connotations. Redon made

a recognizable sudarium of Saint Veronica as the opening image of the print series *Songes* (Mellerio 110) with the caption 'it was a veil, an imprint' ('était une voile, une empreinte') and made several drawings in which male and female faces float like a vision on a cloth; see Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq

1992–98, vol. 1 (1992): *Portraits et figures*, nos. 405, 409, 482, 485, 490.

¹¹ Letters 108 (28 June 1903), Amsterdam, and 109 (30 June 1903), no location.

¹² Letter 129 (15 January 1905), Amsterdam.

¹³ Letter 130 (17 January 1905), no location.



Fig. 7e Philippe de Champaigne, *La sainte face of Le voile de Sainte Véronique*, date unknown. Oil on canvas, 70.2 × 56 cm. Private collection

Fig. 7d Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Entombment*, c. 1654. Etching and drypoint on paper, 4th state of 4, 21 × 16 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

captured the tone and texture of the drawing paper and the softness of the original, and even exuded its spirituality.¹³ The artist was so pleased with it that he sent Van Meurs an enthusiastic letter, which the dealer conveniently quoted in an article on his isographies.¹⁴ Redon saw the sale and exhibition of such artistic reproductions as an opportunity to bring his rare early drawings, which lay hidden in various private collections, into circulation again, thus rescuing them from obsolescence and oblivion.¹⁵ At Bongers's request, Redon subsequently gave the work a new title: *Voile mystique (Mystical Veil)*.¹⁶

That these drawings held a mystical attraction for Bongers emerges from a letter to the artist. He had added *Temple* to a 'magnificent ensemble' of Redon's *noirs* in his study, above the sofa. Even though the collector spent evening after evening with his Redons, he managed to discover something new every time he gazed at the 'profound and mysterious' temple.¹⁷

¹⁴ 'Isografie "Van Meurs"', offprint *De Hollandsche revue* (September 1907), p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 'I have nothing but compliments to give you for these beautiful reproductions. I find in them all the delicateness, the nuances, the finesse, all the preciousness that the material of my paper and chalk gave me [...] Really, I'm impressed. This result also reassures me of the thought that a unique drawing, consequently exposed to accidents or perhaps disappearing, is saved in this way from annihilation by such a perfect method of reproduction' ('Je n'ai que des compliments à vous faire pour ces belles reproductions. J'y trouve toutes les délicatesses,

les nuances, la finesse, tout le précieux que m'a donnée la matière de mon papier et fusain [...] Enfin, j'en suis ravi. Ce résultat me rassure aussi à la pensée qu'un dessin unique, exposé conséquemment aux accidents ou à disparaître peut être ainsi sauvé de l'anéantissement par ce mode si parfait de reproduction').

¹⁶ Letter 130.

¹⁷ Letter 93 (1 February 1903), Amsterdam: 'What a beautiful drawing *Temple* is, how profound and mysterious! I see new things in it every time.' ('Quel beau dessin, le temple, profond et mystérieux! J'y aperçois des choses nouvelles chaque fois.')

CAT. 18**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Edmond Deman Brussels; probably consigned by Edmond Deman to auction Brussels, Deman, E. (*Livres anciens et modernes, dessins & estampes*), referred to as 'Mysticité', purchased by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, 13–16 May 1903; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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CAT. 19**PROVENANCE**

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 100 French francs, November 1902; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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