

14

Decorative panels

CITATION

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, 'Decorative panels', in *Odilon Redon and Andries Bonger: 36 works from the Van Gogh Museum collection*, Amsterdam 2022

14 Decorative panels

(Cats. 34–35)

Cat. 34 Odilon Redon, *Buddha*, 1904. Distemper (*peinture à la colle*) on canvas, 159.8 × 121.1 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), so465N1996

Cat. 35 Odilon Redon, *The Red Tree*, 1905. Distemper (*peinture à la colle*) on canvas, 173 × 87.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), so464N1996

The two decorative glue-based paintings in distemper *The Red Tree* and *Buddha* are among the highlights of the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. All the same, it is worth noting that these works were originally intended for a more intimate viewing experience in the home of a collector. Redon was keenly aware that the effect produced by his works was influenced by their immediate surroundings, and it is questionable whether he would have approved of their placement in a public museum. After *Buddha* was transported to the house of Andries Bonger on the Stadhouderskade in Amsterdam, Redon sighed: ‘How they change when one moves them! How sensitive they seem to me, and affected by the things that surround them. Sometimes that has me worrying about their constitution. But I know how much your yellow wallpaper improves and suits them. There is such torment in the thought that their fate is rendered precarious by the kindly or hostile light that they are bound to receive throughout their allotted life!’¹

What was it like for Bonger to return home after a long day at work and stand face to face with these man-sized decorative panels? *Buddha* took up the entire wall next to the window on the Stadhouderskade. Here Bonger could sit on a summer’s day and watch the shadows of the foliage outside moving across the canvas, or, on a winter’s evening, see the candlelight flickering on its surface. He wrote to Redon about the ‘endlessly renewed surprises’ the work gave him, and connected this with his enjoyment of the atmosphere in his rooms on Christmas Eve: ‘If, on Christmas Night, you had seen all my rooms with discreet corner-lighting and candles in the chandelier, you would have been thrilled, I think. How happy I feel there, of an evening.’²

From 1900 on, Redon gave his most faithful admirers a matchless aesthetic experience by painting large-scale decorations for their interiors. Although the artist did not make any customized decorative paintings for Bonger’s home, as he did for a number of other collectors, he did allow him to purchase several important decorative panels, including *The Red Tree* and *Buddha*.³ By having them framed with thin wooden slats and without glass, Redon clearly distinguished these works from his easel paintings, which he put under glass in gilt frames (figs. 14a–b).⁴ He advised his collectors to place the panels in recesses in the wall, to strengthen the effect of a wall painting.

¹ Letter 137 (8 August 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: ‘Combien ils changent en les déplaçant! Combien ils me paraissent sensibles, et touchés des choses qui les entourent. Cela m’effraie parfois sur leur constitution. Mais je sais combien votre tenture jaune les exalte et leur vont. Quel tourment que la pensée de leur sort rendu fragile par le jour, bon ou néfaste, qu’ils sont appelés à recevoir dans leur durée!’

² Letter 157 (31 December 1905), Amsterdam:

‘Si vous aviez vu, le soir de Noël, mes pièces éclairées discrètement dans les coins, avec des bougies au lustre, vous auriez été ravi, je pense. Je me sens là heureux, le soir.’

³ In 1903 Bonger acquired a decorative panel at Redon’s exhibition at Galeries Durand-Ruel: W2517,

now in Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede. Between 1906 and 1908 Redon produced a screen commissioned by Bonger for his home: W2524, now in Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

⁴ Letters 136 (21 July 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne and 139 (14 August 1905), Amsterdam.



Cat. 34 Odilon Redon, *Buddha*



Cat. 35 Odilon Redon, *The Red Tree*



Fig. 14a Cat. 34 in its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 14b Cat. 35 in its original frame by Boyer

The Nabis inspired their older artist friend to broaden his oeuvre as *peintre-décorateur*. Redon and the artists of this group – the latest avant-garde – portrayed and influenced one another.⁵ Probably at Redon's urging, Bonger went to visit the patron Alexandre Natanson (1867–1936) in order to see Edouard Vuillard's (1868–1940) series of nine decorative panels, *Jardins publics* (1894), installed in his home. Bonger was deeply impressed: 'They are ravishing, incomparably charming. What a joy to have those landscapes constantly before one's eyes', he wrote to Redon (fig. 14c).⁶

