# 10 Painted flower still lifes

# CITATION

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

# 10

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Cats. 23-27

Cat. 23 Odilon Redon, Vase of Flowers (Green Vase with Poppy), c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 32.6 × 25.2 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so484N1996

Cat. 24 Odilon Redon, *Roses in a Vase on a Small Table*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 39.6 × 37.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so468N1996

Cat. 25 Odilon Redon, White Lilac, c. 1902. Oil on canvas, 17.5 × 30.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), s0469N1996

Cat. 26 Odilon Redon, *The Black Bowl*, c. 1905. Oil on canvas,  $46.7 \times 61.5$  cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), 50471N1996

Cat. 27 Odilon Redon, Vase of Flowers against a Blue Background, c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 46.3 × 32.3 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so474N1996

- 1 Various secondary sources mention Camille's role in the arrangement of the bouquets, but no primary source other than this photograph has been found. See, among others, Dario Gamboni, 'Marie Botkine', in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), 2011, pp. 356–57. Writing from the Villa Goa in Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, where the Redons spent the summer of 1901, the artist told Bonger that he 'was working on fruits and flowers'; Odilon Redon, letter 76 to Andries Bonger (29 August 1901), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne.
- 2 The vases varied from simple and nondescript to highly distinctive; see the diagram in Klaus Berger, Odilon Redon: Phantasie und Farbe, Cologne 1964, p. 180, and 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. 3 (1996): Fleurs et paysages, pp. 8–9. See also Vision. Vase of Flowers (entry 11, cat. 28) (https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/so470N1996).

Odilon Redon painted a number of flower still lifes in the 1860s, at the beginning of his career, but these early works can best be characterized as finger exercises that were not intended for the outside world (fig. 10a). After beginning to work more in colour in the 1890s, Redon took a renewed interest in the genre. He eventually made hundreds of flower still lifes, at first mostly in pastel and then increasingly in oil paint. During the summers in particular, when, like all Parisians, he left the city and escaped to the countryside, he worked from blossoming nature. The composition of his artworks began outdoors with the picking of ever different combinations of fresh wild flowers and garden blooms. Redon's wife, Camille Falte, contributed actively to these endeavours. An undated photograph shows her busying herself with flowers in their Paris apartment (fig. 10b). She carefully arranged them in one of the many vases they had collected over the years.<sup>2</sup> One wonders, therefore, whether part of the creative process can be attributed to her, as so beautifully described by the critic Arsène Alexandre: 'But here it happens that little by little the artist sees coming towards him a thousand other flowers, just as earlier he felt himself brushed by the wing of the nasty denizens of the night air. Then he welcomes them with decisive joy, he throws them by the armful onto the canvas or the paper, in oil or in pastel. He puts some of them in beautiful vases, in fabulous heaps. Everything sings and rejoices; with the flowers, as they appear to us in the hours of our elation, Odilon Redon mixes, without seeming to, others that are imaginary and blend with the scent of the other, unknown aromas.'3

By constantly varying the combination and quantity of flowers, as well as the vases that held them, and by placing the vases against differently coloured backgrounds, Redon (and Camille) continually arrived at new compositions, even though a certain amount of repetition was inevitable. Redon took great pleasure in producing his intensely colourful works, but there is another explanation for his large output of still lifes: not only did they find enthusiastic buyers within the group of collectors who were already devoted to him, but they also attracted new clients. Thanks to his flower still lifes, he could afford an increasingly comfortable lifestyle, which gave him and his family peace and happiness.<sup>4</sup>

3 Arsène Alexandre (1913), in Paris/Montpellier 2011, p. 342: 'Mais voici que peu à peu l'artiste voit accourir vers lui mille autres fleurs comme jadis il se sentait frôlé par l'aile des mauvais hôtes de l'air nocturne. Alors il les accueille avec un joie définitive, il les jette par brassées sur la toile ou le papier, avec l'huile ou le pastel. Il en dresse dans de beaux vases, des étagements mirifiques. Tout chante et s'épanouit; à la fleur, telle qu'elle nous apparaît aux heures où nous

nous exaltions, Odilon Redon en mêle, sans en avoir l'air, d'autres qui sont imaginaires et qui mêlent au parfum des autres, des arômes inconnues.'

