

ODILON REDON and Andries Bonger

*36 works from the
Van Gogh Museum
collection*

This online Van Gogh Museum collection catalogue describes the 36 works by Odilon Redon that are part of the Andries Bonger Collection held in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. The digital publication accompanies the exhibition *Andries Bonger and Odilon Redon: Kindred Spirits*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 29 March–3 July 2022

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36 works from the Van Gogh Museum collection

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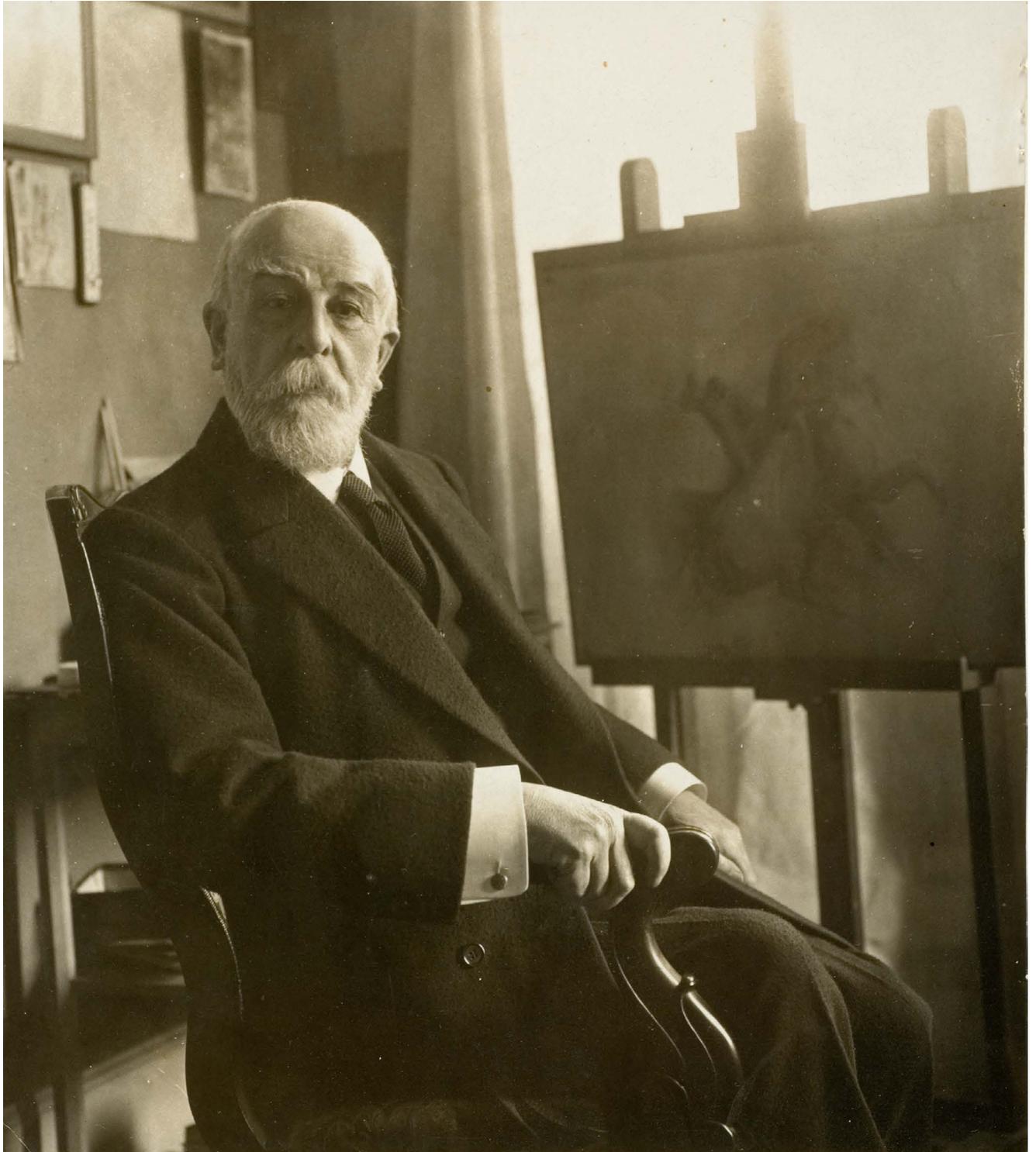


Fig. 1 Odilon Redon in his apartment and studio at the avenue de Wagram, 1913. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris

‘Communion with the chosen’

Andries Bonger and Odilon Redon

The art collector Andries Bonger (1861–1936) first fully immersed himself into Odilon Redon’s (1840–1916) universe in 1894 at a retrospective organized by the art gallery Durand-Ruel in Paris. An annotated catalogue in Bonger’s archive marks this defining event.¹ In it, he scribbled down in pencil scraps of his conversation with the artist at the gallery together with a few impressions of his work (see box text *Bonger’s handwritten notes on Redon*). The seemingly innocuous document bears witness to Bonger’s first purchases and hence to the beginning of the intimate relationship between artist and collector.

The exhibition was a defining moment in Redon’s life too: it marked a period of transition for the fifty-four-year-old artist, in which the black materials and dark motifs that had been his trademark since the 1870s gradually gave way to a more colourful palette and lighter subject matter. He also abandoned his self-imposed seclusion in order to present himself to the art world at Durand-Ruel and enter Parisian life. The retrospective brought him dozens of reviews, recognition as a pioneer of Symbolism in visual art, and a new generation of collectors, whose number Bonger was about to join.²

In Durand-Ruel’s galleries with their deep-red, panelled walls, Bonger was presented for the first time with a complete overview of Redon’s oeuvre (fig. 2).³ He was able to admire over a hundred early *noirs* (charcoal drawings) with titillating titles such as *Le secret*, *Elixir de mort*, *Cauchemar* and *Apparition*, as well as the most important series of prints and ‘*pièces modernes*’ from Redon’s lithographic output, about ten more recent paintings and a similar number of pastels.⁴ Bonger’s catalogue included a description by the critic André Mellerio (1862–1943), a friend of Redon, of the new work in colour as a ‘strange glow’ that had spread across Redon’s ‘*vision sévère*’ (severe vision), opening up the artist’s black oeuvre. He also found clear guidance in Mellerio’s text on how to experience and fathom Redon’s universe: ‘The first sensation that his work inspires is one of astonishment mingled with a vague fear and admiration. One is surprised in the face of a conception so different from the ordinary, which suddenly seizes us and hurls us from the order of ideas in which we are accustomed to live. Then the eye becomes more fixed, the mind reasons, emotions are moved and we are overcome. [...] That is what we find in him, what so few works give us, the thrill of a world beyond.’⁵

Bonger was not put off by his first sight of Redon’s work and made his initial ambitious purchase, acquiring no fewer than five prints and two drawings, and shortly afterwards another drawing that had remained unsold (fig. e on p. 31).⁶ He noted down the artist’s address on the catalogue: ‘10, rue du Regard’. Immediately after returning to Hilversum in the Netherlands, Bonger kindly sent Redon a copy of Eugène Delacroix’s (1798–1863) recently published diary, which they are sure to have discussed. Redon wrote back about the pleasure the publica-

1 *Exposition Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries Durand-Ruel), March–April 1894. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger.

2 See also the survey of reviews and essays on Redon and the art market: Kevin Sharp, ‘Redon and the Marketplace before 1900’, Kevin Sharp, ‘Redon and the Marketplace after 1900’ and Maryanne Stevens, ‘Redon’s Artistic and Critical Position’, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 237–56 and 408–11, 258–80 and 412–16, and 281–304 respectively.

3 See Ward 1991 for a description of the galleries.

4 ‘*Pièces modernes*’ is Mellerio’s description of Redon’s individual prints, see Mellerio (1913) 2001, p. xi.

5 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, C, pp. 1–3: ‘Le premier sentiment qu’inspire son œuvre est un étonnement mêlé de vague effroi et d’admiration. On est surpris devant une conception si différente de l’ordinaire, nous saisissant brusquement et nous jetant bien loin d’ordre d’idées où nous sommes habitués de vivre journellement. Puis l’œil se fixe davantage, l’esprit raisonne, le sentiment s’émeut, – nous sommes dominés. [...] C’est que nous trouvons en lui, ce que si peu d’œuvres nous donnent, – le frisson d’un au delà.’ André Mellerio, foreword, in Paris 1894, p. 3. Interestingly, Bonger framed his own introduction to Redon’s work for the 1909 exhibition in Amsterdam in similar terms. He wrote that the ‘first sight [would be] terrifying’ but that after persistent viewing, ‘an unseen world of dream images’ would open up. Andries Bonger, ‘Lezing ter gelegenheid van de Redon-expositie in de Larensche Kunsthandel, voorgedragen op 7 mei 1909’. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive.

6 It is not clear precisely which prints these were, but the drawings were *Faust and Mephistopheles* (W1078), *Youth* (W334) and *Profile of a Woman against a Background of Black Poppies* (W335) (entry 4, cat. 10).

Fig. 2 Interior of Galeries Durand-Ruel, 16 rue Laffitte, Paris, 1879. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris



tion had given him, initiating a correspondence that continued until Redon's death.⁷

The three-hundred-plus letters that went back and forth between them formed the glue of their relationship, which grew over the years into a long-lasting alliance and even a close friendship. In Bonger, Redon found an intelligent and equally well-read foil, with whom he could correspond on equal terms and who sometimes picked up on the latest ideas from Paris even sooner than he did.⁸ Redon in turn suggested reading matter to Bonger, including the recently published novel *Les nourritures terrestres* by André Gide (1869–1951) in 1897. Bonger had beaten him to it and was able to reply a week later: 'You can scarcely imagine the joy your letter gave me. When it reached me, I had just finished the André Gide you spoke of and I too enjoyed it immensely. [...] So it would be an immense pleasure to talk to you about the book and everything that I love in it.'⁹ The bulk of the correspondence is made up of thoughtful exchanges like this. Virtually all the letters are deep and heartfelt and extend to literature, poetry, philosophy and music. Even their lengthy reflections on the weather have a certain depth and lyricism.¹⁰ Tellingly, notes of financial transactions are relegated to short postscripts at the end of the letters.

In the years following his first purchases via Durand-Ruel, Bonger became an increasingly fanatical collector, admirer and ultimately good friend of Redon. This essay shows how Redon came to choose the Dutch businessman as a collector, friend and confidant. Bonger, meanwhile, eventually came to prefer Redon over the other artists in his collection: his Redons initially shared the walls of his home with works by Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Adolphe Monticelli (1824–1886) and Emile Bernard (1868–1941), among others. Slowly but surely, though, Bonger focused all his attention and resources on the man who, in his view, far surpassed his contemporaries in both artistry and profundity. Bonger's efforts resulted in one of the largest collections of Redon's work. He went on to acquire no fewer than twenty-nine paintings, nineteen pastels and twenty-nine drawings, as well as the artist's complete graphic oeuvre. Thanks to an arrangement between Bonger's heirs and the Dutch state, as many as thirty-six paintings and drawings are now held by the Van Gogh Museum.

⁷ Contrary to Fred Leeman, 'Que voyait Andries Bonger en Redon', in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, p. 685, we infer from the fact that Bonger noted down Redon's address that his first encounter with Redon in 1890 had not led immediately to correspondence between the two.

⁸ Including Gustave Geffroy's (1855–1926) and Arsène Alexandre's (1859–1937) reviews of the Cézanne exhibition at Galerie Vollard in 1895, letter 30 (23 December 1895), Hilversum, and the publication *Théories* by Maurice Denis (1870–1943) in 1912, letter 285 (13 June 1912), Amsterdam.

⁹ Letter 48 (3 June 1897), Hilversum: 'Vous ne saurez jamais la joie que m'a procuré votre lettre. Quand elle m'est parvenue, j'avais justement terminé le livre d'André Gide dont vous me parlez, et que moi aussi, j'ai infiniment goûté. [...] Que j'aurais donc vif plaisir de vous causer du livre et de tout ce que j'y aime.'

¹⁰ 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 Bonger*', in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 719–53.

A somewhat aristocratic view of life

What drove a Dutch insurance man like Bonger to build such a progressive collection of an artist as elusive as Redon? While Bonger did indeed make a career for himself in the insurance business, he craved intellectual nourishment and elevation throughout his life. From an early age, he looked down on ordinary folk and the more prosaic aspects of everyday life with aristocratic disdain. In his letters to his parents, he expressed his aversion to 'idle chitchat, bland pleasantries, platitudes and idiotic conceits'.¹¹ Not that his own background or upbringing provided much justification for such attitudes, but he always strove to rise above his milieu.

Although music played an important role in the family, Bonger described his youth as hard and lacking in colour.¹² To his great frustration, he was not permitted to continue his studies and he duly took a position as a junior clerk at Geo Wehry & Co., a firm trading in tobacco, coffee, tea and rubber.¹³ During his training at the company's Paris branch he slaked his 'insatiable thirst to know more' by seeking out people who could instruct him in the higher arts.¹⁴ The elderly Dutch writer and critic Conrad Busken Huet (1826–1886) provided him with a constant flow of books and reviews while he was in France, while the art dealer Theo Van Gogh (1857–1891) taught him so much about art that he wrote to his parents: 'my eyes are opened wider every day'.¹⁵ Through Theo, Bonger came into contact with Vincent Van Gogh and Emile Bernard, from whom he bought and was given several works. In 1889

¹¹ Bonger to his parents, 15 April 1883, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1760V1970: 'nietswaardige gesprekken, zoutelooze aardigheden, platheden en domme verwaandheden'.

¹² Amsterdam 2009, p. 18.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bonger to his parents, 13 November 1879, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1572V1970, quoted in Amsterdam 2009, p. 18.

¹⁵ Bonger to his parents, 1 October 1885, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1824V1970, quoted in Amsterdam 2009, p. 21: 'de ooggen gaan me iederen dag wijder open'.

Bonger's works by Redon in the Van Gogh Museum

Andries Bonger was very proud of his collection of works by Odilon Redon, he left several items to various museums and placed his letters from Redon in the Rijksmuseum. His widow testified to the fact that, while he did his best to interest museums in it during his lifetime, he did not make any great effort to keep his overall collection intact. Perhaps it was too closely linked to him as a person for that: when he was no longer around, the added meaning similarly dissipated. Bonger's widow and his later heirs bequeathed and sold several Redons in the Netherlands and abroad from 1946 onwards. The Kröller-Müller Museum acquired the folding screen Redon designed for the collector, for instance, while the Rijksmuseum Twente received a decorative panel and the Haagsch Gemeentemuseum (now Kunstmuseum Den Haag) acquired *Still Life with Lemon and Pepper* along with virtually the entire holdings of graphic work.¹ Over the years, several works were bought by museums in Japan or auctioned at Sotheby's New York and purchased by private individuals.² In 1996 the heirs offered for sale what remained of Bonger's collection: some one hundred pieces, fifty of them by Redon, among which were many of his finest works. Under the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act, the collection was purchased by the Dutch state and placed on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum in accordance with the heirs' wishes, providing the museum with one of the most remarkable collections of Redon's work.

In 2007 Fred Leeman completed an extensive manuscript on Bonger and his collection for the Van Gogh Museum. This was

included only in part, however, in the exhibition catalogue *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection* that was published in 2009.³ His descriptions of the works have been used as a departure point for the present entries, supplemented by a wealth of new information. Since 2007, numerous comprehensive catalogues have been published and several important primary sources have become accessible, such as Bonger's letters to Redon, the account books and contemporary reviews. The annotated correspondence between Redon and Bonger, published in 2022, has been especially elemental for grasping the subtleties in the relationship between artist and collector.⁴ Virtually all the works by Redon in the Van Gogh Museum have been examined technically by René Boitelle and Harriet Stratis.⁵ Extensive research has also been carried out into the original frames and mounts of the works in the collection. The insights revealed by these fresh studies have been incorporated in this essay and the entries. All works are depicted in their original frames.

¹ *The Red Screen* (W2524), *Decorative Panel* (W2517) and *Lemon and Pepper on a White Tablecloth* (W1374).

² For an overview, see Amsterdam 2009.

³ Leeman 2007.

⁴ Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022.

⁵ Boitelle, Van den Berg and Goetz 2005.

Fig. 3 Interior of Bonger's home Villa Jeanne in Hilversum, 1896. Private collection



Theo married Bonger's sister Johanna (Jo) (1862–1925), at which point the two friends became brothers-in-law. While his colleagues took full advantage of the Parisian nightlife, Bonger spent his evenings in his bed beneath a counter in his firm's warehouse reading the great English and French authors of both his own and earlier periods. Following a tirade about 'drinking, eating, smoking and puffed-up people', he wrote with relief that 'thank God there are books and hence communion with the chosen'.¹⁶ It was this that Bonger yearned for: contact with people who distinguished themselves through their talent, sensitivity and vision. Literature allowed him to nourish himself from their intellect. As Paul Bourget (1852–1935) set out in his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, of which Bonger was an admirer, the experiences of a real life that went on outside the reader's window – a flower blooming, a sultry summer night or an attractive woman – were no match for the deeply felt and existential revelations that contemporary French writers and poets offered him in his lodgings, where he could forge a direct, spiritual connection with the author.¹⁷ In his spare time, Bonger kept well away from the wild parties in the bohemian stronghold of Montmartre, and visited the Théâtre-Français, the Opéra and the Musée du Louvre instead, to enjoy Paris as 'the focal point of civilization, of high intellectual culture and of fine taste'.¹⁸

Bonger returned to the Netherlands in 1892 to take up a position as an insurance agent, following in his father's footsteps. Since he had attempted unsuccessfully to make a living in Paris as a literary correspondent or art dealer, the move has been described as a capitulation to bourgeois life.¹⁹ All the same, another interpretation is also possible in that pursuing a business career enabled Bonger to earn the money he needed to build a collection and join the upper echelons of the Parisian cultural world. His second wife, Françoise van der Borch van Verwolde (1887–1975), later made this point very clearly: 'Bonger wanted to get ahead. Firstly, because he enjoyed his work and sensed that he had the strength to advance; and secondly, because it provided him with the means to create an environment conducive to his personal development. Bonger felt no disdain towards material prosperity, but he did believe that it ought to be a means of raising a person intellectually to a higher level.'²⁰

¹⁶ Bonger to his parents, 11 August 1883, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1771V1970: 'bitterende en etende en rookende en opgeblazen menschen [...] goddank dat er boeken zijn en dus de omgang met de uitverkorenen'.

¹⁷ Fred Leeman previously noted Bonger's fondness for Bourget in Amsterdam 2009, p. 20, and Leeman, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, p. 707. For this specific passage, see Bourget 1883, but in particular the essay on the subject by Bonger's teacher Busken Huet (Busken Huet 1884, vol. 23, pp. 138–63, p. 143).

¹⁸ Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde 1936–37, p. 114: 'het brandpunt van beschaving, van hooge geestescultuur en van fijnen smaak'.

¹⁹ Amsterdam 2009, p. 26.