When creating his decorative panels, Redon felt free to improvise more so than in other media, owing to their larger format, their ornamental function and their specific destination in the home of a particular admirer.⁷ Redon described to the collector Gabriel Frizeau how, when making his decorative painting *The Window* of 1907, he let his brush dance freely over the canvas from one corner to the other without being led by a clear-cut subject or a well-thought-out composition: 'thinking of nothing beforehand – no, of nothing, only of the desire to apply harmonious colours and lines' (fig. 14d).⁸ This manner of working, which also could have been used in *The Red Tree* and *Buddha*, is in keeping with the primarily decorative function of these works, in which hierarchy in the composition is of less importance, and meaning has been rendered subordinate to such formalist qualities as colour, line and harmony.

But just as he did in the rest of his work, Redon was searching for spiritual depth in his decorative panels. His organic manner of working enabled him to tap into his subconscious, the sacred source of his inspiration. Although he did in fact make summary underdrawings, all kinds of overpaintings can be detected in the works, such as a second, incipient trunk on the right of the red tree, and branches fanning

⁵ Ursula Perucchi-Petri, "'Jeunes Peintres, mes amis': Odilon Redon and the Nabis", in Margret Stuffmann and Max Hollein (eds.), *Odilon Redon: As in a Dream*, exh. cat. Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 103–12, pp. 107–9.

⁶ Letter 75 (22 July 1901), Amsterdam: 'Elles sont de toute beauté, d'un charme incomparable. Quelle joie que d'avoir ces paysages constamment sous les yeux.'

⁷ Gloria Groom, 'The Late Work', 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. 305–32, p. 312.

⁸ Letter from Odilon Redon to Gabriel Frizeau (8 January 1908), translated in Groom, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 421, n. 41.



Fig. 14c Edouard Vuillard, *Jardins publics*, 1894. Five of nine decorative panels, distemper (*peinture à la colle*) on canvas, together approx. 214 × 480 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 14d Odilon Redon, *The Window*, c. 1907. Oil on canvas, 81 × 61.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Ian Woodner Family Collection

out above the Buddha. Even the figures themselves were laid down with exploratory movements, with old contours allowed to stay and previous arms still clearly visible. Redon seems to have made little effort to cover up these passages; on the contrary, he seems to have embraced them as inseparable parts of the finished piece. As in his other artworks, they lend added depth to the composition and reveal the artist's associative working method.⁹

Redon's connection with his subconscious during the creative process was fuelled by his unusual choice of glue-based distemper (*peinture à la colle*). In this technique, the paint dries extremely fast, forcing the artist to work quickly, because once the paint has dried, it becomes gritty and difficult to apply.¹⁰ Nor is it possible to work wet-in-wet, so any corrections have to be made with a new layer of paint.¹¹ According to Redon, distemper painting demanded 'all the freshness of improvisation and first thoughts'.¹² Once again, Redon took his cue from the decorative panels of his friend Vuillard, who was one of the few artists to adopt the traditional technique of *peinture à la colle* to achieve matt, fresco-like paintings, such as the *Jardins publics* series. For every passage the artist had to dip his brush into a pot of heated animal glue and then into dry pigments before placing it on the canvas. This made the execution rather laborious, but Redon was extremely satisfied with the technique. He was even 'astonished this kind of painting [...] doesn't tempt artists more generally', because one could quickly fill large surfaces with it, and the pure pigments produced magnificent tones, which in his opinion only grew more beautiful over the years.¹³ The matt effect, the porous texture and the radiant colours mean that the distemper is sometimes barely distinguishable from pastel chalk.¹⁴

Redon worked not only quickly but also thinly and openly, so that the support shines through in both paintings. In *The Red Tree* he used the brown tone of the ungrounded linen in order to push the meditating Buddha as much as possible towards the background, into the tree trunk, causing the other passages – the light blue sky, the bright white and pink blossoms and the red branches – to come to the fore. In *Buddha* – which was in fact covered with a thin, bright white layer of ground that contributes everywhere to the composition – Redon reserved the most radiant and colourful hues for the fantasy flora and fauna surrounding the meditating Buddha.¹⁵ He did not hesitate to use oil paint and possibly other media for these motifs, making them appear more intensely coloured in the foreground.¹⁶ At the same time, Redon succeeded in connecting the Buddha to the imaginary flora in the foreground. The Buddha's arms and hands merge almost seamlessly with the vegetation, and the strokes above his head suggest the energetic vibrations of meditation, which pass into the foliage of the red tree.