4 See Kevin Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace after 1900', 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. 258-80.



Cat. 23 Odilon Redon, Vase of Flowers (Green Vase with Poppy)



Cat. 24 Odilon Redon, Roses in a Vase on a Small Table



Cat. 25 Odilon Redon, White Lilac



Cat. 26 Odilon Redon, The Black Bowl



Cat. 27 Odilon Redon, Vase of Flowers against a Blue Background



Fig. 10a Odilon Redon, Poppy and Bindweed, c. 1867. Oil on cardboard, 32.5  $\times$  25 cm. Private collection

Andries Bonger, too, who had been following Redon's career closely since 1894, greatly appreciated this change of direction in the artist's oeuvre. When he and his wife Annie visited the Redons in 1902, Bonger bought no fewer than five recently painted still lifes, including *Roses in a Vase* (cat. 24). The purchases were immediately given a prominent place in the Bongers' new house on the Stadhouderskade. By contrast, the collector's 'substantial purchase' and subsequently full walls led to large 'empty spaces' on Redon's walls, and this set him to work 'with renewed relish'. After Bonger's second large purchase of still lifes, including *White Lilac*, at Redon's exhibition at Galeries Durand-Ruel in 1903, Redon again wrote that his recent success had stimulated him 'to do a great deal more painting' (cat. 25).

Bonger seized a third opportunity to buy paintings in 1905, again during a visit to Paris. At the Redons' he found the smaller *Vase of Flowers against a Blue Background* (cat. 27), and when he and Redon took a look around the Galerie Druet, he fell for the sumptuous painting *The Black Bowl* (cat. 26). He reserved both of them on the spot and did not even enquire about the prices until after his return to the Netherlands. He wrote to the artist: 'I should very much like you to withdraw from Druet's the flowers that I saw there. I was much struck by them in memory, when I saw my rooms again. It sets a completely different note.'9

5 Letters 85 (26 November 1902), Paris, and 86 (28 November 1902), Amsterdam. In addition, he bought: Vase of Flowers, Yellow Broom, Peonies (W1526), Vase of Flowers on a Red Carpet (W1439), Lemon and Pepper on a White Tablecloth (W1374), Flowers in a Porcelain Cup (W1617), Chimera (W1210) and Temple with Barbarian Idols (see entry 7, 'Two Noirs with Religious Themes', cat. 19) https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/d1062N1996).

6 Letter 85: 'I am enclosing the list of your substantial purchase. The empty spaces that it has made on my walls have set me back to work with renewed relish, which always cheers me up.' ('Je vous mets ici la liste de votre gros achat, dont le vide qu'il causa sur mes murs m'a remis, avec entrain, à travailler, et à l'allégissement d'esprit qui en découle.')
7 Letter 101 (25 March 1903), Paris: 'The exhibition has been consistently well attended by a very attentive

public. Some reassessment of these works will surely follow. In short, I did well to hold it. But what a significance your purchases had. I'm delighted from every point of view. My household is full of joy and I can dream of new works in all tranquillity of mind. I am going to do a great deal more painting. I must.' ('L'exposition a été fort visité, d'une manière soutenue, par un public fort attentif. Il en sortira quelque prise de considération de ces travaux. En somme, j'ai bien fait de la faire. Mais combien les achats que vous y avez faits, ont eu aussi de la portée. J'en suis joyeux, à tous les points de vue. La joie est à mon foyer, avec mes rêves de nouveaux travaux à faire dans la tranquillité d'esprit. Je vais peindre, plus abondamment, il le faut.')

8 Letter 133 (2 July 1905), Amsterdam. 9 Ibid.: 'Si cela vous est possible, j'aimerais beaucoup que vous retiriez de chez Druet les fleurs que j'y ai vu. Le souvenir m'en a beaucoup frappé, en revoyant mon intérieur. C'est une toute autre note.'