²⁰ Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde 1936–37, p. 117: 'Bonger wilde vooruit komen. In de eerste plaats omdat hij zijn werk liefhad en in zich de kracht voelde om verder te komen, in de tweede plaats omdat hij zóó de middelen te verkrijgen wist, die hem in staat zouden stellen om zich het milieu te scheppen, dat bij zijn ontwikkeling paste. Bonger had geen minachting voor materiele welvaart, maar hij meende dat deze een middel moest zijn om den mensch geestelijk op hooger peil te brengen.' See also Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, "'L'intérieur qui est l'image de votre pensée": Odilon Redon chez Andries Bonger', in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 776–808.



Fig. 4 Andries Bonger in his home at Vossiusstraat 22, Amsterdam, 1908. Private collection

Eyes closed to reality

The newly minted businessman Bonger and his first wife Anne (Annie) Bongervan der Linden (1859–1931) moved into the Villa Jeanne in Hilversum, where he found a nice spot for the Bernards and Van Goghs he had brought with him from Paris (fig. 3). Whenever he made a business trip to the city that had become so precious to him, he invariably found time to visit the Louvre and was thus able to attend the major Redon retrospective in 1894. He might even have travelled specifically for that purpose, since the artist had fascinated him for several years by then. Busken Huet had introduced him to art criticism and it is highly likely that he was already reasonably familiar with Redon's work through literary figures like Jan Veth (1864–1925), Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) and Emile Hennequin (1859–1888).²¹

Bonger's very first acquaintance with Redon's work must have occurred some years earlier. In 1889 Theo Van Gogh acquired a painting directly from the artist for his own collection: the original painted version of what would become Redon's most famous motif, *Closed Eyes* (fig. 5).²² Theo viewed the purchase as a personal investment for the art dealership he hoped to set up with his brother Vincent and in which he closely involved Bonger as well.²³ The friends are sure to have discussed the work fervently. The struggle for direction within modern art was a constant topic of conversation between the two, whose preferences differed.²⁴ Theo was particularly appreciative of artists who visually represented their personal sense of modern life. Bonger had different ideas, which are neatly summed up by Gustave Kahn's (1859–1936) famous definition of Symbolism: 'The essential aim of our art is to objectify the subjective (the externalization of the idea) instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through the eyes of temperament).'²⁵ Like the figure in *Closed Eyes*, Bonger preferred to close his eyes to visible reality. He later wrote that 'with his

²¹ Bonger wrote several times that, in his opinion, it was Hennequin who best summed up Redon's art. See letters 187 (10 March 1907), Amsterdam and 313 (20 September 1914), Aerdenhout-Bentveld. He even transcribed the complete text by hand: see Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, C, p. 11.

²² See also entry 5 for *Closed Eyes* (cat. 13).

²³ The first plans of the Van Gogh brothers and Andries Bonger to found a commercial art gallery date from 1886. The idea resurfaced several times in the years that followed, but when the moment came, Bonger always shied away from the venture, a fact that later drove a wedge between the friends. See Amsterdam 2009, p. 25.

²⁴ See also Amsterdam 2009; Leeman, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, p. 715. Like every dichotomy in art history, the one between Naturalism and Symbolism is often overstated: Theo owned a work by Redon, after all, while Bonger would acquire and cherish several works by Cézanne and Van Gogh.

²⁵ Kahn 1886.

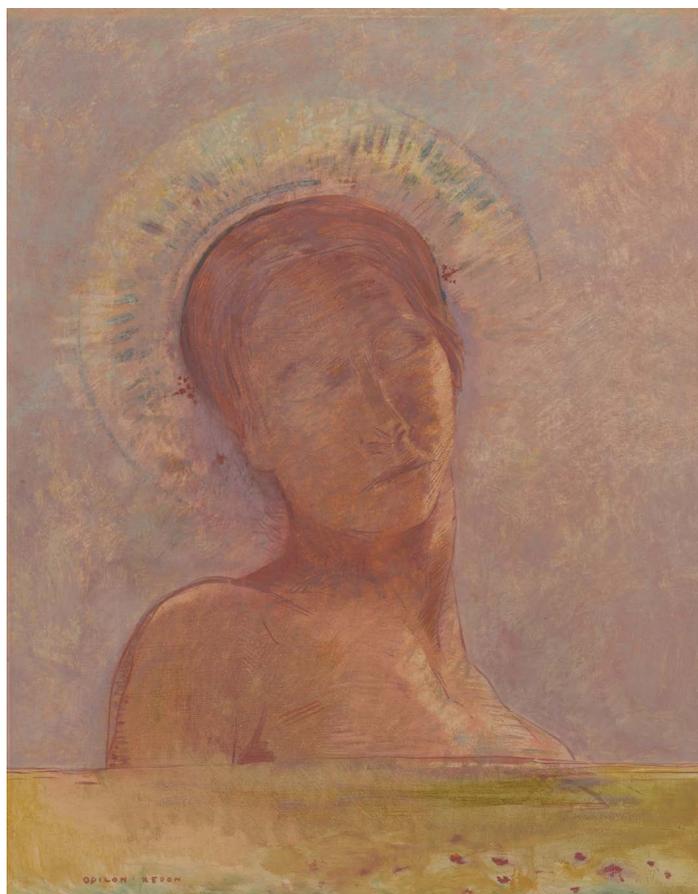


Fig. 5 Odilon Redon, *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*, 1889. Oil on cardboard, 45 × 35 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands) (see entry 5, cat. 13)

glorification of nature' Emile Zola (1840–1902) would 'gallop on like a dead horse'.²⁶ According to Bonger, a work of art ought to express the rich inner world of the artist and hence offer the viewer a spiritual experience and urge them to reflect on the essence of human existence. As Bonger pursued his quest, Redon's art came to him as nothing less than a revelation. He later wrote: 'When there was nothing more in the intellectual sphere, when all had been torn down, then came Redon.'²⁷

The first meeting between Redon and Bonger took place shortly afterwards, on 8 November 1891. Annie recorded the event: 'It had long been an ambition of [An] Dries to make his acquaintance, and he was not disappointed. He came back full of admiration for Redon. They have arranged a rendezvous at the Louvre next Sunday, and Redon will then come here to see my portrait, which Bernard will bring along.'²⁸

A select circle of initiates

The first group of Redons, purchased at Durand-Ruel, immediately granted Bonger entry to an exclusive circle of enthusiasts as well as a new identity in the spirit of the French 'amateur'. While Redon's collectors included a number of actual aristocrats, the others were no longer distinguished automatically by their noble origins as would have been the case in previous centuries.²⁹ Many worked as lawyers, for example, but combined this with writing plays or art criticism or composing sonatas. Their careers and social status allowed them to create a haven within the protective walls of their libraries and studies, in which they could feed their spirit and intellect with art, literature and music. They set themselves apart from other bourgeois through the refined sensitivity with which they shaped their collections. Their progressive preference for Redon united them in a self-selected aristocracy of taste.³⁰ The author of the first catalogue of Redon's graphic work, the Belgian lawyer and politician Jules Destrée (1863–1936), described the motives of these *initiés*, among whom he included himself, as 'feeling so unusual, imagining themselves candidly as the first cluster of peaks to catch the light of the rising sun, within the anonymous and multitudinous crowd'.³¹

Writer and painter Kasper Niehaus (1889–1974) compared Bonger to 'the French amateurs' and described the cult as an 'un-Dutch phenomenon'.³² All the same, Bonger was not the only person in the Netherlands to focus on the cultural elite of Paris in general and Redon in particular: Redon had already caused a furore in the 1880s among the 'Tachtigers', a modern literary movement named after the same decade, while the painter Isaac Israëls (1865–1934) was another great admirer.³³ Having purchased the last copy of Redon's most coveted print series, *Dans le rêve*, which appeared in a tiny edition of twenty-five, Israëls wistfully commented that he would love to get hold of 'the portraits' of the other twenty-four owners.³⁴ Bonger must have had similar feelings following his purchase from Durand-Ruel. The names of Redon's most important collectors featured prominently in the catalogue as lenders (figs. 6–14) in what was a deliberate strategy on the part of the artist and the gallery to win over new buyers.³⁵ As a lover of French literature, the names of Huysmans and Gide must have been especially pleasing for Bonger to see.

and spectacular works of Eugène Delacroix. Numerous paintings by both masters were already on display at the Louvre in 1890 and a shared appreciation of these artists would be a constant thread in Bonger's relationship with Redon. As noted earlier, Bonger sent him a copy of Delacroix's recently published diary immediately after their second meeting at the Durand-Ruel exhibition. The artist and collector also regularly exchanged reproductions and postcards of Rembrandt, and the masters in question were a frequent topic in their correspondence. See also the entry for the copy after Rembrandt (entry 15, cat. 36).

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu has described how cultural capital and taste can be used to distinguish oneself from one's peers (Bourdieu 2010). This idea had already been expressed in the eighteenth century by the literary scholar Anne-Gabriel Meusnier-de Querlon: 'The distinction of things around a being is the measure of the distinction of that being.', see Roos Rosa de Carvalho, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 776–808.

³⁰ See, for example, Adamson 1996; Dario Gamboni, 'Une oeuvre à quatre mains', in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 623–45.

³¹ Destrée 1891, p. 8: 'à se sentir si rares, à s'imaginer avec candeur qu'ils sont quelques sommets premiers éclairés par le soleil levant, dans la foule anonyme et multiple'.

³² Kasper Niehaus called Bonger an 'on-Hollands fenomeen' and a 'type in het genre van de Fransche amateurs'. See Niehaus 1937; Roos Rosa de Carvalho, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 776–808.

³³ See Leeman and Sharp 1994, pp. 16–28 and Leeman, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, p. 678.

³⁴ Destrée 1891, p. 8.

³⁵ Given that this exclusive world was dominated by men, it is interesting to note a 'madame Sèthe' in the catalogue. This must be one of the three progressive Sèthe sisters, who moved freely in progressive art circles. The most likely candidate would be Maria Sèthe (1867–1943), who married Henry van der Velde (1863–1957) in 1894.

²⁶ Notes for a Lecture on Odilon Redon at the Larensche Kunsthandel on 7 May 1909 in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, C, p. 19: 'met zijn verheerlijking van de natuur als een dood paard doorhollen'.

²⁷ As Bonger wrote to his second wife: see Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde 1936–37, p. 117: 'Toen er op geestelijk gebied niets meer was, toen men alles had afgebroken, toen is Redon gekomen.'

²⁸ Annie Bonger-van der Linden to Andries Bonger's

parents, 9 November 1891, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1865V1970: 't was al sedert lang een ambitie van Dries zijn kennis te maken, en hij is niet teleurgesteld geweest. Hij is een en al bewondering voor Redon teruggekomen. Den volgende zondag hebben ze rendez-vous in het Louvre, en daarna komt Redon hier om mijn portret te zien dat Bernard zal meebrengen.' During their visit to the museum, Bonger and Redon are sure to have admired the works of Rembrandt as well as the large



Fig. 6 Portrait of lawyer and writer Alidor Delzant (1848–1905) by Félix Bracquemond, 1900. Etching and drypoint on laid paper, 40.6 x 33 cm. British Museum, London (donated by Campbell Dodgson)

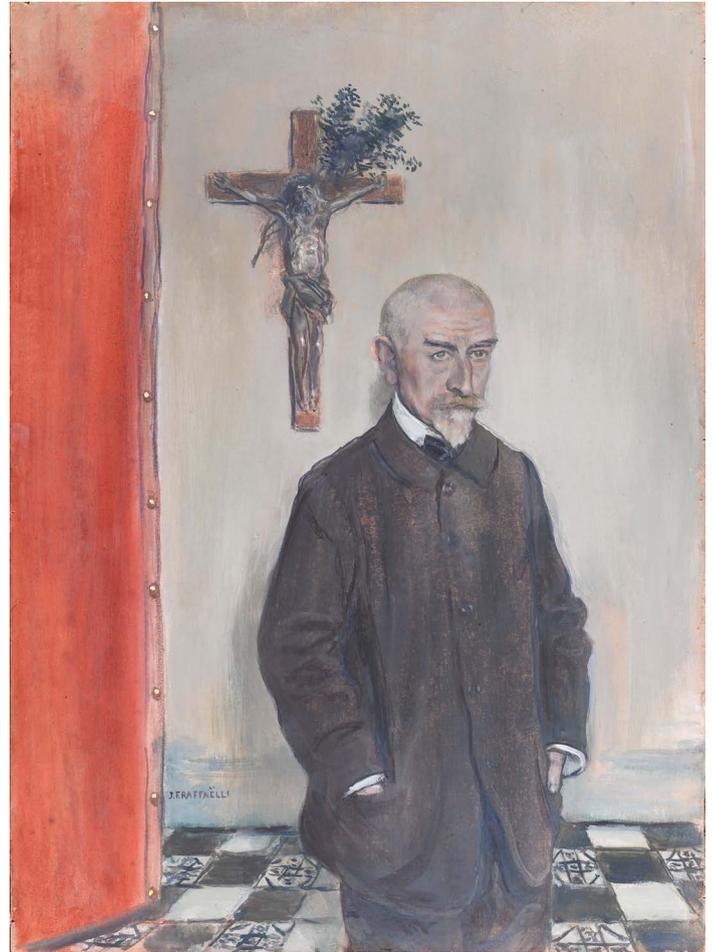


Fig. 7 Portrait of writer and critic Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) by Jean-François Raffaëlli, c. 1903. Pastel and oil pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 63 x 38.6 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

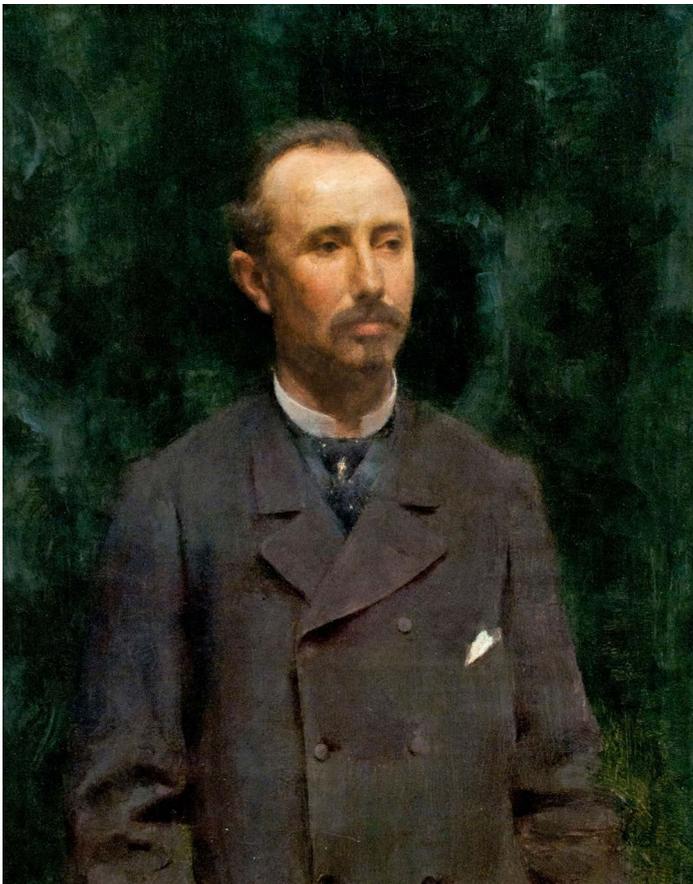


Fig. 8 Portrait of lawyer and critic Edmond Picard (1836–1924) by Fernand Khnopff, 1884. Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 32.5 cm. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels



Fig. 9 Portrait of art official and critic Roger Marx (1859–1913) by Eugène Carrière, 1886. Oil on canvas, 46.5 × 38.4 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 10 Portrait of rentier Charles Hayem (1839–1902) by Jules-Elie Delaunay, 1865. Oil on canvas, 55.5 × 46 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

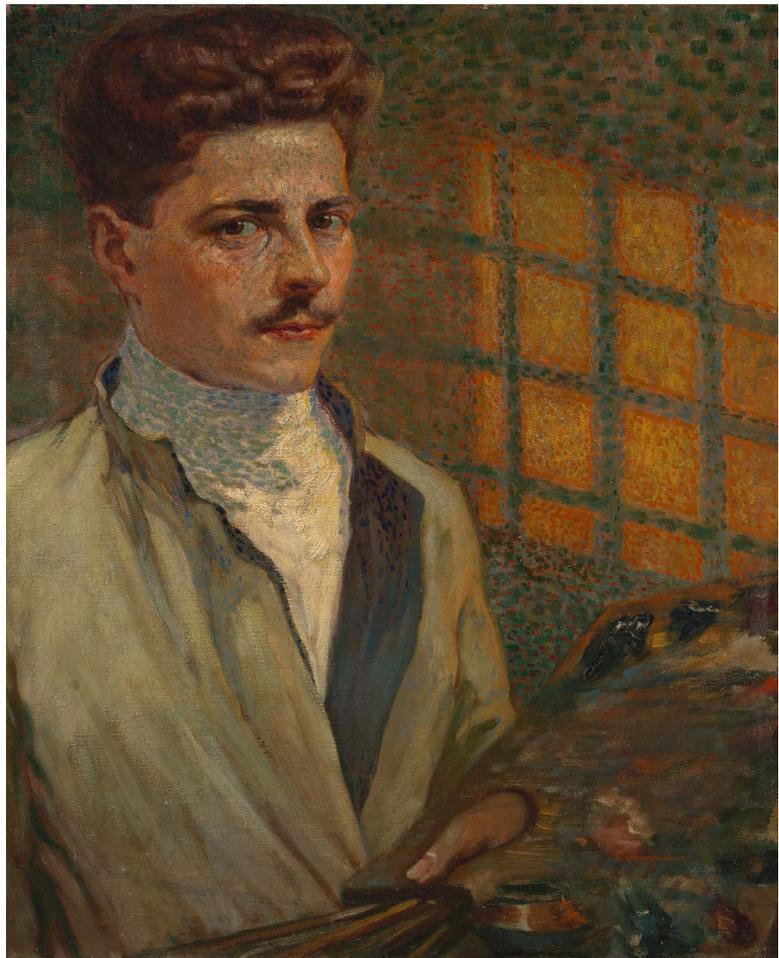


Fig. 11 Portrait of artist and aristocrat Antoine de La Rochefoucauld (1862–1959) by Emile Schuffenecker, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 69.5 × 56 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Fig. 12 Portrait of artist and musician Maria Sèthe (1867–1943) by Théo Van Rysselberghe, 1891. Oil on canvas, 120 × 86 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp

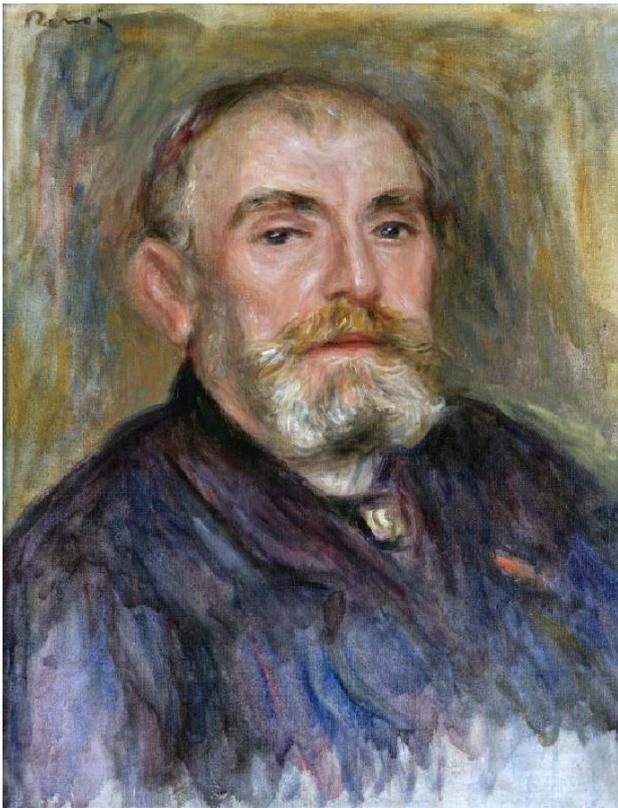
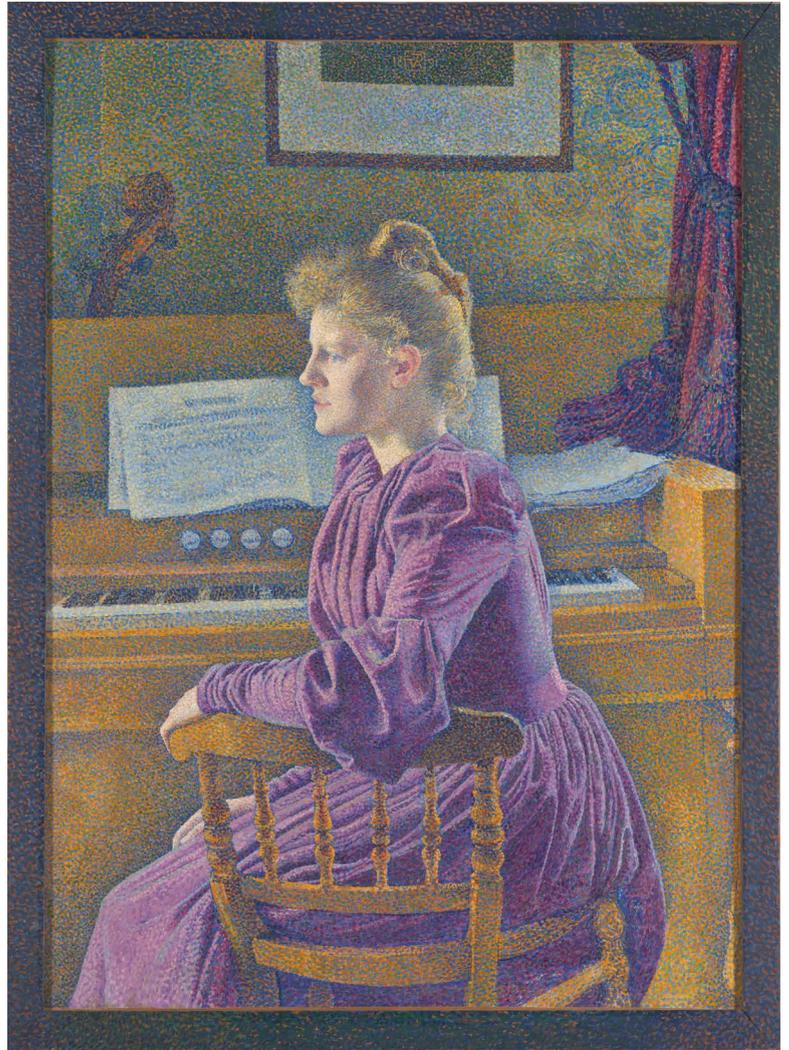


Fig. 13 Portrait of artist Henry Lerolle (1848–1929) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, c. 1895. Oil on canvas, 45.4 × 35 cm. Private collection



Fig. 14 Portrait of composer and lawyer Ernest Chausson (1855–1899) by Odilon Redon, 1899. Sanguine on paper, dimensions unknown. Collection unknown

Redon as one of the chosen

Along with his immersion in books, these first purchases thus assured Bonger of 'communion with the chosen' without having to leave home. They brought him into contact with other admirers, but above all with the artist himself. To Bonger, the work of art was a direct expression of its maker's spirit, which made personal contact essential.³⁶

Unlike the shabby bohemians he encountered at Theo's home, for whose liberated lifestyle he could muster little respect, the twenty-years-old Redon embodied an entirely different type of artist: one who precisely matched Bonger's ideal image of elite Parisian culture.³⁷ Redon was well read, refined, sensitive and aristocratic.³⁸ In his later years, he was described by print dealer and publisher Johannes Hendricus de Bois (1878–1946) as: 'an exceptional man [...] but not in the manner that many have represented him, that is to say as a wild fantasist with long hair, floppy tie and Garibaldi hat. Far from it: he is a gentle, dignified, truly French old gentleman, dressed in black with a white tie, soft of speech and smile' (fig. 1).³⁹ Even in his younger days, the artist had been respectable and restrained in appearance, channelling his turbulence and vehemence entirely into his art. Redon screened off his sensitive nature from the outside world as much as he could. He never, for instance, opened his studio to the public as many of his contemporaries did, and he worked in immense tranquillity and seclusion in his living quarters. The artist is depicted on the cover of the magazine *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, staring in apparent meditation at the sheet of paper on his easel (fig. 15).

Bonger as one of the chosen

Around the self-imposed isolation of his domestic arrangements, Redon constructed a second protective circle of loyal collectors, whom he called his *fidèles*. Although Bonger came to occupy a special place, he was by no means the only collector with whom Redon struck up a relationship. These friendships were instrumental to some extent, in that they guaranteed the artist stable sales,⁴⁰ without his having to venture out too often in public⁴¹ – a reticence brought about by the widespread indifference or even hostility towards his work. One of Redon's *noirs* caused a furore, for instance, at an 1882 exhibition in the offices of newspaper *Le Gaulois* on a Paris boulevard. As they passed the shop, passengers on the omnibus would point and jeer at these most intimate expressions of his soul.⁴²

The Durand-Ruel exhibition of 1894 was Redon's first major show since then and the comforting domesticity of the rooms and the gallery's exclusivity were well suited to his work. Redon was convinced of the importance of a conducive environment for his art, one capable of reflecting its personal origins, which is why he preferred to place his work with collectors he knew well and trusted. He wrote to Bonger: 'How these artistic media are sensitive! They're like the kind of shy people who can seem negligible in certain contexts but in the intimacy of a small gathering give the true measure of their brilliance.'⁴³

³⁶ Amsterdam 2009, p. 11.

³⁷ Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde (1936–37, p. 115) wrote: 'Bonger was riveted by their conversations about painting, but their lifestyle was offensive to him. He was not interested in the slightest in night-life and loathed anything that reeked of Bohemia.' ('Hun gesprekken over schilderkunst boeiden Bonger in de hoogste mate, maar hun manier van leven stuitte hem tegen de borst. Het caféleven had niet de minste aantrekking voor hem: hij haatte alles wat naar de Bohème zweemde.') See also the

letter from Theo Van Gogh to Jo Bonger, Paris, 26 January 1889, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b2030V1982, published in Van Gogh and Van Gogh-Bonger 1999, no. 28, p. 115. See also Amsterdam 2009, p. 20.

³⁸ Amsterdam 2009, p. 57; Leeman, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, II, p. 707.

³⁹ De Bois (1937), quoted in Heijbroek and Wouthuyzen 1994, p. 50: 'een bijzonder mensch [...] maar niet zooals velen zich hem voorstelden als een wilde fantast met lange haren, flapdas en garibaldi-

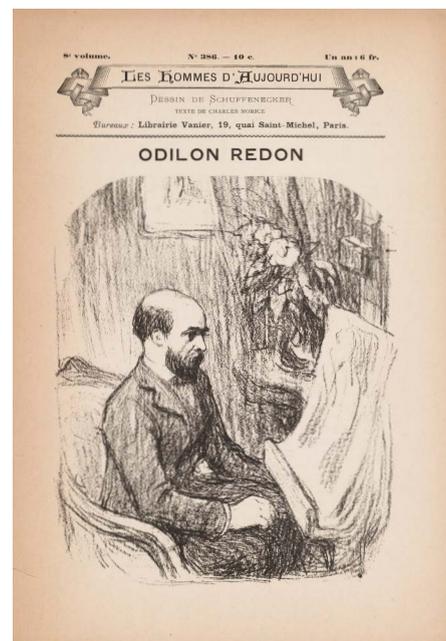


Fig. 15 Cover of *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, no. 386, 1890, with a portrait of Odilon Redon by Emile Schuffenecker. Private collection

hoed. Niets van dat alles. Een zachtzinnig, deftig echt-Fransch oud heertje, in 't zwart, met een wit dasje, rustig-zacht pratend en glimlachend.'

⁴⁰ As Redon himself stated, all his relationships revolved first and foremost around his art: 'My art, which is, above all, indeterminate, has brought me friends in every rank of humanity, but only for art's sake.' ('Mon art, surtout indéterminé, m'a valu des amitiés dans tous les rangs; mais uniquement pour l'art.') Letter 224 (12 March 1909), Cannes.

⁴¹ See also Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace before 1900', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, pp. 238–56; Adamson 1996.

⁴² The target of this mockery was *Le boulet* (W1054), a Redon *noir* owned by Bonger, to whom the anecdote obviously appealed. He referred to it several times in his correspondence and also cited the incident in his lecture to the Larensche Kunsthandel in 1909 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, C, p. 22). Bonger (*pace* Redon himself) explicitly linked the scorn of the masses to Zola's naturalism by recounting how the newspaper that was serializing the author's latest novel, *Pot-bouille*, promoted it with a large advertisement on its façade. See also letter 93 (1 February 1903), Amsterdam and note 6 above, and letter 220 (2 January 1909), no location.

⁴³ Redon to Bonger, letter 227 (16 May 1909), no location: 'Comme ces matières d'art sont sensibles! Elles sont comme ces personnes timide qui ne paraissent rien quelquefois en de certains milieux, et donnent au contraire leur éclat dans une petite intimité.'



Fig. 16 Odilon Redon, *Peach*, 1901. Oil on canvas, 20.5 × 25.5 cm. Inscribed: 'à Madame A. Bonger – respectueusement'. Private collection

44 Letter 17 (4 May 1895), Paris: 'Je vous redis ce qui me vient à l'esprit bien des fois: c'est que mon art m'a fait connaître des personnes de qualité; je lui dois de bien bonnes amitiés. Je suis de plus en plus entouré d'amis aimants et dévoués.'

45 Vincent Willem Van Gogh was less than enamoured with Bonger's role in the management of Vincent Van Gogh's estate, the low point being Bonger's advice to his sister Jo to 'do away' ('weg te doen') with the whole lot. Ir. V.-W. Van Gogh, *Memorandum Andries Bonger*, 1 January 1963, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, p. 1. All the same, Bonger repeatedly expressed his sincere admiration for Van Gogh, of whom he wrote, 'He's really the only artist we've had at the turn of this century'. ('C'est bien lui le seul artiste que nous ayons eu à la fin de ce siècle.') Letter 51 (4 September 1897), Hilversum.

46 Letter 267 (1 October 1911), Amsterdam: 'Mais il faut bien marcher, comme de bons soldats.'

47 Letter 26 (10 November 1895), Hilversum: 'Ce que j'ai souffert dans ma vie et ce que je souffre journellement encore de ce conflit!'

48 Letter 26 (10 November 1895), Hilversum: Redon wrote: 'The same is true for all of us, in so far as we are human. These dual roads are quite contrary one to another, and only willpower can help us keep our balance, going where neither bourgeois nor bohemian does.' ('Nous en sommes tous là, quand nous sommes des hommes. Il y a la dualité de ces routes, si contraires, où la volonté seule nous tient, en équilibre, où ne marchent ni les bourgeois, ni les bohèmes.')

When they met again in Paris where the Dutchman had purchased his first works from Durand-Ruel, Redon was establishing the intimate relationship between artist and collector that he considered essential. To Redon's mind, Bonger was of sufficient calibre to be worthy of his art. Within the space of a few letters, he already felt able to write to him: 'Let me say again what has often occurred to me – that my art has brought me into contact with some very fine people; some excellent friendships have come of it. I am increasingly surrounded by loving and devoted friends.'⁴⁴

Neither bohemian nor bourgeois

We are better informed now about Bonger's complex character thanks to the publication of the annotated correspondence with Redon in 2022. He himself destroyed the majority of his much more extensive correspondence, which meant that, until recently, researchers had to make do with the earlier letters to his parents and a few very unfavourable anecdotes about him that were noted down after his death by Vincent Willem Van Gogh (1890–1978), the son of Theo and Bonger's sister Jo.⁴⁵

The image of Bonger that emerges from the correspondence is that of an intelligent and sensitive man with an exceptionally strong sense of duty. 'But one must carry on regardless, like a good soldier', he wrote wistfully to Redon in 1911.⁴⁶ Although he always dutifully fulfilled his everyday obligations, the banality and monotony of that life were an inexhaustible affliction for a man of his nature. 'How I have suffered in my life – and still do every day – because of this conflict!', he had complained to Redon some years earlier.⁴⁷ According to the artist, this duality was the result of an attitude to life that he also recognized in himself and which arose from an aristocratic refusal to identify with the bourgeois on the one hand or the bohemian on the other.⁴⁸

What Bonger found in Redon's art was a potent antidote to the banality of everyday life. He wrote to Redon: 'You cannot imagine the extent to which you occupy my mind amid the work that, alas, absorbs almost all of my strength.'⁴⁹ At the same time, however, Bonger was perfectly clear that this mental world, his contact with Redon and his support of the artist, only existed by grace of the funds provided by his career. He wrote in another letter to the artist: 'It makes me happy, you may well believe, not least for the contentment you feel at my love of your art. My daily labours, over and beyond the material security they provide, will not have been entirely in vain. [...] This consoles me in my many anxieties and spares me many regrets.'⁵⁰

A rather one-sided image of Bonger's wife Annie had developed, shaped largely by Andries's cry of despair shortly after he married her: 'Sometimes I think she's been lying on a marble tomb for years. [...] There's no question of an intellectual life – I had so much more stimulation on that side before my marriage.'⁵¹ Various sources document that Annie was an aloof woman and that the couple supposedly avoided each other at home as much as they could. The correspondence confirms that they did indeed develop a *modus vivendi* of their own over the years.⁵² Annie's interest in Redon's work and her piano playing in the evening suggest, however, that she did actually share to some extent in her husband's intellectual activities. Through her correspondence with Redon's wife and various visits between the two couples, Annie actively contributed to the relationship, just as Camille Redon (1853–1923) assumed some of her husband's social and organizational duties.⁵³ Bonger's second wife described Annie in more appreciative terms: 'With her calm nature, cultivation and refined taste, his wife was a true companion for him, who shared his interest in art and literature and who, with the greatest devotion, provided him with the care he so desperately needed in his demanding work and a nervous disposition that tended almost to oversensitivity.'⁵⁴ Redon courteously involved Annie in the relationship by always sending her his regards, and those of Camille too, in his letters. He even dedicated a subtle still life of a peach to her, which he inscribed 'à Madame Bonger – respectueusement – ODILON REDON' (fig. 16).⁵⁵

Building the collection

Bonger carefully built up his extensive collection of Redons between 1894 and 1908. His purchases in Paris and The Hague were soon joined by many others, yet each new acquisition seems only to have whetted Bonger's appetite for the master's work. He was able to track the artist's development closely through Redon's own letters and his daily scrutiny of reviews in international newspapers and magazines. In the wake of his first acquisitions of female profiles in charcoal, he followed Redon's transition from working in black materials to working in colour, and in 1898 he purchased one of the artist's first small paintings, done two years earlier.⁵⁶ After Redon wrote to him in 1896 that he was making increasing use of pastels, Bonger immediately sounded him out about the possibility of adding pastels to his collection.⁵⁷ Working in colour gave Redon a new, light-hearted source of pleasure. At the same time, the works sold well, enabling him to move into a larger apartment.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Letter 35 (26 April 1896), Hilversum: 'Vous ne saurez jamais combien, parmi le travail qui malheureusement absorbe toutes mes forces, vous occupez mon esprit.'

⁵⁰ Letter 141 (27 August 1904), Amsterdam: 'J'en suis heureux, croyez-le bien, aussi pour le contentement que mon amour pour votre art vous donne. Mon

travail quotidien, en dehors de la sécurité matérielle qu'il me procure, n'aura donc pas été tout-à-fait vain. [...] Cela me console de bien des soucis, et m'évite bien des regrets.'

⁵¹ Bonger to his sister Jo, 3 October 1887, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1033V1962, quoted in Amsterdam 2009, p. 22: 'Soms denk ik dat

ze jaren op een marmeren graftombe gelegen heeft. [...] Van geestelijk leven is geen kwestie – voor mijn trouwen had ik van dien kant nog heel wat meer opwekking.' See also the quoted letter from Theo to Vincent Van Gogh about their flawed marriage, p. 23.
⁵² Jo Van Gogh-Bonger mentioned the couple's unhappy marriage in her diary on 29 June 1892: 'They have so little in common – it is as though she were apart from him for hours at a time, that she *cannot* follow him and he cannot follow her into her little world [...].' ('Zij vormen zoo weinig een geheel – het is net of zij uren van hem weg is, hem niet volgen *kan*, en hij kan haar niet volgen in haar wereldje [...].') bongerdiaaries.org/diary_jo_4_section_30 (accessed in October 2021). Vincent Willem Van Gogh also described the marriage as 'unhappy' ('ongelukkig') in his 1963 memorandum, while Andries's cousin Henk Bonger (1911–1999) wrote to Bonger's second wife in 1973: 'I certainly believe that life with Aunt Annie was very tough. She was overly serious, precise and devoid of any humour or gaiety, and put off a lot of people because of that.' ('Ik geloof zeker, dat het leven met Tante Annie erg zwaar is geweest. Zij was overernstig, precies en gespeend van elke humor en vrolijkheid en zij stootte daardoor veel mensen af.') Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, D. Letters, with thanks to Merel van Tilburg.

⁵³ In letter 149 (13 October 1905), no location, for example, in which Redon wrote that 'Mme Bonger's long letter was fascinating' ('La longue lettre de Madame Bonger nous intéressa beaucoup').

⁵⁴ Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde 1936–37, p. 116: 'Met haar rustigen aard, hooge ontwikkeling en zeer verfijnden smaak zou zijn vrouw voor hem waarlijk een levensgezelligen zijn, die zijn belangstelling in kunst en letteren deelde en hem met de grootste toewijding de verzorging gaf, die hij bij zijn ingespannen arbeid en door zijn haast tot overgevoeligheid verhoogd zenuwleven zoozeer behoefde.'

⁵⁵ *Peach* (W1369).

⁵⁶ See entry 4 on female profiles (cats. 7–12) and entry 9 on family pastels (cats. 21–22).

⁵⁷ See letters 36 (28 April 1896), Paris and 37 (21 June 1896), Hilversum.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, and letters 47 (29 May 1897), Peyrelebadé and 67 (3 January 1900), no location.