It is striking that, in both panels, the clouds of fanciful flowers that appear to stream from the Buddha's immeasurable consciousness slowly change into a more realistic tree, which Redon may well have drawn from life in his early years on the family estate of Peyrelebadé (see fig. 14g for the lithograph of 1892 after the drawing of 1865).¹⁷ In all of his writings, Redon continued to stress that his own recorded observations of nature provided the necessary building blocks for his fantasy landscapes.

9 See entry 9, 'Family Pastels', cats. 21–22. See Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002, pp. 70–1.

10 Harriet Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, pp. 353–77, p. 376.

11 René Boitelle, Klaas Jan van den Berg and Eva Goetz, 'A Technical Examination of Odilon Redon's Paintings from the Bonger Collection, Van Gogh

Museum', *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art*, vol. 3 (2005), pp. 66–81, p. 72.

12 Letter 156 (18 December 1905), no location: 'C'est de la détrempe; elle exige, à mon avis, toute la fraîcheur de l'improvisation et du premier jet'.

13 Ibid. 'I'm astonished this kind of painting with glue-size doesn't tempt artists more generally. Perhaps because its use is a little bit complicated and

tedious – and checks the wilder reaches of one's fantasy for mixing things up. But once you've got started on big surfaces, you can produce quickly and extensively.' ('Je suis étonné que cette peinture à la colle ne tente pas plus généralement les artistes. Peut-être à cause de son emploi un peu compliqué et ennuyeux – et qui comprime les égarements de la fantaisie des mélanges. Mais une fois entré sur de grandes surfaces, on produirait vite et beaucoup.')

14 Redon wrote in 1908 that tempera was 'a material tantalizingly like pastel, I've had a good result with it' ('une matière très appatantée au pastel, j'en ai eu un bon résultat'), see Stratis, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, p. 431, quoted in note 50. See also Boitelle, Van den Berg and Goetz 2005, pp. 72–73.

15 Boitelle, Van den Berg and Goetz 2005, p. 69.

16 Ibid., p. 73.

17 Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, pp. 215–36, p. 230; Barbara Larson, 'From Botany to Belief: Odilon Redon and Armand Clavaud', in Margret Stuffmann and Max Hollein (eds.), *Odilon Redon: As in a Dream*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 95–101, p. 100.



Figs. 14e–f Pair of commercial postcards sent by Odilon Redon to Andries Bonger, featuring Krishna, dated 6 May 1913, and Pythagoras in Egypt, dated August 1913. Andries Bonger Archive, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

At this time, science was opening up hidden worlds, which nourished Redon's imaginings of the fantastical and the spiritual, and inspired panels such as these depicting the meditations of the Eastern Buddha. His interest in the Darwinian theory of the origin of species comes to the fore in the imaginary forms of vegetation in the foreground, which look like organisms in various stages of evolution, somewhere between flowers, microbes and insects.¹⁸

Buddhism was likewise a source of fascination for Redon and the literary and mystical circles in which he moved. His wide-ranging, almost eclectic use of elements from various world religions can be considered a form of syncretism, a free-thinking movement that sought the common denominators among the different belief systems.¹⁹ Redon shared his 'omnivorous' broad interest in 'disparate cultural references' with Bonger by sending him picture postcards of Krishna and Pythagoras above an Egyptian sphinx, pyramid and hieroglyphs (figs. 14e–f).²⁰ When the artist Maurice Denis asked him in 1911 to take part in an exhibition of Christian art, Redon replied that he did not wish to advertise himself as a purely Catholic artist and that his elements and figures were not only taken from Christianity but also freely drawn from other religions, such as Greek mythology, Hinduism and Buddhism, without impinging on the spiritual questions and piety that drove him: 'I have also represented Buddha; and that image, and its symbol, still moves the hearts of an innumerable part of mankind, and these subjects (if one can call them subjects) are as sacred to me as others.'²¹

The artist shared this synthetic approach with the French writer and theosophist Edouard Schuré (1841–1929), who in 1889 published his masterpiece *Les Grands initiés*, inscribing Redon's copy with a handwritten dedication.²² In this history of humankind's quest for universal truths, Schuré searched for the spiritual, philosophical and religious values that bind the various world religions,²³ and by connecting the 'initiates' Buddha, Socrates and Christ, as spiritual leaders, he influenced a number of artists.²⁴ In 1885 Schuré had published a study on the

¹⁸ Perucchi-Petri, in Frankfurt 2007, pp. 108–9. See also Gamboni 2002, p. 69.