Fig. 10b Camille Redon in the apartment at the avenue Wagram, Paris, date unknown

Bonger used this musical term to refer to the 'ensemble' of Redons he was composing on his walls: a veritable piece of music in which he sought both harmony and variation. Pedon replied that his commercial success had given him great happiness and had stimulated him to paint without let-up and with 'more and more pleasure' during his summer holiday at Villa Goa. Bonger's eagerness as a collector who, as it were, snatched up the still lifes almost before the flowers had wilted, therefore had a direct influence on the artist's output, and provided the impetus for Redon to step up his production of still lifes.

Flower still lifes represent a substantial proportion of the work by Redon in Bonger's collection. In 1908, when Bonger decided that his collection was complete, he owned eighteen flower pieces by Redon: six in pastel and twelve in oils. The artist must have been able to produce some of these works, such as the smaller still lifes against a uniform background, in a relatively short time. He always built them up in the same way and used a limited number of pigments. For example, the various yellow flowers in Vase of Flowers (Green Vase with Poppy) (cat. 23) were all painted with the same yellow hues. To enliven the uniform background and to lend this work some depth, Redon let the blue proceed subtly from dark to light. In the background of Vase of Flowers against a Blue Background, lilac, grey and brown are discernible, but these passages, too, seem to have been painted rather quickly. White Lilac was laid in very rapidly indeed. Redon painted it on a previously used canvas, which he simply covered with a uniform grey background.12 Again, he painted the lilacs and daffodil fairly rapidly. Nevertheless, he succeeded ingeniously in capturing the precise nature of the lilac by applying layers of various blended colours, ending with a few telling touches in heightened white. As is often the case with his flower still lifes, the canvas was originally larger, but Redon put it on a smaller stretcher, causing the rather abrupt truncation at the lower edge.<sup>13</sup>

- 10 See Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, "L'intérieur qui est l'image de votre pensée": Odilon Redon chez Andries Bonger', in Dario Gamboni and Merel van Tilburg (eds.), 'Sans adieu'. Andries Bonger Odilon Redon correspondance 1894–1916, 2 vols., Paris 2022, vol. 2, pp. 776–808.
- 11 Letter 136 (21 July 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: 'de plus en plus du plaisir'.
- 12 Beneath the composition there is one or possibly two other compositions that Redon painted over; with thanks to René Boitelle, conservator of paintings.

  13 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. 75.



Fig. 10c Cat. 23 in its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 10d Cat. 24 in its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 10f Cat. 26 in its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 10g Cat. 27 in its original frame by Boyer

The small flower still lifes demanded relatively little of the artist's time and attention, but *The Black Bowl* is a different thing altogether. Redon used a much richer palette, subtly alternating radiant and more subdued passages and giving each individual flower its own colour scheme. The bowl in which he placed his bouquet is built up of numerous pigments and therefore anything but pure black. The artist chose a type of ground that absorbed the oil from his paint, allowing him to achieve a distinctly matt effect that resembles pastel. Redon decided ahead of time where he wanted each flower and each stem, and he left these places open when applying the background. Because the canvas is still visible around the flowers, the whole bouquet has room to breathe and even has a kind of aura. As finishing touches, Redon placed a few unerring accents to bring out individual petals and stalks.<sup>14</sup>

The choice of frame also makes clear that *The Black Bowl* is the masterpiece of the group (fig. 10f). Both Redon and Bonger attached great importance to the framing of the flower still lifes, which they discussed at length in their correspondence (fig. 10f). During Bonger's visits to Paris, the artist and collector went together to see Boyer, their regular frame-maker, to find a suitable frame for each work. Often this resulted in fairly narrow profiles with no inlay (figs. 10c, 10d and 10g). The simple effect this produced seems to have been a deliberate choice on the part of the artist. <sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Technical examinations carried out in 2021 by René Boitelle and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the paintings by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

<sup>15</sup> Letter 85: 'I added to the consignment the drawing that was in the house, the little canvas of two roses, adding a simple frame, not too wide, which will, I hope, pass muster.' ('I'ai ajouté à l'envoi avec le dessin qui était chez moi, la petite toile des deux roses, en y mettant aussi un cadre simple, sans trop de largeur, qui sera convenable, je l'espère.')