Bonger bought most of the works in his collection directly from the artist: as many as forty paintings and drawings, as well as all the prints, came to the Netherlands via this route. The line between maker and buyer was so short, in fact, that after one big purchase by the collector, Redon found his studio walls entirely bare.⁵⁹ Bonger also frequently acted to 'save' Redons from private collections that came up for auction. His purchases at these sales prevented the works from falling into 'the hands of someone indifferent to your art' – rescue missions for which Redon thanked him effusively.⁶⁰

The 1903 sale exhibition

Bonger bought several dozen works at sale exhibitions, mostly at Durand-Ruel. Redon was granted other shows of this kind at the gallery after 1894, for which Bonger always tried to travel to Paris despite his busy schedule. In 1902 Bonger offered to lend his collection to a forthcoming exhibition, while thinking back wistfully to 1894. He wrote to Redon: 'I shall never forget the feelings inspired in me by the 1894 exhibition, I can bring its every detail to mind. That little room holding your lithographs and etchings, how overjoyed I should be to see it again!'⁶¹ Bonger lent four important items to the 1903 exhibition, which meant that he himself was now listed in the catalogue among the prestigious lenders. His name appears there above those of other prominent collectors like Fabre, Fontaine and Frizeau. He wrote to Redon of how he imagined meeting these other admirers: 'All your friends and collectors will no doubt be there too, united in one and the same sentiment of admiration and gratitude.'⁶²

Bonger bought no fewer than eight new works during his visit to this particular sales exhibition – virtually everything that was not yet in the hands of other collectors. A striking number of purchases were (floral) still lifes. These works were highly sought after and so accounted for a steadily growing proportion of Redon's output.⁶³ For all his unique identity in a period when most artists were aligned with a particular school or style, Redon thus showed himself to be sensitive to the demands of the art market. Redon wrote to Bonger in 1907, 'Here everyone is, for the time being, devoted to my flowers'.⁶⁴ Over the years, Bonger would acquire as many as twenty of them in total.⁶⁵

59 Letter 85 (26 November 1902), no location: '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.')

60 At the auction of Sara de Swart's Redons, Bonger purchased no fewer than four of the works, writing afterwards to the artist: 'I was very happy to get hold of these pieces, which would otherwise have fallen into the hands of someone indifferent to your art. I didn't see a single friendly face at the sale.' ('J'ai été bien content d'avoir pu m'assurer de ces pièces, qui sans cela auraient touché dans les mains d'un indifférent. Je n'ai rencontré à cette vente aucun visage ami.')

61 Letter 81 (8 June 1902), Amsterdam: 'Je n'oublierai jamais l'émotion ressentie à celle de 1894, dont j'ai encore tous les détails présents à la mémoire. La petite sale réunissant vos lithographies et eaux-fortes, avec quelle joie la reverrai-je!' Ibid.

62 Other collectors were Maurice Fabre (1861–1939), Arthur Fontaine (1860–1931) and Gabriel Frizeau (1870–1938). Letter 97 (23 February 1903), Amsterdam: 'Vos amis et collectionneurs se trouveront sans doute tous là, réunis dans un même sentiment d'admiration et de reconnaissance.'

63 Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace after 1900', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 258–80.

64 'on est tout à mes fleurs pour l'instant.' Letter 192 (27 April 1907), no location.

65 See entries 10, 11 and 12 on floral still lifes – cats. 23–27, 28 and 29–31.

The secret of Redon

Below an article on Redon preserved in the Andries Bonger Archive in the Rijksmuseum there is an anonymous note written in pen and ink, and signed (or decorated) with an 'X': 'The secret of Redon is his mind' (fig. a). This enigmatic observation has been confirmed in recent years during the search for 'the secret of Redon'. In an effort to gain a better understanding of his artworks, every aspect of his artistry has been explored: his life and milieu, his tastes, his materials, his working process, the books he owned, and the ideas prevalent in his day.¹ But are we any closer to unravelling the enigma of Redon's art? This is doubtful. The key to unlocking Redon's secret lies, in fact, in the impenetrable recesses of his mind. It was not for nothing that he gave his autobiographical writings the title '*To Myself*' and began with the phrase: 'I have made an art according to myself'.²

Redon had the sensitivity and the capacity to let his innermost being speak through his art, and the result is an oeuvre in a unique and utterly idiosyncratic idiom. This process of creation began with his receptiveness to apparitions that emanated from his subconscious and appeared in his mind's eye. They simply came to him, generally when he was out walking in – or merely observing – unspoiled nature. A youthful memory recounted by Redon is telling: 'My father often used to say to me: "Look at those clouds, can you see as I can, the changing shapes in them?" And then he would show me strange beings, fantastic and marvelous visions, in the changing sky'.³

This summoning up of 'fantastic and marvelous visions' was by no means a passive gift, such as that of a medium who serves only as an intermediary between two worlds, but an active process that

fifteen years old, his first lessons in art. "He was a distinguished water-color painter, and a thorough artist. His first word—I shall remember it always—was to inform me that I was one myself, and that I should never permit myself to make a single pencil-stroke without my sensibility and my reason sharing in it." He did indeed remember the advice always, and every one of his plates tells how he followed it. His technical means are ample, but they are without secrets for one who knows etching and lithography.

The secret of Redon is ⁵⁸his mind.



Fig. a

he could control 'with imperturbable clear-sightedness'.⁴ By giving his visions – which proceeded from his exploration of elements of nature and his knowledge of science, including the theory of evolution, osteology and microbiology – a physical shape that complied with the laws of nature, he succeeded in endowing fluid matter with a fixed and convincing form.

The other element Redon deployed to capture his dreams was his artist's materials. A piece of white paper or a blank canvas gave him 'artist's block'; only after he applied a layer of material to such supports could his powers of imagination come to life.⁵ For Redon, moreover, each medium could cause different aspects of his mind to surface by virtue of its own particular character: he described the transfer paper he used for his lithographs as 'responsive', his charcoal was 'serious and unpleasant', his chalk pastels were 'pleasant' and 'rejuvenating', oil paint was 'enthraling' and 'stubborn', and quick-drying distemper lent itself to improvisation.⁶ In all of these media, Redon's manner of working was emphatically associative: the compositions were born, as it were, of the materials themselves, such as the powder of the charcoal and later the pastel chalk. The artist wrote compellingly: 'The material reveals secrets, it has its genius, it is through it that the oracle will speak.'⁷

Since the mystery of Redon's art is bound up with matter – that is to say, his artistic materials, into which he breathed life in his own inimitable way – these entries pay considerable attention to the technical descriptions of the works and the suggestive qualities that the artist was able to evoke with light and darkness, arabesque and contour, colour and harmony.

Redon's lucid visualizations of his subconscious are in stark contrast to the neutral or even vague descriptions he gave his works in his account books. In 1895 he described a charcoal drawing he had made in 1881 as follows: 'And *The Nightmare*

(drawing), a kind of bony monk holding by the hand, suspended by a thread, a kind of being (a round face), then in the sky a head in profile on the black (fig. b).'⁸ From Redon's hesitant formulation, one is scarcely able to make out that he is the author of the works, which lends strength to his assertion that he did not begin working with a preconceived idea. Furthermore, he wished to protect this source – a source that lay deep inside him and that he referred to as the sacred fount of his work – because it was too personal and too vulnerable.⁹

This reticence in referring to himself and his art has frustrated every collector and critic who has had anything to do with Redon. In 1886 Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917) published a harsh critique of Redon's *noirs*, which in his eyes were not precise enough. He articulated, moreover, the uncontrollable tendency of every viewer (and scholar) to interpret the artist's dream images: 'Thus M. Redon draws for you an eye which floats, at the end of a stem, in an amorphous landscape. And the commentators assemble. Some will tell you that this eye exactly represents the eye of Conscience, others the eye of Incertitude; some will explain that this eye synthesizes a setting sun over hyperborean seas, others that it symbolizes universal sorrow, a bizarre water lily about to blossom on the black waters of invisible Acherons. A supreme exegete arrives and concludes: "This eye at the end of a stem is simply a necktie pin." The very essence of the ideal is that it evokes nothing but vague forms which might just as well be magic lakes

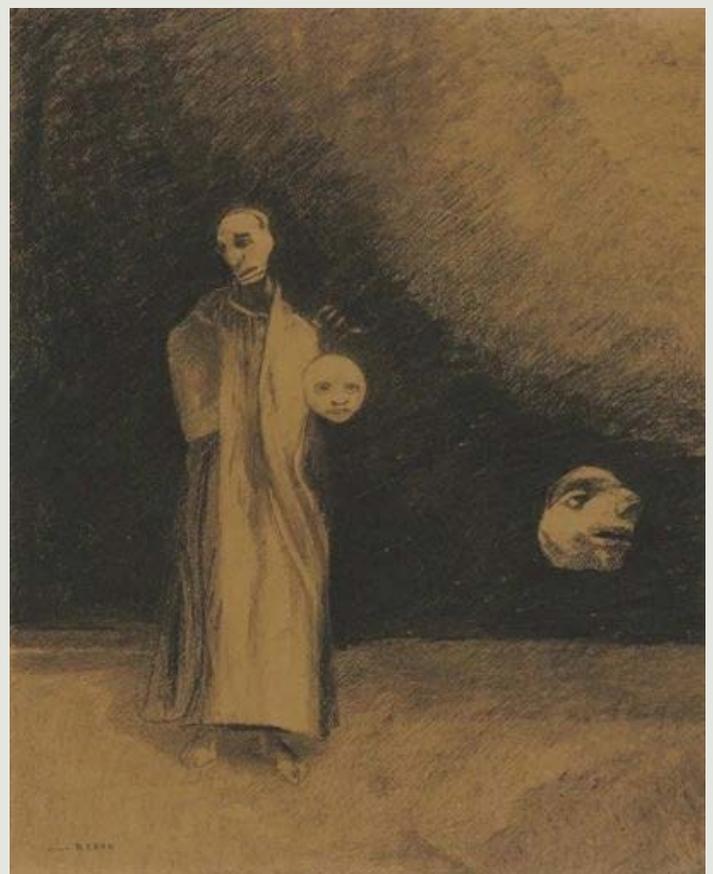


Fig. b Odilon Redon, *Nightmare*, c. 1881. Charcoal and fixative application on paper, 45.9 × 36.4 cm. Private collection

as sacred elephants, extraterrestrial flowers as well as necktie pins, unless they are nothing at all. Yet, we demand today that whatever is represented be precise, we want the figures that emanate from an artist's brain to move and think and live.¹⁰

Although Redon did think it essential that his creatures, no matter how bizarre, had substance and were plausibly conceived, it is true that he kept his art deliberately vague, which demands a receptive attitude on the part of the viewer. When his critic friend André Mellerio sent Redon a list of questions in preparation for the oeuvre catalogue of his lithographs, the artist replied: 'I would like to convince you that all this was but a bit of liquid oily black, transmitted by the greasy body of the stone, onto a white paper, for the sole purpose of producing in the spectator a certain diffuse yet domineering attraction to the obscure world of *indetermination*. And predisposed to thought.'¹¹

The intention, therefore, was to carry viewers away and set them thinking, but preferably not interpreting. After all, as soon as one interpretation presents itself, the doors to other ways of seeing close. The artist preferred to leave a whole row of doors open a crack, doors that could never be pushed fully open. In these entries the later interpretations of Redon are addressed only selectively, bearing in mind Redon's exclamation: 'Every pen wishes to use me for its theses, for its beliefs. It is wrong to ascribe all kinds of intentions to me. I only make art. Art of expansion.'¹²

Like every viewer, Bongers sought meaning in Redon's work, but he was exceptional in the restraint and respect he showed for the untouchable in Redon's art – an art that, in Bongers's eyes, was not only infinitely profound but also addressed the existential questions of humanity. Bongers wrote that the artist afforded us a 'glimpse of the universe with its ever recoiling mystery'.¹³ He compared the effect of Redon's art on his mood with that of music, which he considered an inexhaustible source of contemplation and rapture.¹⁴ In addition, Bongers, like the writer of the enigmatic note in the archive, saw the works as the direct expression of Redon's 'deepest nature', and he was honoured to commune with this extraordinary soul.¹⁵ No doubt he experienced this as a great privilege.

Even when there was no personal contact between artist and admirer, the appreciation of Redon's art has always entailed a certain amount of elitist self-satisfaction, since an affinity for these works presupposes the possession of certain qualities: a sensitive nature, broad erudition and a deep intellect. The works by Redon in the Van Gogh Museum were initially and intentionally committed by the artist to the protective interior of a sensitive admirer whom he knew personally. For him, too, 'communion' with a kindred spirit was essential. Now his works are exposed to the daily gaze of hundreds, if not thousands, of museum visitors, who can explore for themselves 'the secret of Redon'. As the artist himself wrote: 'I have put in [my works] a little door opening onto a mystery. I have made fictions. It is up to them [the people] to go further.'¹⁶

1 In his text of 1913, André Mellerio had explored all of these aspects in an effort to arrive at a more complete picture of Redon's (lithographic) art. See Mellerio (1913) 2001. See also Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95; Leeman 1994; Gamboni 2002; Dario Gamboni, "'Why a blue here and gold there?' – The Golden Cell: The Significance and Reception of Color in the Art of Odilon Redon', in Frankfurt 2007, pp. 123–32; Gamboni 2011.

2 Redon (1922) 1986, p. 7.

3 Ibid.

4 Letter 109 (30 June 1903), no location.

5 Redon to Mellerio (21 July 1898 and 16 August 1898), in Leblond 1923.

6 Redon to Mellerio (21 July 1898) and (16 August 1898), in Leblond 1923; letter 47 (29 May 1897), Peyrelevede, and letter 165 (21 April 1906), Chaville. See also entry 14 on Redon's decorative paintings (cats. 34–35).

7 Redon (1922) 1986, p. 107.

8 Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 25 May 1895, no. 225/170, published as CD-ROM in Paris/Montpellier 2011. Referred to as follows: 'Et *Le Cauchemar* (dessin) une sorte de moine osseux tenant à la main; suspendu par un filament, une sorte d'être (une face ronde) puis dans le ciel est une tête se profilant sur le noir.'

9 Redon to Mellerio (21 July 1898), in Leblond 1923: 'All the reasons that I will give you regarding the structure of my albums will seem insignificant and puerile to you; they would take away the prestige the albums must have. Once more it is good to surround all genesis with mystery' ('Toutes les raisons que je vous donnerais sur le contexte de mes albums vous paraîtraient insignifiantes et puérides; elles leur enlèveraient le prestige qu'ils doivent avoir. Encore une fois, il est bon d'entourer toute genèse d'un mystère').

10 O. Mirbeau, 'L'Art et la Nature', *Le Gaulois* (26 April 1886), translated in John Rewald, 'Odilon Redon', in New York 1961, pp. 33–34.

11 Redon to Mellerio (21 July 1898), in Leblond 1923: 'Je voudrais vous convaincre que tout ne sera qu'un peu de liquide noir huileux, transmis par le corps gras et la pierre, sur un papier blanc, à seule fin de produire chez le spectateur une sorte d'attirance diffuse et dominatrice dans le monde obscur de l'*indéterminité*. Et prédisposant à la pensée.'

12 Redon to Picard (15 June 1894), translated in Rewald, in New York 1961, p. 39.

13 Andries Bongers, 'Lezing ter gelegenheid van de Redon-expositie in de Larensche Kunsthandel, voorgedragen op 7 mei 1909'. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bongers archive, C, p. 4: 'blik in het heelal met zijn altijd terugdeinzend mysterie'.

14 Gustave Kahn had already described Redon's drawings in musical terms in 1887: 'The drawing or rather the form represented has the value of being suggestive, a musical theme with the potential to stimulate [...] the spectator's daydreams. Different individuals can intuit different melancholy thought and sentiments from these images'; translated in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 202.

15 Letter 107 (1 June 1903), Amsterdam: 'No artist has fascinated me as you have; your art has the gift of moving me to the bottom of my heart. It stands outside every school, and has no other concern than that of manifesting your wonderful vision of the universe. Your prodigious gift offers a presentiment of the unrevealed life, which we always wish to fathom in greater depth. The Italians had Christianity, from which they drew an art admirable but constrained. Yours is universal, having no other source than your deepest nature.' ('Nul artiste ne m'a autant fasciné que vous; votre art a le don de m'émouvoir dans mes fibres les plus profondes. Il est en-dehors de toute école, sans autre préoccupation que de manifester votre vision merveilleuse de l'univers. Le prodigieux don que vous avez de faire pressentir la vie non révélée, que nous voudrions toujours sonder davantage. Les italiens eurent la foi chrétienne, source d'un art admirable, mais restreint. Le vôtre est universel, émanant uniquement de votre nature profonde.')

16 Redon (1922) 1986, p. 77.

Fig. 17 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of A. M. L. Bonger-van der Linden*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 72.5 × 59.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Gift of C.H. Huguenot van der Linden, Amsterdam and E.C. van der Linden, Amsterdam



This awareness of the market also explains the increasing proportion of portraits in Redon's oeuvre. The relative number of them in the 1903 catalogue is striking: no fewer than six portraits, several of which were of collectors' wives. Together with still lifes, these portrait commissions took up the majority of Redon's time around 1906.⁶⁶ Annie Bonger-van der Linden was also immortalized by the master (fig. 17). Bonger was delighted with his wife's depiction in just a few shades of oil paint: 'The portrait of my wife is a masterpiece, it is quite unexampled. It is supremely elegant and has an inner life that is deeply moving.'⁶⁷ Redon made a small portrait of Bonger himself during a few enjoyable days that the couples spent together in Paris in early November 1904 and gave it to the appreciative Dutchman as a souvenir (fig. 18). Bonger wrote to the artist that the portrait would always remain dear to him as 'testimony to your friendship'.⁶⁸ Redon made similar portraits in *sanguine* of several of his 'amateurs', mostly in profile or three-quarter view, with highly worked-up and refined facial features, floating on a sheet with ample borders. The artist inscribed his personal message at bottom right, using the same words as he had for other friends and collectors, somewhat reducing the individual touch (figs. 20, 21).⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Letter 190 (20 April 1907), no location.

⁶⁷ Letter 168 (3 June 1906), Amsterdam: 'Le portrait de ma femme est un chef-d'œuvre, dont je saurais trouver d'exemple. C'est d'une vie intérieure qui émotionne profondément et d'une suprême élégance.'

⁶⁸ Letter 126 (18 December 1904), Amsterdam: 'Merci, infiniment, cher Monsieur, de ce souvenir que j'apprécie vivement et qui me sera toujours cher, comme un témoignage de votre amitié.'

⁶⁹ See Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, I (1992), nos. 49–71.