¹⁹ On Redon's syncretism, see, among others, Leeman in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 215–36; Larson, in Stuffmann and Hollein 2007, pp. 95–102.

²⁰ Maika Pollack, 'Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin, and Primitivist Color', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 102, no. 3 (2020), pp. 77–103, DOI: 10.1080/00043079.2020.1711488. Accessed in January 2022.

²¹ Redon to Denis, 4 July 1911, Centre de documentation du musée Maurice Denis, Ms 12561, translated in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 233–34.

²² See Fred Leeman, *André Bonger, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

²³ See also Leeman, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95; Larson, in Stuffmann and Hollein 2007.

²⁴ Edouard Schuré, *Les grands initiés*, Paris 1889.



Fig. 14g Odilon Redon, *Tree*, 1892. Lithograph in black on China paper on wove paper, 40.4 × 32.1 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

legend of Buddha in the *Revue des deux mondes*.²⁵ He sketched the birth of the holy Buddha, meditating under a tree against the backdrop of a fairy-tale India, full of misty rainforests, screeching peacocks and ‘veiled beauties’. Buddha withdraws in isolation and asceticism to sit under a tree, sinking into the depths of his being in order to fathom the highest truth of human existence. Indeed, this is how Buddha appears on Redon’s panels. Schuré writes: ‘Because his ascetic glance – gentle and piercing, subtle and profound, like his doctrine – is [the glance of] one of those who confront us with the greatest insistence with the biggest question of the hereafter: *To be or not to be!*’²⁶

Redon was driven in his art by a similar quest for this all-encompassing mystery of life. His most keen collectors wrestled with the same questions and were therefore attracted to his work.²⁷ So, too, Bonger, who bought Redon’s *Buddha* for 700 francs, which was a considerably higher sum than the 300 francs he paid around the same time for *The Red Tree*. In the seclusion of his home, these panels afforded Bonger an opportunity to escape the concrete reality of daily life and to lose himself in a parallel universe, which had sprung from the artist’s very core.

²⁵ Edouard Schuré, ‘Le Bouddha et sa légende’, *Revue des deux mondes* (1 August 1885), pp. 589–622. On p. 622: ‘This singular rapport has become highly relevant today. It gives us a premonition of the great unity that dominates the religious development of humanity. Whether we place ourselves on the peaks of the Himalayas or the heights of Galilee, we must recognize that the Buddha is a brother of Christ and that the light of Asia is a sister of the light of the Occident’ (‘Ce seul rapport devient aujourd’hui d’un

intérêt puissant. Il nous fait pressentir la grande unité qui domine le développement religieux de l’humanité. Que nous nous plaçons sur les cimes de l’Himalaya ou sur les hauteurs de la Galilée, nous devons reconnaître que le Bouddha est un frère du Christ et que la lumière de l’Asie est sœur de la lumière de l’Occident’).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 593: ‘Car son regard d’ascète, doux et perçant, subtil et profond comme sa doctrine, est de ceux qui posent devant nous avec le plus

d’insistance la grande question de l’au-delà: *Être ou n’être pas!*’

²⁷ This was also true of the wine grower Gabriel Frizeau, who corresponded from Bordeaux with Redon about philosophical and religious subjects. In a review of the Salon d’automne of 1904, he read about *Buddha* and decided, merely on the basis of this text and the title *Jeunesse de Bouddha priant devant la nature* (*Youth of Buddha, Praying before Nature*), that he wished to own the work. Frizeau wanted to hang it next to his monumental work by Gauguin, which also treated such elementary questions as ‘Where did we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?’ (‘D’où venons-nous, que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?’; see the painting under this title at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston). In the end he decided not to buy it because he thought its price, 800 francs, was too high. See Leeman 2007.