Fig. 10h Andries Bonger in his home at 22 Vossiusstraat, Amsterdam, 1908. Private collection, The Netherlands

**16** See Roos Rosa de Carvalho, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg, 2022 and essay ""Communion with the Chosen": Andries Bonger and Odilon Redon' in this publication.

# 17 Letter 136.

- 18 Letter 139 (14 August 1905), Amsterdam: 'Les fleurs dans une coupe sont une pièce d'un goût exquis. Le cadre lui va à merveille. C'est une chose d'un raffinement tel, que je serai embarrassé de lui trouver une place convenable. Il nous faut une autre maison, c'est absolument urgent!'
- 19 Conrad Kikkert, *De Telegraaf* (17 May 1907): 'de burgerij [...] houvast': 'Het heeft vele dingen, die men geleerd heeft "mooi" te vinden. Het heeft "belle peinture", iets oud-Hollander-achtigs, iets zorgvols, glads. [...] De charme komt, door de volmaakte harmonieusheid, het begrijpelijke komt, doordat het mooie is samengesteld uit oude dingen, men kent dit, de compositie zóó, en de kleur zus. [...] Deze dingen, met nog enkele, hangen nog aan de natuurlijkheid.'

In fact, most of these frames were not of outstandingly high craftsmanship. Redon was generally satisfied with industrially produced bronze profiles sold by the metre. <sup>16</sup> An exception to this, therefore, is the beautifully finished cream-coloured frame that Redon chose, in consultation with Boyer, for the flowers in a black bowl. <sup>17</sup> After returning, Bonger wrote to the artist: 'The flowers in a bowl are in exquisite taste. The frame matches them wonderfully. It's a thing of such refinement that I shall be at my wits end to find a suitable place for it. We need a new house, as a matter of urgency! <sup>18</sup> A photograph taken around 1908 shows Bonger posing proudly in front of his still lifes, among them *The Black Bowl* (fig. 10h).

Redon's flower still lifes were well received at the exhibitions to which Bonger lent them. In the Netherlands, a selection of the still lifes was shown at the retrospective exhibition held at Kunstzaal Reckers in 1907. They were widely praised in the reviews and described as accessible, entry-level works that could prepare viewers for Redon's darker creations. Conrad Kikkert wrote in *De Telegraaf* that the small still lifes provide 'the bourgeoisie' with a 'foothold': 'They have many things that one has learned to find "beautiful". They have "belle peinture", something Old-Holland-like, something compassionate, polished. [...] The charm lies in the perfect harmoniousness, they are understandable because the beautiful is composed of old things, one recognizes this, the composition like this, and the colour like that. [...] These things, and a few others, still adhere to naturalness.'19

One can, in fact, see a work like *The Black Bowl*, with its flowers on a table in front of a dark background, as stemming from the rich tradition of still-life painting, ranging from the seventeenth-century Dutch masters to the French artists Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) and Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904). Despite the simplicity of the motif and the naturalness he shared with those artists, Redon availed himself of numerous artifices to make his flowers transcend reality.



Fig. 10i Paul Gauguin, A Vase of Flowers, 1896. Oil on canvas, 64 × 74 cm. National Gallery, London

Indeed, Redon's still lifes bear a much greater affinity to the partly observed, partly fantasized still lifes of Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) (fig. 10i). Redon described his still lifes as 'flowers at the confluence of two riverbanks, that of representation and that of memory. It is the soil of art itself, the good earth of the real, harrowed and tilled by the spirit.'20 His spirit helped him to arrange the flowers carefully on the canvas, with ample room for each individual bloom and sufficient balance between the various forms and colours.21 Redon generally placed his still lifes against a background composed of various thinly applied pigments, which are as rarefied as air. The surroundings usually offer no ties to reality. The bouquets float in a vacuum and are not illuminated by any clear source of light; moreover, whenever Redon does place them on a table, as in Roses or The Black Bowl, it offers only a slight degree of orientation. In Roses in a Vase on a Small Table the table top is fully visible, but in *The Black Bowl* Redon painted out the area underneath the table, including its support, thereby transforming it into a kind of flying saucer. On the other hand, the reflection and the gleam on the edge of the table top in Roses seem to be the result of the artist's keen observations.