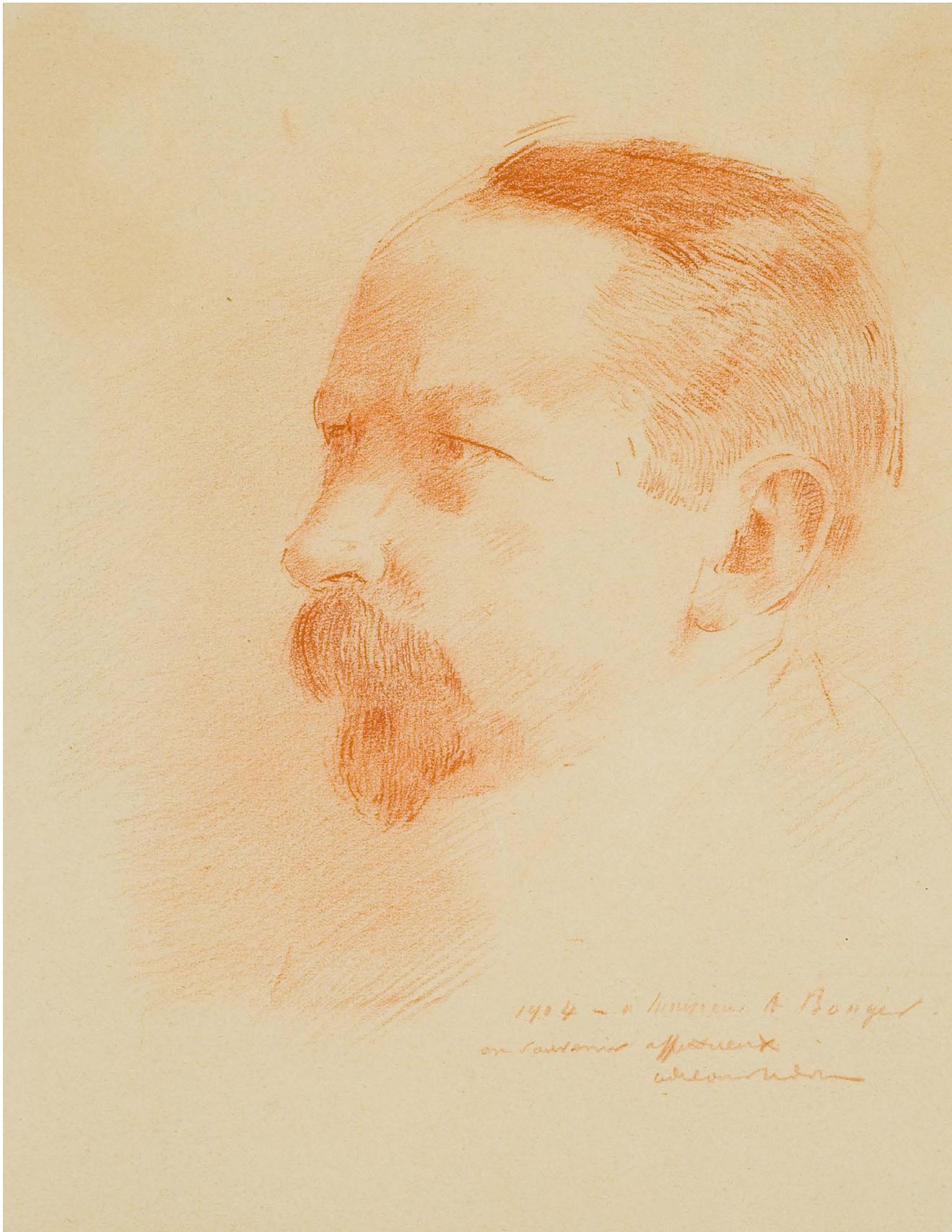


Fig. 18 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of Andries Bonger*, 1904. Sanguine on paper, 24 x 18 cm. Private collection



Fig. 19 The interior of Andries Bonger's home at Stadhouderskade 56, Amsterdam, 1904. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest

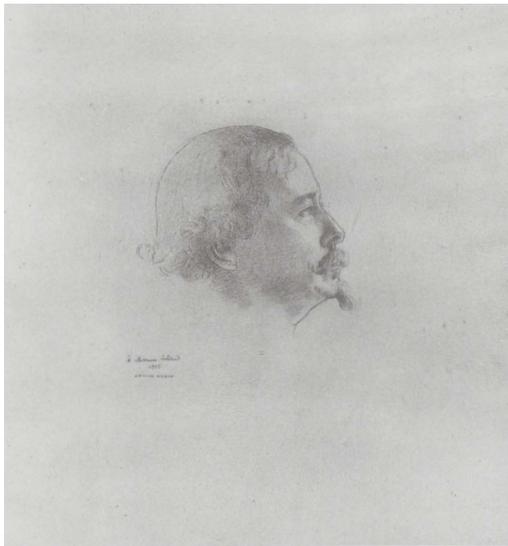


Fig. 20 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of Marius-Ary Leblond*, 1913. Sanguine on paper, 45 × 42 cm. Private collection

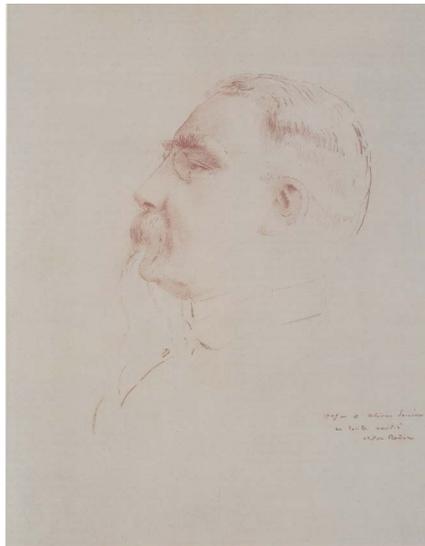


Fig. 21 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of Olivier Sainsère*, 1905. Sanguine on paper, 44.9 × 35.8 cm. The Ian Woodner Family Collection, New York



Fig. 22 Odilon Redon, *The Red Screen (with Pegasus)*, 1906–08. Distemper on canvas, 173.5 × 238 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Almost as personal as a portrait were the customized decorations that Redon produced for his collectors' interiors, although some were also sold individually on the art market. Bonger acquired his first decorative panel in distemper from Durand-Ruel in 1903 on Redon's suggestion. On his return, he carefully installed it in his home on Stadhouderskade (fig. 19). The beautiful effect of the painting, with its abstract dream world of flowers against a light background, rekindled Bonger's old yearning for 'a little house of my own, decorated by you and Bernard to match my most intimate tastes'.⁷⁰ This desire was stimulated further by Redon's accounts of the decorations he was now producing for the interiors of his (by now often truly aristocratic) French collectors.⁷¹ Bonger dropped several hints to Redon about a tailored commission like this, before specifically proposing in 1906 that he decorate a screen in shades of red to divide the front and back rooms of his new house on Vossiusstraat in Amsterdam, where it would contrast attractively with the modern white walls (fig. 22). It is noteworthy that while Bonger made the request partly at his wife's behest, it would also have had the effect of dividing off the study in which he spent his evenings from the living room where Annie was mostly to be found.⁷²

Making up lost ground

At the same time as he was acquiring some of Redon's recent works, Bonger tried to get his hands on the master's early *noirs* (1870–90) in lithographic ink and charcoal. By now, Redon had moved far beyond the existential phase of life in which these works had been created and the well from which he had drawn for such creations was likewise sealed up. Bonger managed to acquire several of the now scarce charcoal drawings from the artist and from private collectors, and with effort and perseverance, he succeeded over the years in assembling the entire graphic oeuvre.⁷³

In time, Redon simply began to send Bonger his latest prints automatically, often providing several copies at a time for him to distribute among private collectors and dealers in the Netherlands – a tried and tested strategy on the artist's part. In doing so, Redon was using Bonger as his personal agent, as it were – a role that the collector was only too happy to assume.⁷⁴ He wrote to Bonger as early as 1895: 'I have put into the post: Three new lithographs, though on condition you simply return those you do not like, as do other collectors (abroad or in various French towns) to whom I regularly send things for sale or return'.⁷⁵

One by one, Bonger eventually acquired the rarest prints and was able to complete his collection. He sometimes asked specifically for a print he was still missing, such as *Wing*, of which Redon sent a signed impression on his request in 1895 (fig. 23).⁷⁶ In 1903 Bonger paid a hefty 100 francs for the iconic print *Closed Eyes* from 1890 – a key work for every Redon admirer (see fig. 5c in entry 5).⁷⁷ The rare series *Dans le rêve* and *Les origines*, which had assumed mythical status among collectors, were the crowning glory of his collection. Their purchase in 1908 via Redon's wife meant that Bonger, too, had now become one of the twenty-five 'chosen' about whom Israëls had mused years earlier (fig. 24).⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Letter 71 (19 March 1901), Hilversum: 'une petite maison à moi selon mes goûts intimes, décorée par vous et Bernard'.

⁷¹ See entry 14 on Redon's decorative panels (cats. 34 and 35).

⁷² Bonger wrote in letter 175 (19 September 1906), Amsterdam, regarding the commission: 'We should be delighted, my wife and I!' ('Nous en serions ravis, ma femme et moi!'). With thanks to Merel van Tilburg for the reflections on the more intimate aspects of Bonger's life.

⁷³ See entries 2, 3, 6 and 7 on Redon's *noirs* (cats. 5, 6, 14–19).

⁷⁴ Letter 26 (10 November 1895), Hilversum: 'These last few days I have successfully entered the lists on your behalf. The booksellers Scheltema & Holtkema [sic] asked me to request that you put them down for a subscription to the album in progress.' ('Ces jours-ci, j'ai bataillé pour vous et avec succès. Les libraires Scheltema & Holtkema [sic] m'ont prié de vous demander de les inscrire pour un numéro de votre album en train.'). Leeman and Sharp 1994, p. 25.

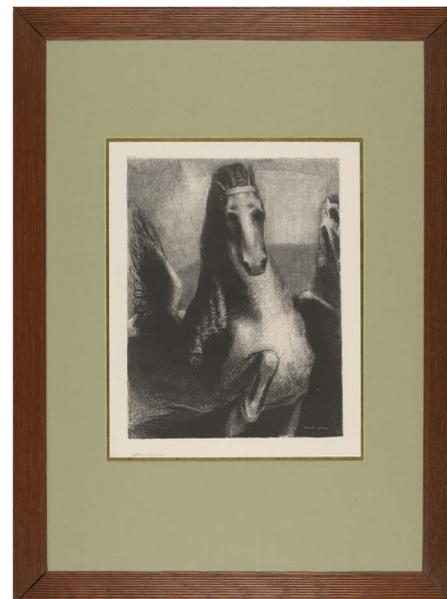


Fig. 23 Odilon Redon, *Wing*, 1893. Lithograph in black on chine collé on wove paper, 61.2 × 43.8 cm (in its original matting and frame). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands)

⁷⁵ Letter 12 (14 January 1895), no location: 'j'ai mis en poste: Trois nouvelles lithographies mais à condition que vous me retourniez simplement celles qui ne vous plairaient pas, tout comme le font quelques collectionneurs de l'étranger ou de quelques villes, avec lesquels je suis en communication directe maintenant.'

⁷⁷ See letter 111 (24 November 1903), Amsterdam: 'The proof of *Closed Eyes* has just this minute arrived in perfect shape. Very many thanks for sending it to me. It is an admirable thing and one I very much wanted to own. My collection of your lithographic work is slowly but surely being filled in.' ('L'épreuve d'*Yeux clos* arrive à l'instant même, en parfait état. Merci mille fois, de me l'avoir envoyée. C'est une chose admirable que je tenais beaucoup à avoir. Ma collection de votre œuvre lithographique se complète lentement et sûrement.'). See entry 5 on *In Heaven* or *Closed Eyes* (cat. 13) for the motif.

⁷⁸ Letter 206 (8 March 1908), Amsterdam: 'Given this godsent opportunity, I'm thrilled to go ahead and complete my collection.' ('Puisque cette aubaine se présente, j'en profite de grand cœur pour compléter ma collection'.)



Fig. 24 Odilon Redon, Frontispiece of the series *Dans le rêve*, 1879. Lithograph on China paper, 29.9 × 22.3 cm. Kunstmuseum, The Hague

With the addition of a few more purchases around 1908, Bonger considered his overall collection to be virtually complete, even though Redon would continue making art for a few more years to come. During those years, he acquired just a handful of items that subtly complemented or provided context for Redon's oeuvre. He was happy to shell out, for instance, for a group of prints by Redon's teacher Rodolphe Bresdin (1822–1885) and a few early landscape drawings by Redon.⁷⁹ The two early copies after Rembrandt (1606–1669) and Delacroix that Bonger was able to acquire from Redon's widow after his death were particularly special. He had previously made tentative but repeated attempts to get the artist to part with them, but Redon refused to sell these precious works.⁸⁰

A personal ensemble

Those final purchases allowed Bonger to achieve his goal of a collection covering the 'complete range' of Redon's work. He wrote to the artist as early as 1901 that he was building an ensemble of his entire oeuvre, which he considered infinitely varied.⁸¹ It was this, he stated in 1903, that set Redon apart from other artists: 'Looking over my collection as a whole, I'm astonished by the variety of your art. Moreover, it offers the rare spectacle of a new blossoming, at a time when so many others have stiffened to a uniform note.'⁸²

Bonger described the assembly and hanging of his collection as a creative act comparable to composing a piece of music, in which each new work added a note to the harmony of the ensemble, transcending the individual parts. He spent endless Sundays and evenings carefully arranging Redon's pieces in his successive rooms, in harmonious interplay with those of Bernard, Van Gogh and Cézanne.⁸³ With each new acquisition, the collector began to compose afresh, keeping Redon informed through descriptions in his letters and specially commissioned interior photographs (fig. 25). Bonger generally selected a large floral still life or a decorative panel as the centrepiece of the wall and grouped his other works around it. Significantly, having moved into his final home on Gabriel Metsustraat, Bonger no longer mixed his Redons with other works of art but placed them in the main rooms as the dominant melody, with the works by other artists now barely audible in the background in the corridors and upstairs rooms.⁸⁴

Suitable framing

The artist and collector were both keenly aware that the frames in which the Redons were placed formed a defining element of the ensemble. After each purchase, they corresponded in detail about the choice of frame, with Bonger having absolute faith in Redon's judgement. Besides which, Bonger did not know any framer in the Netherlands who could provide Redon's work with a suitable setting.⁸⁵ Redon almost always chose Jean-Marie Boyer's (1850–after 1906) firm in Montmartre to frame Bonger's purchases (fig. 26).⁸⁶ The company was strategically located in the artists' quarter, close to the dealers and practically next door to Pierre Cluzel (1850–1894), who also made frames for the Impressionists and for Redon. Like Cluzel, Boyer specialized in 'encadrements artistiques', with particular attention

apartment at Stadhouderskade 56 in Amsterdam, followed by a newly built house at Vossiusstraat 22 in 1906. When the Bongers had had enough of the bustling city, they had a house built in Aerdenhout, into which they moved in 1914. They later grew to dislike the isolation and the need to travel, however, and moved to Gabriel Metsustraat 13 in 1924.

⁸⁴ See also Roos Rosa de Carvalho, 'A House Full

of Pride: Photographs of the Andries Bonger Collection', in Amsterdam 2009, pp. 95–103; Roos Rosa de Carvalho, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 776–808.

⁸⁵ Letter 135 (6 July 1905), Amsterdam.

⁸⁶ For various works by Charles-Victor Guillaoux (1866–1946), for instance. With thanks to Willem Russell for the information.

⁷⁹ See entry 1 for early drawings (cats. 1–4).

⁸⁰ See entry 15 on Redon's *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family* (after Rembrandt), c. 1862–64 (cat. 36).

⁸¹ Bonger bought a whole batch of works in 1901, which he described as 'a complete range of your art' ('une gamme complète de votre art'). Letter 75 (22 July 1901), Amsterdam; in 1906 he wrote: '[The ensemble] admirably brings out the full gamut of your work: charcoals, pastels and painting.' ('[L'ensemble] fait admirablement ressortir toutes les gammes de votre œuvre, pastels et peinture.') Letter 168 (3 June 1906), Amsterdam.

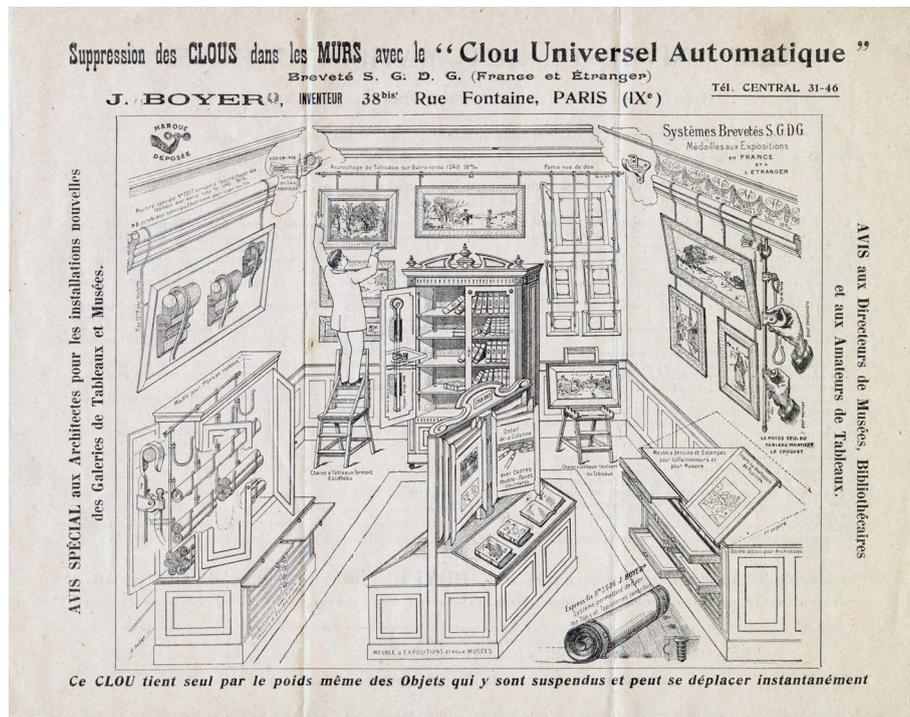
⁸² Letter 93 (1 February 1903), Amsterdam: 'En regardant l'ensemble de ma collection, je suis émerveillé de la variété de votre art. Il offre actuellement le spectacle rare d'une éclosion nouvelle, au moment où tant d'autres se sont figés dans une note uniforme.'

⁸³ Bonger lived at Villa Jeanne in Hilversum from 1892 to 1895. He then moved to Albertus Perkstraat in the same city. His next address as of 1901 was a two-storey



Fig. 25 The interior of Andries Bonger's home at Stadhouderskade 56, Amsterdam, 1904. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest

Fig. 26 Jean-Marie Boyer, 'Clou Universel Automatique', promotional brochure, Paris, c. 1916. The Art Institute of Chicago, André Mellerio Papers, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives



to works on paper.⁸⁷ He offered all styles, from traditional Louis XIV frames and gilding to contemporary designs for the avant-garde.⁸⁸

The frames for the Bonger collection, which Redon commissioned from Boyer, have almost all been preserved, as have the mounts.⁸⁹ Redon was acutely aware of the importance of the frame and selected each one with great care. His work commanded relatively low prices during his lifetime, however, and so he was generally unable to spend too much on framing. For that reason, he often favoured bronzed mouldings that were sold by the metre and then sawn to size. The decorative aesthetic of the mouldings was contemporary without being overpowering. Redon frequently chose strikingly thin frames, which gave his paintings a subtle character. Works on paper were framed with wide, coloured mounts, which isolated them, as it were, from the outside world.⁹⁰ Redon deliberately pursued this effect of 'interiority', which is also why he expressly elected to display his works behind glass.⁹¹

Familiar as he was with the household, he corresponded with Bonger about the walls on which his works (and hence the frames) were to hang. Redon wrote: 'Above all, tell me about the frames for which I took responsibility and about the effect of the works. How they change when one moves them! How sensitive they seem to me, and affected by the things that surround them.'⁹² He advised the collector to use yellow wallpaper,⁹³ but Redon's works were also displayed to good effect on the white walls of Bonger's newly built house on Vossiusstraat.⁹⁴ Redon clearly had to adjust to this modern context for his work, but he was curious about the effect,

⁸⁷ Promotional brochure J.M. Boyer in Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, André Mellerio Papers, 5, 5.