Redon's depiction of the Buddha is not the only element that speaks of his fascination for Eastern cultures. In its format and composition, and in its lack of three-dimensionality and perspective, *The Red Tree* is reminiscent of Japanese scroll paintings or folding screens. Just as Japanese screens were painted on a golden ground serving as an 'abstract space so flexible that it could be air above or sand below', Redon used the canvas to realize this removal from reality.²⁸ The red tree's blossoms fan out like an abstract decorative pattern across the entire upper half of the canvas, as if it were the panel of a Japanese screen. The influence of Eastern wall paintings is also clearly visible in the radiant colours: the golden tone of the garments, the deep red of the trees and the vivid hues of the flowers. Whereas in Western traditions colours are usually applied mimetically, the use of colour in Asiatic art presented Redon with an example for creating a purely imaginary, divine world.²⁹ 'Eastern' and 'Asiatic' are rather broad terms, catch-all receptacles in which various cultures can be lumped together, but these designations happen to correspond most closely to Redon's idealizing approach to 'primitive' cultures, an approach he shared with his contemporaries. Marius-Ary Leblond (pen name of George Athénas [1877–1953] and Aimé Merlo [1880–1958]) used equally generic terms when they described Redon's decorative panels as 'the hybridization of Western genius with the genius of the Orient, because Redon's imagination, filled with the impressions of faces and flowers, sculptures and prints, travels to China, Japan and to Cambodia and India.'³⁰

As an artist, Redon must have identified with Buddha, who pursued the same goal in his meditations: the fusion of every living thing in the natural and spiritual world. As Émile Cordonnier expressed it in his review of *Buddha* at the Salon d'automne, it is not the artist who is unresistingly seduced by capricious nature, but the power of his creative mind that gives imaginary nature its colour and enchantment, just as the Buddha's meditations cause the blossoms on the red tree to burgeon.³¹ While painting, the artist created a spiritual and ideal dream world of pure arabesques and colour, and arrived at 'a suggestive painted surface' that today's viewers still find conducive to dreams and meditations.³²

²⁸ Natalie Adamson, 'Japonisme and Odilon Redon's Decorative Painting', *Apollo*, vol. cxLvi (October 1997), pp. 12–21; Adamson 1997, p. 18.

²⁹ Pollack 2020. For how this offered Redon an alternative to the Western use of local colour in an artwork: 'Both Gauguin and Redon saw the exotic as a space for invention, imprecision, and imagination, rather than aiming for cultural accuracy or undertaking a precise investigation of the uses of color in any particular country. Their approach allowed them to execute bold chromatic shifts. As artists, they remade or imagined a world in new colors on canvas – a painterly parallel to the practices of fiction.' In this article Pollack quotes Edmond de Goncourt, who in 1877 wrote: 'It's curious, the revolution brought by Japanese art to a people enslaved, in the arts, to the symmetry of Greece and who, suddenly, have found passion for a plate where there is a flower which isn't perfectly in the middle, or for fabric with harmonies

not made through the transitions of halftones, but only through the savage juxtaposition of bright colors.'

³⁰ Marius-Ary Leblond, 'Le merveilleux dans la peinture: Odilon Redon', *La Revue illustrée* (20 February 1907), p. 166, translation from Pollack 2020.

³¹ Émile (Louis) Cordonnier, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *La Grande revue*, vol. 8 (15 November 1904), p. 439: 'At the foot of a sacred tree, in a yellow vapour of sunrise, in the midst of the most beautiful and exotic flowers, is a young man, still a child, in a hieratic pose of prayer, completely gilded by the light of dawn. We are far from the voluptuous temptation of Parsifal by the flower maidens in the enchanted field. It seems that

here the artist's mind had wanted another enchantment, nature seduced, dominated, reduced to servitude by this son of light' ('C'est au pied d'un arbre sacré, dans une buée jaune d'aurore, au milieu des fleurs les plus belles et les plus étranges, un jeune homme, un enfant encore, dans une pose hiératique et de prière, tout doré par cette lumière d'aube. Nous sommes loin de la tentation voluptueuse de Parsifal par les filles-fleurs dans la prairie enchantée. Il semble qu'ici, la pensée de l'artiste ait voulu un autre enchantement, la nature séduite, dominée, asservie par ce fils de lumière'). See Leeman 2007.

³² Redon (1909), quoted in Groom, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, p. 309.

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 700 French francs, August 1905; 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. 35

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 300 French francs, August 1905; 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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Fig. 14f Detail of cat. 34