While the Dutch critics were quick to emphasize Redon's verisimilitude, their French colleagues struggled to define the mysticism in his flower still lifes. Claude Roger-Marx discussed in poetic terms the puzzling effect these works had on viewers: 'We can easily understand how Redon carries us away when he deals with the great myths, communicates with the prophets and fraternizes with the demigods and heroes of fable and tragedy. But through what miracle does he manage to transfigure humble daily reality without any epic intervention?'22 The critic compared the spiritual impact of the still lifes to that of music, which can move us to our very core. Instead of oil paint or pastel, Redon used, in this critic's view, 'the dust of butterflies or the pollen of flowers'. Roger-Marx was not the only one to wax lyrical about Redon's still lifes in an effort to do justice to their effect. Marius-Ary Leblond devoted numerous pages to florid descriptions of the works.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that, despite his somewhat formulaic approach, Redon succeeded time after time in imbuing his still lifes with something intangible yet irresistible. Another critic, after admiring the Redon room at the Salon d'automne of 1905, where The Black Bowl was among the works on display, wrote: 'M. Odilon Redon is a painter of flowers as they are seen in dreams.'24

<sup>20</sup> Redon (1912), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art* and Artists, New York 1986, p. 99. 'fleurs venues au confluent de deux rivages, celui de la représentation, celui du souvenir. C'est la terre de l'art même, la bonne terre du réel, hersée et labourée par l'esprit.'

**<sup>22</sup>** Claude Roger-Marx, 'Odilon Redon', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 36, no. 27 (June 1920), pp. 269–75, p. 275.

<sup>23</sup> Marius-Ary Leblond, 'Le merveilleux dans la peinture: Odilon Redon', *La Revue illustrée* (20 February 1907), pp. 155–60.

<sup>24</sup> A. Flament (1905), in Maryanne Stevens, 'Redon's Artistic and Critical Position', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 281–304, p. 297.

#### CAT. 23

#### PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, June 1901; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongervan 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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# EXHIBITIONS

- Rotterdam, Kunstzaal Reckers, Exposition de peintures, dessins, lithographies par Odilon Redon, May 1907, no. 6, Vase vert.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 103, Flowers in a small green vase.

# CAT. 24

# PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 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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- Aukje Vergeest, The French Collection: Nineteenth-Century French Paintings in Dutch Public Collections, Amsterdam 2000, no. 848, p. 268.
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- Fred Leeman, in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon:* 1840–1916, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, pp. 260–61.

# EXHIBITIONS

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- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 11, Drie rozen in een vaas op een tafeltje.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 104, Roses in a vase on a small table (Roses dans une vase sur un guéridon).
- Madrid, Fundación Mapfre, *Odilon Redon*, 11 February–29 April 2012, no. 85, *Rosas en un jarrón sobre un velador*.

# CAT. 25

#### PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris through Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 300 French francs during the exhibition at Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris (*Pastels et Peintures de Odilon Redon*), cat. 12 (*Lilas blanc*), March 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. 26

#### PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam through Galerie Druet, Paris 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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- Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, *Moderne Kunst Kring*, 6 October–5 November 1911, no. 107, *Fleurs (Peinture*).
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 17, Wijde vaas met bloemen op een ronde tafel.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 116, The black bowl (La coupe noire).

#### CAT. 27

#### PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 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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- Andries Bonger, letter 138 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (11 August 1905).
- Andries Bonger, letter 139 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (14 August 1905).
- Odilon Redon, letter 140 to Andries Bonger, Saint-Georges-de-Didonne (23 August 1905).
- Andries Bonger, letter 141 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (27 August 1905).
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