⁸⁸ One of the biggest commissions he received was for the new museum in the home and studio of the recently deceased Gustave Moreau, for which Boyer supplied the panelling, frames and drawing cabinets. The bills for this mammoth operation can be found in the Musée Gustave Moreau's archives. Boyer's role went far beyond simply supplying the frames: he was basically responsible for fitting out the entire museum. He also provided the hanging systems for the Musée du Luxembourg. With many thanks to Emmanuelle Macé of the Musée Gustave Moreau.

⁸⁹ Choices are also mentioned and depicted in the specific entries. See also Roos Rosa de Carvalho, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 776–808, pp. 792–99.

⁹⁰ Redon wrote to his musician brother Ernest (1835–1907) about the need to view the *noirs* with a large white expanse around them. Otherwise, it would be as if 'you [were to] play one of your impromptus

surrounded by the noise of the street' ('tu jouais un des impromptus au milieu du bruit de la rue'). Quoted by Harriet Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 354–77, p. 430, n. 59.

⁹¹ Letter 140 (23 August 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne; quoted by Roseline Bacou, in Redon 1960, p. 11. See also Stratis, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 377.

⁹² Letter 137 (8 August 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: 'Et surtout parlez-moi des cadres dont j'ai eu le souci, et aussi de l'effet des ouvrages. Combien ils changent en les déplaçant! Combien ils me paraissent sensibles, et touchés des choses qui les entourent.'

⁹³ Letter 73 (10 June 1901), Amsterdam.

⁹⁴ Letter 166 (20 May 1906), Amsterdam.

especially for his *noirs*, which were after all drawn on coloured paper.⁹⁵ Bonger wrote that he was able to admire the works on his white walls as if through new eyes, confirming Redon's opinion that the context of a work of art is decisive to the way it is perceived.⁹⁶

Bonger's experience of Redon's art

Many collectors might gradually grow accustomed to the paintings on their walls and cease to notice them. Not so Bonger, who viewed them with his full attention almost continuously. The spiritual experience that Redon's art offered him was closely linked to the way he experienced music. He described to Redon, for instance, how the piano music his wife played enhanced the mystery of his art. Bonger's thoughts also transported him to Redon's work in moments of rapture during performances at the Concertgebouw.⁹⁷ He sensed connections, in other words, between Redon's art and music: 'It is expressive, like music, that is to say it speaks for itself.'⁹⁸ Bonger shared the view, therefore, that visual art could correspond with the other arts on an abstract level. Gustave Kahn had already referred to Redon's drawings in musical terms in 1887: 'The drawing or rather the form represented has the value of being suggestive, a musical theme with the potential to stimulate [...] the spectator's daydreams. Different individuals can intuit different melancholy thought and sentiments from these images.'⁹⁹ Bonger further described how Redon's works were continuously transformed not only by the colour of the walls but also the changing light throughout the day and the seasons.¹⁰⁰

The collector reached for his large leather portfolio of Redon's graphic work in order to 'lose' himself while browsing the albums.¹⁰¹ Bonger seems to have meant by this that he could forget his everyday worries and tiredness and be transported to another dimension¹⁰² – one directly connected to the mind of the artist. He could then feel that he was surrounded not only by Redon's works of art but also by the artist himself.¹⁰³

Bonger gave a lecture on the subject when he exhibited his complete collection of Redon's prints at the Larensche Kunsthandel in Amsterdam in 1909.¹⁰⁴ He was hesitant about doing so, as he had little patience with audiences that shied away from Redon's art.¹⁰⁵ The collector spoke mostly of his *noirs*, which he described as 'an art that, even on superficial inspection, leaves a deeper impression, yet which is so meaningful and which springs from such a mysterious source that only by fathoming it more deeply each time can one achieve a full understanding of its grandeur.' As far as Bonger was concerned, this 'grandeur' lay primarily in the work's humanity.¹⁰⁶ What Redon offered, the collector said, was 'a deeper glimpse into the universe, with its ever-receding mystery'.¹⁰⁷ Redon himself wrote how he expected the 'amateur' to play an active role – a role that Bonger fulfilled with absolute devotion. According to Bonger, *Dans le rêve* allowed the viewer to descend into the very deepest mystery, as – unlike other series – it was entirely separate from literature. With no titles or narrative to offer points of reference, the associatively arranged images spoke 'for themselves', as Bonger put it.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁵ Letter 195 (24 May 1907), no location.

⁹⁶ Letter 166 (20 May 1906), Amsterdam.

⁹⁷ Letters 6 (9 July 1894), Hilversum and 18 (5 May 1895), Hilversum.

⁹⁸ 'Zij is evenals muziek expressief, dat wil zeggen, zij spreekt voor zichzelf.' Notes for a Lecture on Odilon Redon at the Larensche Kunsthandel on 7 May 1909 in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, C, p. 2.

⁹⁹ Gustave Kahn (1887), quoted in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 202.

¹⁰⁰ See entry 14 on Redon's decorative panels (cats. 34–35).

¹⁰¹ Letter 78 (31 December 1901), Amsterdam.

¹⁰² Letter 168 (3 June 1906), Amsterdam.

¹⁰³ Bonger wrote: 'They are your art, and your art alone. No one else can currently speak as proudly as you can of "my art".' ('C'est votre art, votre art seul. Il

n'y a personne, en ce moment, qui puisse parler aussi fièrement que vous de: "mon art".') Letter 34 (9 March 1896), no location.

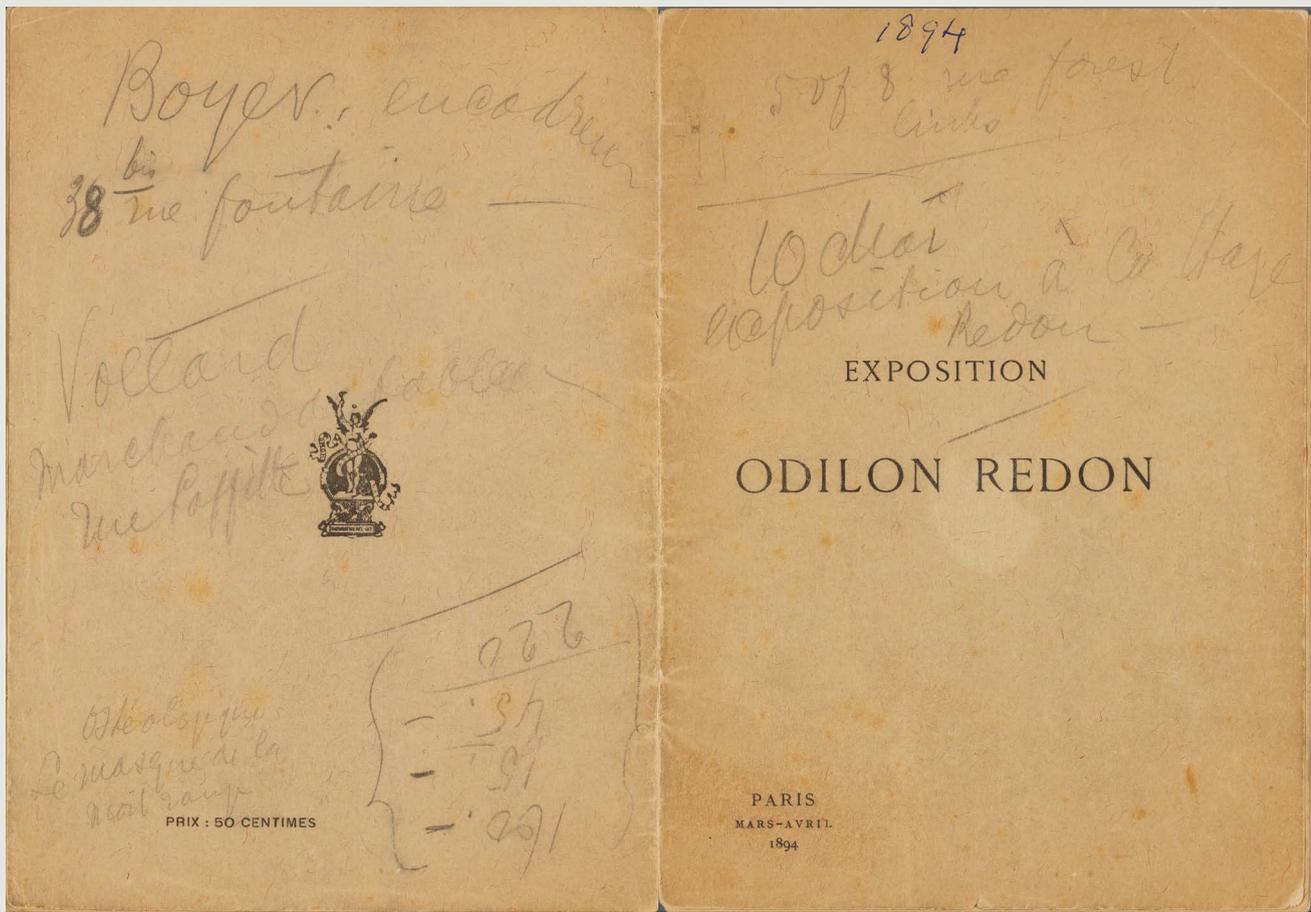
¹⁰⁴ The lecture offers a neat parallel with the one given by the earlier Redon admirer Edmond Picard in 1894 at the Haagsche Kunstkring, when Bonger had just begun to collect, see letter 6 (9 July 1894), Hilversum.

¹⁰⁵ Notes for a Lecture on Odilon Redon at the Larensche Kunsthandel on 7 May 1909 in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, C, p. 1. Letter 30 (23 December 1895), Hilversum and Ir. V.-W. van Gogh, *Memorandum Andries Bonger*, 1 January 1963, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, p. 2: 'He never tried to make me feel anything of what he found beautiful in Redon.' ('Hij heeft nooit geprobeerd mij iets te laten meevoelen van wat hij mooi vond in Redon.')

¹⁰⁶ Notes for a Lecture on Odilon Redon at the Larensche Kunsthandel on 7 May 1909 in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, p. 3: 'een kunst, die zelfs bij oppervlakkige beschouwing wel een diepere indruk nalaat, maar die zoo zinnig is en uit zulk een geheimnisvolle bron voortkomt, dat alleen een telkens dieper tot haar doordringen tot een volledig besef van haar grootte kan leiden.' Bonger's opinion of the artist in 1895 (which matched that of the critics Hennequin, Veth and Huysmans) is stated in letter 18 (5 May 1895), Hilversum: 'I, on the other hand, perceive you as a creator of neither monsters nor spectres, but as a profoundly human artist, who sees further than anyone of his time.' ('Quant à moi, je ne vois en vous ni un créateur de monstres, ni de spectres, mais un artiste profondément humain, qui voit plus loin que tous ceux de son temps.')

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4: 'een dieperen blik in het heelal, met zijn altijd terugdeinzend mysterie.'

¹⁰⁸ Notes for a Lecture on Odilon Redon at the Larensche Kunsthandel on 7 May 1909 in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, p. 23. See also Box text 'The Secret of Redon'.



Figs. a–b Cover of the catalogue for the exhibition *Odilon Redon* at Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1894, with notes in graphite by Andries Bonger. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive

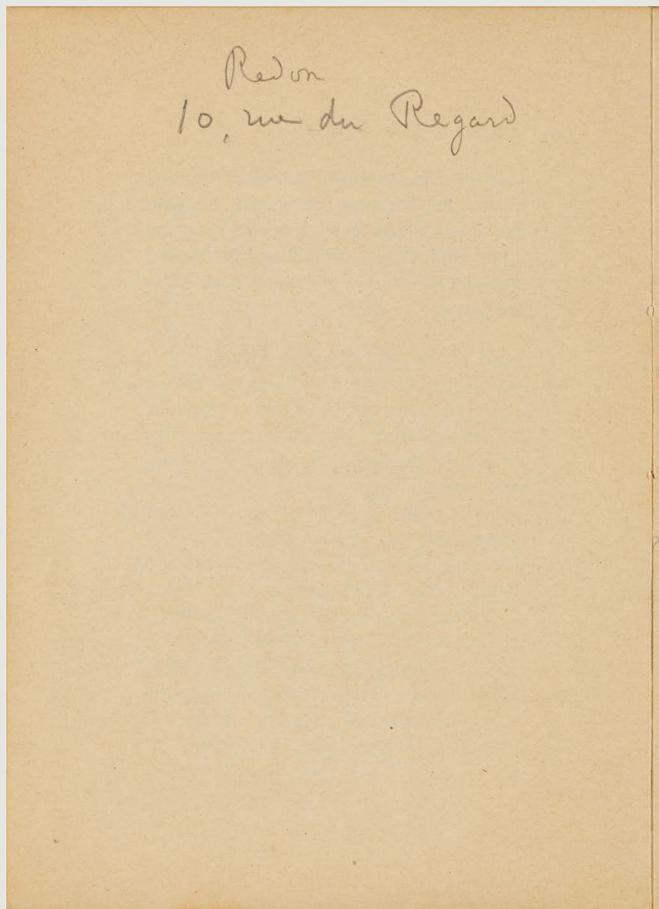


Fig. c Page of the catalogue for the exhibition *Odilon Redon* at Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1894, with notes in graphite by Andries Bonger. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive

Bonger's handwritten notes on Redon

When Andries Bonger visited the Odilon Redon exhibition in the art gallery Durand-Ruel in 1894, he made several notes on the back and front cover of the exhibition catalogue.

(Back cover, bottom left)

'**Ostéologique**', or the scientific study of the structure of the skeleton. Redon drew on scientific knowledge of this kind to render his fantasy creatures as convincingly as possible. He later reflected: 'all my originality consists of giving life to creatures of dreams, improbable beings [fashioned] according to the laws of the probable.'¹

Bonger added the note '**La masque de la mort rouge**', the below the title of a *noir* owned by Edmond Picard (1836–1924), after the story of the same name by Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), which featured in the exhibition (fig. d).² Bonger managed to get hold of this key drawing ten years later and was able to admire it every day in his own home. The fact that Bonger approached Redon's oeuvre based on his literary interests is apparent not only from the way he was drawn to the motif derived from Poe, but also his purchase of the *noir* titled *Faust and Mephistopheles* (fig. e).

(Back cover, top and middle left)

Bonger was seemingly advised to have his new acquisitions framed by Redon's regular framer '**Boyer**' at '**38, rue Fontaine**' and also appears to have visited the '**marchand de tableaux Ambroise Volland**' a little further down the road on rue Laffitte, since he noted down both addresses on the cover.³

(Front cover, top)

'**10 Mai exposition à La Haye Redon**' refers to Redon's monographic exhibition in The Hague, which was scheduled to open shortly afterwards. Bonger immediately involved himself in his new role as a collector of Redon's work by lending his recent acquisitions to the exhibition, organized by the existing Redon devotees Sara de Swart (1861–1951), Jan Toorop (1858–1928) and Jan Veth.⁵

(Back cover, bottom right, upside down)

The totalled-up figure of **220** might relate to prices or purchase amounts, but a direct connection is not possible.

¹ Redon (1922) 1986, p. 23. ('Toute mon originalité consiste donc à faire vivre humainement des êtres invraisemblables selon les lois du vraisemblable, en mettant, autant que possible, la logique du visible au service de l'invisible.')

² Much earlier, Bonger had admired Edouard Manet's (1832–1883) graphic interpretation of Poe's *The Raven* (1875) at Busken Huet: see Bonger to his parents, 4 February 1881, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, letter b1634V1970; see also Leeman, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, p. 703. Bonger discussed the work extensively in his 1909 lecture, at which he read out the entire story.

³ This is an exceptionally early date for him to have been aware of Ambroise Volland, who had only just started out as an art dealer and had yet to make his name with his exhibition of Cézannes from the estate of Père Tanguy (1825–1894).

⁴ *Odilon Redon*, exhibition at the Haagsche Kunstkring, 20 May to 1 July 1894. Bonger lent seven loose prints and the print series *Songes* (M110–115).

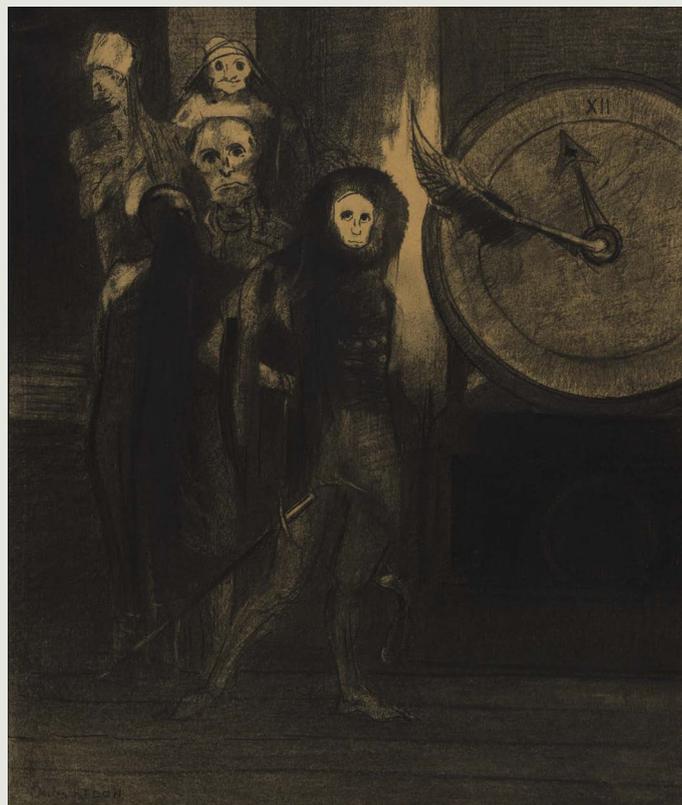


Fig. d Odilon Redon, *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1883. Charcoal and black chalk on paper, 43.7 × 35.8 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, The John S. Newberry Collection



Fig. e Odilon Redon, *Faust and Mephistopheles*, 1880. Charcoal and fixative application on paper, 40 × 32 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Dorothy Braude Edinburg to the Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection

A close alliance

Although Bonger fully concurred with Redon's conviction that his art was most powerfully experienced by leaving it undefined, he could not resist occasionally asking for titles for his latest acquisitions. The artist tended to respond very reluctantly to such requests and what titles Bonger did eventually receive were conspicuous for their generality: *Femme avec enfant*, say, or *Paysage*.¹⁰⁹ While some of Redon's other collectors and dealers came up with interpretative titles of their own, Bonger always respected the artist's wishes.¹¹⁰

The circumspect way in which Bonger approached Redon's oeuvre meant that the artist entrusted him with the publication of his early diary entries, those of 'a mystical and doleful soul'.¹¹¹ The collector took on this task and honour with his characteristic diligence.¹¹² Redon expressed his gratitude in the dedication of the manuscript he sent to Bonger in 1909: 'To you, Monsieur Bonger, it is dedicated and addressed – to you, whose faithful appreciation of my art is as old-established as our friendship; I shall be well content if, beyond those borders that art has rendered so illustrious, it may yet elicit an echo as precious as the one that I found in you.'¹¹³

The wish that Bonger expressed early on for 'communion with the chosen' had more than come true. His books enabled him to commune briefly with the mind of the author but without any opportunity to reciprocate. Through Redon's art and letters, by contrast, he could experience a true exchange and even friendship. After Redon's death, his widow invited Bonger and the collector Dr Raymond Jacques Sabouraud (1864–1938) to dinner, as 'you are the two friends whom Redon loved most'.¹¹⁴ Through his years of support and dedication, Bonger had truly become the chosen among Redon's *fidèles*.¹¹⁵

109 See entry 1 on Redon's early landscapes (cats. 2, 3) and entry 9 on Redon's family pastels (cat. 21).

110 When Redon failed to provide sufficiently evocative titles, Picard, Ambroise Vollard (1866–1939) and Gustave Fayet (1865–1925) simply invented their own. More on this can be found in Gamboni 1989; Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace after 1900', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, p. 263.

111 Letter 237 (2 October 1909), Paris: 'une âme dolente et mystique'.

112 Ibid. Redon also sent his personal notes to André Mellerio in 1898, but the latter did not publish them until 1913 in his catalogue raisonné of Redon's prints. They appeared via Bonger in 1909 in the Dutch journal *In onzen tijd* and in 1912 in *La Vie* as 'Confidences d'un artiste'. The texts were then published in full in 1922 under the title *A soi-même*.

113 'Je vous l'adresse et le dédie, Monsieur Bonger, vous appréciateur fidèle de mon art – et de longue date comme notre amitié – heureux si, par de là des frontières que l'art si hautement illustrées, il pouvait encore répercuter le précieux écho que j'ai trouvé en vous.' Letter 227 (16 May 1909), no location, and letter 237 (2 October 1909), Paris, note 11.

114 Letter from Camille Redon to Mr and Mrs Bonger (1916), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger archive, A, p. 106.

115 It is for good reason that he is referred to as 'le fidèle parmi les fidèles' ('most faithful of all faithful friends') in Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, I (1992), p. 35.

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Catalogue

1

Early landscape drawings in charcoal

Cats. 1–4

Cat. 1 Odilon Redon, *Autumn Leaves, Poplars in a Lake*, c. 1865. Various charcoals with fixative on cream wove paper, 37.9 × 32.8 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1053N1996

Cat. 2 Odilon Redon, *Landscape*, 1865. Various charcoals and black chalk with fixative on cream wove paper, 24 × 37 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1054N1996

Cat. 3 Odilon Redon, *Landscape*, 1865. Various charcoals with fixative on cream wove paper, 36 × 25.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1055N1996

Cat. 4 Odilon Redon, *Landscape, Two Figures*, c. 1865–68. Various charcoals with fixative on pink wove paper, 47.5 × 36.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, d1044S1995

Odilon Redon's earliest charcoal drawings from around 1865 – no fewer than four of which can be found in the Van Gogh Museum collection – are closely linked by their subject matter, composition and technique. The focus here is on a majestic nature, into which small figures are inserted. As a pure landscape study, *Autumn Leaves, Poplars in a Lake* (cat. 1) is an exception in this regard.

Beginning in 1865, Redon exhibited his charcoal drawings at the Société des amis des arts in his native Bordeaux. By taking his first steps in the art world with landscapes of this kind, he aligned himself with the work of successful contemporary *fusainistes* like Maxime Lalanne (1827–1886) and Adolphe Appian (1819–1898), who had been showing their charcoal drawings at the large Salons of various French cities in recent years.¹ Thanks to their efforts, drawings had come to be admired as works of art in their own right rather than simply as preparations for paintings. Redon followed the example of these masters by using charcoal to achieve all manner of tonal effects and light-and-dark contrasts in his landscapes.² *Autumn Leaves*, for example, was built up by spreading large horizontal expanses of powdered charcoal across the paper. Working from this greyish base tone, the artist emphasized certain passages and used the tip of the charcoal stick to draw in details like the dark leaves of the poplars and the clumps of grass in the foreground (fig. 1d). He then selectively removed the drawing material with a wad of dough or gum to make the light zones sparkle: the underside of the poplar leaves, for instance, as they are blown away from the trees.³ A detail from *Autumn Leaves*, meanwhile, shows that Redon also used his fingertips moistened with fixative to remove charcoal in order to make the leaves on the scratched-in branches of a tree stand out against the dark sky (fig. 1d). The charcoal on his fingers was applied in turn to create dark accents in the foliage.

Redon enriched the grey and the oiled, deep-black charcoal in several of these early drawings with the generously applied tone of multiple layers of resinous fixative. *Landscape*, for instance, was hung up with two drawing pins so that he could apply a thick coating of Canada balsam on the back with a wide brush (fig. 1e). The resin mixture fixed the charcoal drawing on the front by soaking through the pores of the paper, while also forming a deep-gold patina over the next few months that lent the artist's work the monumental weight of an Old Master and further deepened the already atmospheric lighting effects.⁴ Redon enjoyed an intimate relation-

¹ See also Lee Hendrix, 'Landscape, Charcoal and the Etching Revival', in Lee Hendrix (ed.), *Noir: The Romance of Black in 19th-Century French Drawings and Prints*, exh. cat., Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum), 2016, pp. 30–49.

² See also Timothy David Mayhew, 'Dessin au fusain: Nineteenth-Century Charcoal Drawing Materials and Techniques', in Los Angeles 2016, pp. 125–52.

³ Technical examinations carried out on 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. See also Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', 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. 353–377, pp. 357–58.

⁴ André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon: Les estampes* –

The Graphic Work: Catalogue raisonné (1913), Alan Hyman (ed.), San Francisco 2001, p. xvii: 'Par un fixatif, mixture à lui particulière, il donne à ses essins un fondu général comme doré sourdement, équivalant à cette patine d'ensemble que prennent en vieillissant les peintures de Rembrandt.'



Cat. 1 Odilon Redon, *Autumn Leaves, Poplars in a Lake*



Cat. 2 Odilon Redon, *Landscape*



Cat. 3 Odilon Redon, *Landscape*



Cat. 4 Odilon Redon, *Landscape, Two Figures*

Fig. 1a Camille Corot, *Passage of the Ford, Evening*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 99 × 135 cm. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes



ship with his materials: the charcoal, for example, was closely associated in his mind with Peyrelabade, his family's estate in Listrac (Gironde), where he produced most of his drawings. The fact that his charcoal was made from the wood of local grapevines further heightened the intimate connection between art and locus.⁵

The four works reflect Redon's affinity with nature. He spent the 1860s ceaselessly wandering the vast and inhospitable Peyrelabade and trekking through the Pyrenees. The young artist captured his impressions in these moody charcoal drawings. He did not execute them out of doors but later in his studio, where he sought to express his thoughts and his feelings.⁶ The drawings also echo the Romantic poems and stories he devoured and the art he admired.⁷

He saw landscapes by Camille Corot (1796–1875) at the Salon in his native Bordeaux, for instance, and reviewed them for the magazine *La Gironde*. He found in them a synthesis between natural studies of visible reality and a poetic harmony (fig. 1a).⁸ Redon praised Corot as 'a superior artist: a painter before nature, a poet or thinker in the studio' and set out to follow in his footsteps.⁹ He placed majestic trees drawn from nature in imagined landscapes with reflecting pools, dark clouds or imposing crags, to which he frequently added one or two lone figures (often viewed from the rear), aligning himself in this way with the Romantic visual tradition. The figures help us contemplate a wild, inhospitable nature, while their nudity or medieval-style robes evoke mythical and religious dimensions.¹⁰

⁵ Stratis, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 355 and n. 4.

⁶ Redon (1895), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 13: 'And it was indeed an effort of reason, of duty, almost of virtue, when I had to set myself to study objectively; I preferred to attempt representations of imaginary things that haunted me and I failed fruitlessly at the beginning. However I made many of them: landscapes, battles, evocations of beings scattered in rocky plains, a

whole world of despair, black smoke of the romanticism which still hung over me.' ('Et c'était vraiment un effort de raison, de devoir, presque de vertu, quand il fallait me mettre à l'étude objectivement; je préférais tenter la représentation des choses imaginaires qui me hantaient et où j'échouai infructueusement au début. J'en fis cependant beaucoup: paysages, batailles, évocations d'êtres épars dans des plaines rocheuses, tout un monde de désespérance, noires fumées du romantisme qui m'embrumaient encore.')

⁷ He was inspired, for instance, by Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), Etienne Pivert de Senancour (1770–1846) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). See also Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, 'Under a Cloud 1840–1870', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 25–72.

⁸ See Odilon Redon, 'Salon de 1868: Le paysage: MM. Chintreuil. Corot et Daubigny (19 May 1868)', in Robert Coustet (ed.), *Odilon Redon. Critiques d'art*, Bordeaux 1987, p. 47.

⁹ Ibid., translation from Druick and Zegers, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 67.

¹⁰ In *André Bonger, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum), Fred Leeman wrote: 'The journey made by Redon and his friend Berdoly also took in part of the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. Medieval associations and a sublime experience of nature go hand in hand in this period in Redon's work. The two figures clad in long cloaks, who walk side by side through the twilight landscape can be read as a re-experiencing of the journey he and Berdoly had undertaken two years earlier, but now *en guise de pèlerin*.'

11 Sandström called it a 'free copy' after Corot's painting *Dante and Virgil in a Landscape* (1859; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts), which he showed at the 1850 Salon, and adjusted the title of Redon's drawing accordingly to *Dante et Virgile*; see Sven Sandström, *Le monde imaginaire d'Odilon Redon: Etude iconologique*, Lund/New York 1955, pp. 2–3. Bacou adopted this title in her exhibition catalogue the following year; see Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie), 1956–57, p. 41, no. 5. Uiter has rightly criticized Sandström's overly free interpretation (Evert van Uiter et al., *Odilon Redon 1840–1916: Tekeningen, Litho's, Pastels en Schilderijen uit Nederlands bezit*, exh. cat., Enschede (Rijksmuseum Twenthe), 1984–85, p. 8); Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Chicago/London 2011, p. 49; Leeman 2007. Redon's refusal to link his figures explicitly to classical iconography is precisely what distinguishes him from his precursors.

12 'Vous vous préoccupez des titres; je les donne toujours avec certaine inquiétude, trouvant qu'ils déterminent trop, ou pas assez. [...] les autres sont des paysages, fort lointains de ma jeunesse'. Andries Bonger had tried his luck in letter 75 (22 July 1901), Amsterdam: 'Would it be indiscreet to ask you for their dates and titles?' ('Y aurait-il indiscretion à vous demander les dates de facture avec les titres?'), to which Odilon Redon responded in letter 76 (29 August 1901), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne.

13 Hillel had acquired no fewer than thirteen Redon drawings in 1893; see Gamboni 2011, p. 221. In letter 69 (9 January 1901), Hilversum, Bonger writes: 'Recently, glancing through the catalogue of your 1894 exhibition, I felt a rush of emotion remembering a large frame full of charcoals. Would you, perhaps, be able to compose one for me; at least, if this is not an indiscreet request.' ('Parcourant ces jours-ci le catalogue de votre exposition de 1894, je me rappelai avec émotion un grand cadre rempli de fusains. Pourriez-vous, peut-être, m'en composer un; du moins si cette demande n'est pas indiscreète.')

14 Kevin Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace before 1900', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 237–56, pp. 242–44. Redon was no longer working in charcoal and was thus reluctant to sell his early drawings. He carefully managed any such sales, allowing only a few select collectors to purchase certain items.

15 *Landscape, Two Figures* (cat. 2), *Landscape* (cat. 3), *In the Font* (W1070), *Sleep* (W187) and *Concern for the Absolute* (see entry 4, 'A Group of Women's Profiles', cat. 8).

16 Letter 74 (16 July 1901), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne.

17 Technical examinations carried out on 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in

The fact that these dimensions are never strictly narrative but through Redon have assumed a personal, more obscure and multiply interpretable meaning, has not prevented many an art historian from interpreting the works and even adding explanatory titles. Cat. 4, for instance, has been renamed *Deux druides près d'un étang* ('Two druids near a pool'), while cat. 2 was known for many years as *Dante and Virgil*.¹¹ For his own part, Redon resisted explanatory titles. He preferred purely descriptive ones which, while perhaps not doing justice to the work, nevertheless allow scope for personal interpretations and associations. To leave the meaning open and to respect Redon's restraint, the Van Gogh Museum now uses the title *Landscape* for both works once again, reflecting Redon's own neutral description in his account book.

When Andries Bonger acquired the drawing from the artist in 1901 and asked after its title, Redon would go no further than *Landscape*, a title he also gave to another work acquired at the same time (cat. 3): 'You are concerned about titles; I always bestow them with a certain anxiety; I find that they determine either too much or too little. [...] and the others are landscapes from my very distant youth', he wrote.¹²

Bonger's purchase was motivated by the 'emotion' he had experienced on seeing a group of charcoal drawings from Charles Hillel's collection combined in a single large frame at Redon's 1894 exhibition at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris.¹³ He asked whether the artist might put together a similar ensemble for him, prompting Redon to open his cherished portfolio of drawings for the Dutchman.¹⁴ Bonger travelled to Paris between April and July 1901 to select a group of drawings (two of which were cat. 2 and cat. 3).¹⁵ He had Redon's regular frame-maker Jean-Marie Boyer frame them straight away with coloured mounts and 'bordures' (fig. 1c).¹⁶

Bonger added two more early charcoals to what by now was his extensive collection, one in 1913 and the other in 1934 (cats. 1 and 4). Rather surprisingly, Johannes Hendricus de Bois dated both drawings to around 1880. Given the technique, style and signature, however, both can be placed much more plausibly in the 1860s.¹⁷ *Autumn Leaves* (cat. 1) shows traces of an earlier signature and date in charcoal, which were later erased and replaced in ink.¹⁸ Bonger had considered his collection of Redons to be complete since 1908, but made an exception for these two drawings. Writing to his second wife, Françoise, he stated: 'I bought two last week at Debois [...] in Haarlem, which I had been aware of for a long time and would not have liked to see slip into another's hands. They are two landscapes from his youth, which already contain all the mysterious power of the later Redon. They now form a very fine cornerstone for the entire collection, which they complement beautifully.'¹⁹

the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, suggest that a date of around 1865 is much likelier.

Bonger himself likewise described them as drawings from Redon's 'youth': see the quote in this entry and note 19 below. De Bois dated cat. 1 to 1880 in *Zomer-Tentoonstelling 1928: moderne schilderijen en teekeningen J.H. de Bois, Haarlem, Haarlem 1928*. This date was then adopted in the Bonger catalogue (Amsterdam 2009) and by Leeman 2007; the latter identified the drawing in the *Livre de raison* as Mellerio Redon Chronology, p. 18 verso, 1881 'Paysage (2 personnages)'. The actual date remains a matter of conjecture, given Redon's cursory notes regarding his work prior to 1870. His account book terminates in 1910.

18 Technical examinations carried out on 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.

19 Andries Bonger to F.W.M. van der Borch van Verwolde, 28 January 1934 in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, C.20: 'Verleden week heb ik er twee bij Debois [...] in Haarlem gekocht, die ik al heel lang kende en die ik ongaarne in andere handen zou hebben zien overgaan. Het zijn twee landschappen uit zijn jeugd, waarin al de mysterieuze kracht van den latere Redon ligt. Zij vormen nu een heel mooie hoeksteen voor de gehele verzameling en zij vullen die prachtig aan.'

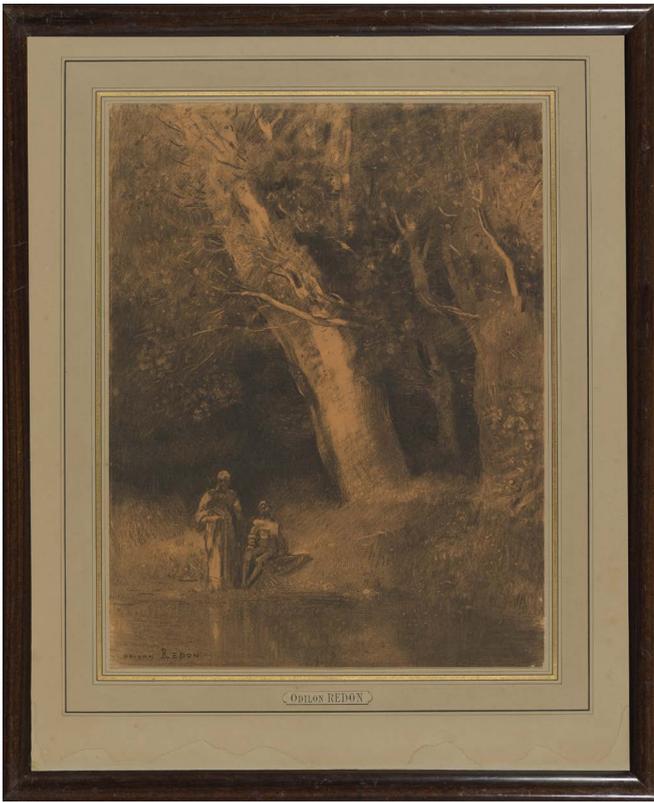


Fig. 1b Cat. 4 in its original matting and frame by Boyer

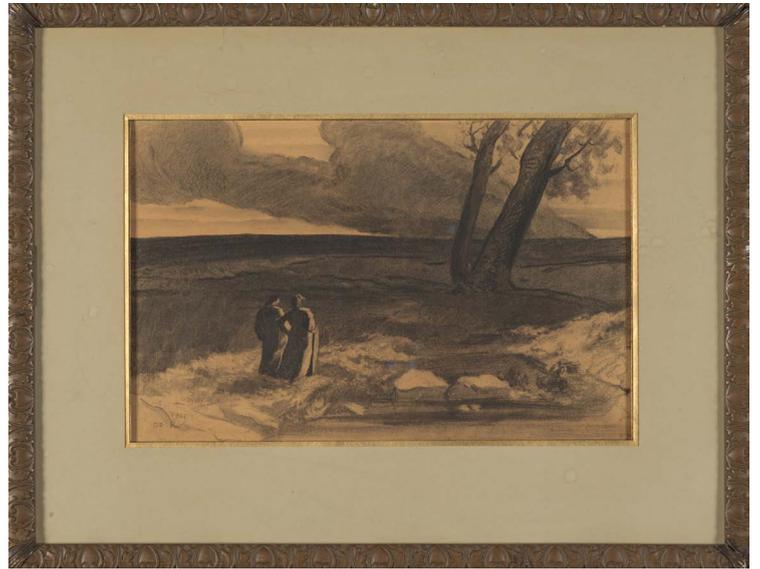


Fig. 1c Cat. 2 in its original matting and frame by Boyer



Fig. 1d Detail of cat. 1



Fig. 1e Verso of cat. 3

CAT. 1**PROVENANCE**

Sold by the artist, Paris to Kunsthandel J.H. de Bois, Haarlem, 1913; sold by Kunsthandel J.H. de Bois to Andries Bongger, Amsterdam, January 1934; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongger-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. 3

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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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CAT. 4**PROVENANCE**

Sold by the artist, Paris to Kunsthandel J.H. de Bois, Haarlem, 1913; sold by Kunsthandel J.H. de Bois to Andries Bonger Amsterdam for approximately 1,500 Dutch guilders, January 1934; 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 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 2 October 1995.

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- Haarlem, Kunsthandel J.H. de Bois, *Zomer-expositie van Fransche Kunst*, June–July 1929, no catalogue.
- Paris, Musée de l’Orangerie, *Odilon Redon*, October 1956–January 1957, no. 8, *Sous-bois avec deux personnages auprès d’une mare*.
- The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, *Odilon Redon*, 3 May–23 June 1957, no. 2, *Sous-bois avec deux personnages auprès d’une mare*.
- Paris, Institut Néerlandais, 4 May–14 June 1964/Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 25 June–16 August, *Le dessin français de Claude à Cézanne dans les collections hollandaises*, no. 189, *Sous-bois avec deux personnages auprès d’une mare*.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 36, p. 25, *Twee mannen aan de oever van een water onder zwaar geboomte*.
- Enschede, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, *Odilon Redon: Tekeningen, Litho’s, Pastels en Schilderijen uit Nederlands bezit*, 1 December 1984–20 January 1985, no. 2, *Twee mannen aan de oever van een water onder zwaar geboomte*.
- Tokyo, Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, *Vincent Van Gogh Drawing Exhibition: Van Gogh and his Time, from the Van Gogh Museum and H.W. Mesdag Museum*, 14 September–13 November 2000, no. 59, *The Source*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De Bonger collectie: Werken van Odilon Redon en Emile Bernard*, 2 July–31 October 2004.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 156, *Landscape, Two figures*.

Fig. 1f Detail of cat. 3



2

The Girl in the Woods

Cat. 5

Cat. 5 Odilon Redon, *The Girl in the Woods*, c. 1870–72. Various charcoals with fixative on cream wove paper, 39.5 × 30.4 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1056N1996

This early drawing by Odilon Redon shows a woman in a veil and long gown, the train of which she has folded over her forearm, walking towards us out of an atmospheric forest. The landscape is carefully conceived: structured around a mid-tone and then built up from numerous layers of charcoal. The leaves in the undergrowth have been rubbed out with a wad of gum so that they light up in the foreground. The figure of the young woman was largely done in the same way, ‘freed’ from the charcoal with gum, so that her pale shape contrasts with the dark surroundings. Her gaze is averted. The fact that we cannot see her feet beneath the long gown lends an unearthly touch to her appearance.

In the early decades of his career, Redon worked almost exclusively with black materials, which had a profound meaning for him: his identification of charcoal drawings like *The Girl in the Woods* as *noirs* emphasized how the importance of the black ‘should be respected. Nothing prostitutes it. It does not please the eye and does not awaken sensuality. It is the agent of the spirit much more than the splendid colour of the palette or of the prism.’¹

Despite the rhetorical emphasis Redon’s writings place on the benefits of using black over coloured drawing materials, there is still a surprising degree of colour and warmth in this charcoal drawing, which is actually more golden brown than black. While it is true that Redon worked with a wide range of grey tones and black charcoal, he brought colour into his work by choosing tinted paper as a support and applying a self-prepared fixative with a wide brush to the back of the sheet and with an atomizer on the front, so that each layer of charcoal would adhere to the paper. Redon himself played down the *noir* concept somewhat: ‘for the charcoal drawings which I made before them and since, were always made on paper tinted with pink or yellow, sometimes blue, thus showing my tendency or premise for colour in which I later found the utmost pleasure and which overwhelmed me with delight.’² The sheet that Redon used in this case might have been cream-coloured, but repeat applications of Canada balsam (resin) lent the work a golden-brown tone. He brushed a thick layer of the mixture onto the back of the sheet,³ which the porosity of the paper allowed to soak through to the front. This not only fixed the loose particles of drawing material to the sheet, but within a few months also imbued the drawing with a dull gold sheen that steadily deepened over time to create an atmospheric patina.⁴

The drawing’s matt-gold tone was further heightened by the choice of Redon and his frame-maker Jean-Marie Boyer in 1904 of a wide, light-gold mount and narrow bronzed frame, which must also have originally had a bright golden sheen (fig. 2a). Framed in this way, the drawing of the mysterious girl in a forest would have positively glowed on the wall. We can see it standing on the floor in a photograph of the Redon exhibition at Kunstzaal Reckers in 1907 (fig. 2b). A critic described it at

1 Odilon Redon (1913), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 103: ‘Il faut respecter le noir. Rien ne le prostitue. Il ne plaît pas aux yeux et n’éveille aucune sensualité. Il est agent de l’esprit bien plus que la belle couleur de la palette ou du prisme.’

2 *Ibid.*, p. 129: ‘car les dessins au fusain que je fis avant elles, et depuis, furent toujours exécutés sur des papiers teintés de rose, ou jaune, quelquefois bleu, donnant là ma tendance ou les prémisses de la couleur dans laquelle je devais plus tard me complaire et me laisser envahir de délectation.’

3 Technical examinations carried out on 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. See also Harriet K. Stratis, ‘Beneath the Surface: Redon’s Methods and Materials’, 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. 361; Michelle Sullivan and Nancy Yocco, ‘Diversity and Complexity of Black Drawing Media: Four Case Studies’, in Lee Hendrix (ed.), *Noir: The Romance of Black in 19th-Century French Drawings and Prints*, exh. cat., Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum), 2016, pp. 117–23, pp. 118–20.

4 André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon: Les estampes – The Graphic Work: Catalogue raisonné* (1913), Alan Hyman (ed.), San Francisco 2001, p. xvii: ‘Par un fixatif, mixture à lui particulière, il donne à ses dessins un fondu général comme doré sourdement, équivalant à cette patine d’ensemble que prennent en vieillissant les peintures de Rembrandt.’



Cat. 5 Odilon Redon, *The Girl in the Woods*

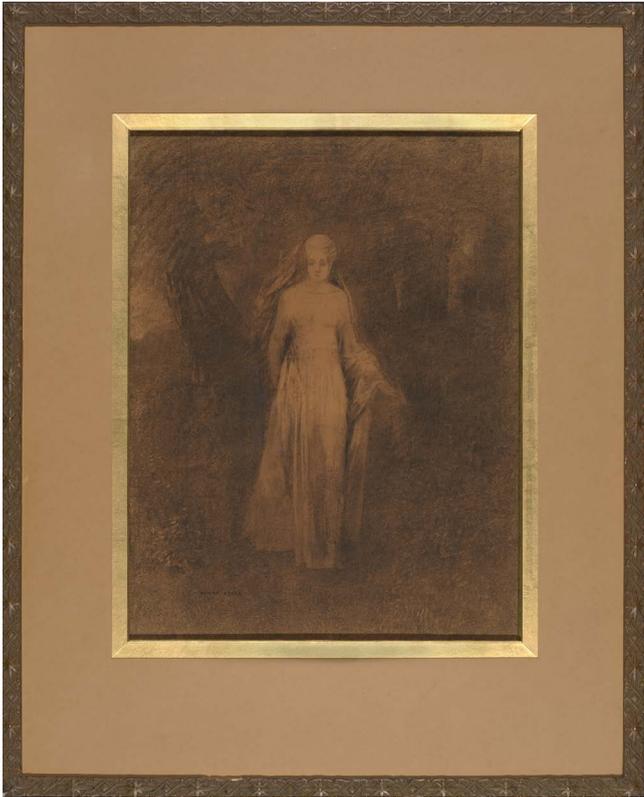


Fig. 2b Interior of Kunstzaal Reckers, Rotterdam, during the Redon exhibition of 1907. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bongers Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest

Fig. 2a Cat. 5 in its original matting and frame by Boyer

5 A. v. V., 'Kunsthandel Reckers. Odilon Redon', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (25 May 1907): 'Een geheel ander soort teekening, een der tonige en der meest ons nabij staande is zeker wel het Wandelende meisje in het bosch. [...] Hoe subliem valt het licht op het figuurtje en op de plooiën van het gewaad en hoe teer broos raken deze het gras, hoe uiterst sober is het en hoe geweldig rijk aan stemming en warm van kleur; hoe prachtig afgesloten door den brede gouden band van het karton.'

6 In the end, the work does not seem to have featured in the exhibition. It does not appear under this name in the 1890 catalogue. See Octave Maus, *Les XX, Bruxelles: Catalogue des dix expositions annuelles*, Brussels 1981, p. 208.

7 Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, pp. 161–62: 'Maus and I have already chosen from among my drawings which might go to Les XX. We opted for [...] a young, standing woman, surrounded by foliage, which we have called: *Isolde*.' ('Nous avons déjà, Maus et moi, choisi, parmi mes dessins, ceux qui pourraient aller aux XX. Nous avons pris [...] une jeune femme debout dans les feuillages, que nous nommons: *Isolde*.'

the time as: 'An entirely different kind of drawing, one of the most tonal and most to our taste, is undoubtedly the *Girl Wandering in the Forest*. [...] How sublimely the light falls on her small figure and on the drapery of her robe, and how delicately these brush the grass, how very sober it is and how immensely rich in atmosphere and warm in colour, how beautifully bounded by the wide golden border of the mount.'⁵

We note that the critic made no attempt at an iconographic interpretation of the drawing, although this had occurred when the work was supposed to have been shown at the 1890 exhibition of Les XX.⁶ Edmond Picard, its Belgian owner at the time, renamed the drawing in consultation with the organizer Octave Maus (1856–1919) as *Yseult*, or *Isolde*, after the medieval legend and the tale of Tristan and Isolde's doomed love, which Richard Wagner (1813–1883) had made into an opera in 1865.⁷ It is no coincidence that besides being lawyers, both men were also Symbolist authors and so attached particular importance to a narrative element in Redon's work.⁸ While the artist maintained close ties with the literary world, he nevertheless resisted an explicit explanation of this drawing. He might have placed the mysteriously illuminated figure of a young woman in her pale robe and veil in the dark forest to evoke associations with a distant Gaulish past or with medieval legends, but he preferred not to reveal his immediate sources of inspiration.⁹ The elasticity of his figures and their interpretation is apparent from the related drawing

8 Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 286–87.

9 In *André Bongers, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum), Fred Leeman wrote: 'The female type with her long robe and veil is that of the

priestess, the druidess who lived in the forests of ancient Gaul. Redon frequently expressed his interest for his country's semi-mythical past, as in another *noir* from Bongers's collection *Sous-bois avec deux personnages* ['Undergrowth with two figures'], which dates from the same period'.

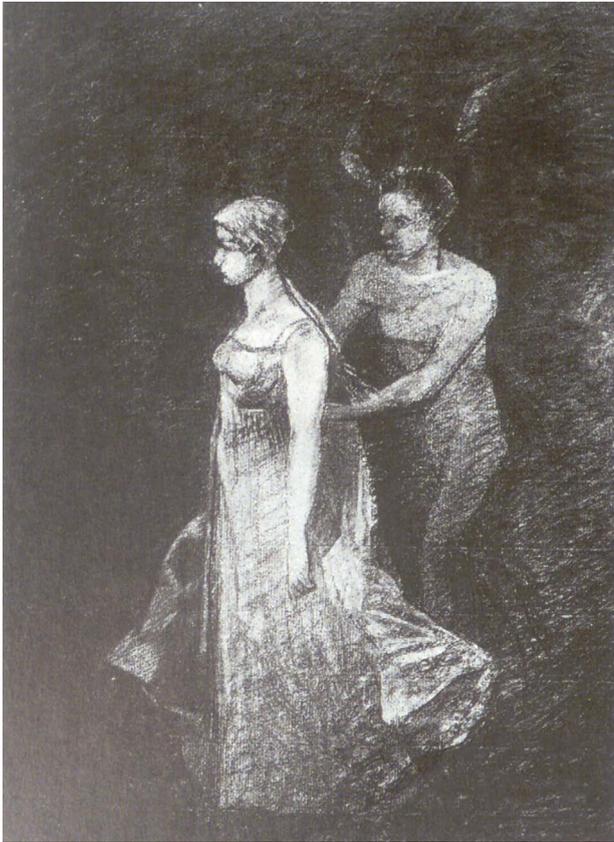


Fig. 2c Odilon Redon, *Marguerite hantée*, 1872. Charcoal, black chalk, heightened with gouache, 37.3 × 27.9 cm. Location unknown



Fig. 2d Odilon Redon, *Hantise*, 1894. Lithograph in black on chine collé on wove paper, 36.6 × 22.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), po875N1996

Marguerite hantée of 1872, in which what appears to be the same young woman, now turned sidewise, is assailed by the demonic Faust (fig. 3c).¹⁰ Redon returned to the motif in 1894 in the lithograph *Hantise*, which Bongers also owned and is now in the Van Gogh Museum collection.¹¹ In this instance, Faust has been replaced with more personal demons springing directly from the artist's imagination. The landscape has also disappeared, leaving behind an empty, bare and dark space (fig. 2d).

It is clear from Redon's reply to Maus that Isolde did not feature in his repertoire, as he states drily that he has no memory of the drawing 'that you refer to as Isolde'.¹² The artist's response did not stop Picard describing the drawing in downright narrative terms in the catalogue for the sale of his collection in 1904: 'Dressed in white robes, concerned and alert, Isolde awaits Tristan in a mystical forest.'¹³

Andries Bongers made the most of this sale, taking the opportunity to supplement his collection at a stroke with several important charcoal drawings by Redon, which were difficult to get hold of by that time.¹⁴ *The Girl in the Woods* had been

¹⁰ 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. 2 (1994): *Mythes et légendes*, no. 947, p. 100; Mellerio (1913) 2001, no. 128.

¹¹ Leeman 2007.

¹² From Odilon Redon to Octave Maus, 3 January 1890, quoted in Gamboni 1989, pp. 286–87: 'It has been agreed with our friend Picard that we will reserve the drawing that you refer to as Isolde, which I do not recall [...].' ('Il est entendu avec notre ami Picard que nous réservons le dessin que

vous appelez Isolde, dont je ne me souviens plus [...].')

¹³ Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères, Brussels, *Catalogue de la collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard*, auction catalogue (26 March 1904), no. 93, p. 58, *Yseult*.

¹⁴ His other purchases at the 'Vente Picard' besides *The Girl in the Woods* were *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya* (W1064, see entry 3, cat. 6), *Spring* (W239), *The Masque of the Red Death* (W1171) and *The Thinker* (W1068).

scratched by a shard of glass in a broken frame,¹⁵ and when Bonger wrote about the damage, Redon agreed to retouch the drawing. The artist told the collector that his sensibility had changed so much in the ‘some thirty years’ that had elapsed since he had made it that his intervention had respected the drawing ‘as if it were by some other being’.¹⁶

Redon’s reference to ‘some thirty years’ has since prompted a strict dating to 1874.¹⁷ The use of materials and technique are, however, entirely in keeping with those of his early landscapes in the 1860s, which – combined with the related drawing of 1872 – renders a slightly earlier dating between 1870 and 1872 more plausible.¹⁸ This would make it a first translation into charcoal of the women in gowns placed in desolate landscapes that populate his somewhat earlier pencil drawings.¹⁹

15 Letter 116 (4 April 1904), Amsterdam: ‘Two of your drawings have unfortunately suffered. Spring and Isolde are both scratched, I would guess from the glass being broken. I hope you will allow me to bring them to you next time I come to Paris, and that this damage can be repaired. And Boyer can make me new frames worthy of it all. I should like to be able to tell you when I am coming but am, alas, overwhelmed with work and find it very difficult to get away. I have a great craving to see your most recent works, those you were recently telling me about. (‘Deux de vos dessins ont malheureusement souffert. Le printemps et Yseult portent une égratignure, on dirait d’une vitre cassée. J’espère que vous voudrez bien me permettre de vous les apporter à ma prochaine venue à Paris et que ces dégâts sont réparables. Et Boyer me fera pour le tout un encadrement digne. Je voudrais pouvoir fixer l’époque de mon voyage, mais, malheureusement, je suis surchargé de travail et m’absente bien difficilement. J’aurais le plus vif désir

de voir vos derniers travaux, dont vous me parliez récemment.’) The apparent correction Redon made could remarkably enough not be traced by the Van Gogh Museum’s Conservator of works on paper, Nico Lingbeek, in 2021.

16 Letter 122 (28 November 1904), Paris: ‘I shall [...] take him the drawing of the young girl in the woods. I put in a tiny, discreet retouch, which taught me a lot. Since this drawing dates from some thirty years ago, when I set the pencil-point on it, I felt, even in the slightest line, how much one’s state of sensibility changes and is modified. I had to respect the thing as if it were by some other being. But I don’t think I have spoiled it.’ (‘Je vais [...] lui porter le dessin de la jeune fille sous bois. J’y ai fait une petite retouche discrète,

d’où j’en retire tout enseignement. Ce dessin datant d’une trentaine d’années, j’ai senti, en y appliquant le crayon, même dans un trait le plus menu, combien l’état de la sensibilité se modifie et change. J’ai dû respecter la chose comme si elle était d’un autre être. Mais je ne crois pas l’avoir abîmé.’)

17 Amsterdam 2009, no. 150, p. 129; Leeman 2007.

18 Technical examinations carried out on 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. Redon did not record the drawing either among his sales to Picard or in his list of *noirs*.

19 See, for instance, Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 59–62, 64, 65, 67, 70, 71; Leeman 2007.

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Edmond Picard, Brussels, before 12 December 1889; consigned by Edmond Picard to auction Brussels, Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères (Collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard), lot 93 (*Yseult*), purchased by Andries Bongers, Amsterdam, 26 March 1904; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongers-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.

LITERATURE

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- Odilon Redon, letter to Octave Maus, Paris (3 January 1890).
- Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères, Brussels, *Catalogue de la collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard*, auction catalogue (26 March 1904), no. 93, p. 58. Referred to as 'Yseult. Dans une forêt mystique, Yseult en vêtements blancs, inquiète et attentive, attend Tristan. Dessin. Signé Odilon Redon'.
- Andries Bongers, letter 116 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (4 April 1904).
- Odilon Redon, letter 119 to Andries Bongers, Saint-Georges-de-Didonne (21 August 1904).
- Odilon Redon, letter 122 to Andries Bongers, Paris (28 November 1904).
- Andries Bongers, letter 125 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (14 December 1904).
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- Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 286–87.
- 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. 634, p. 248. Referred to as 'La jeune fille au bois' and 'Isolde'.
- Cassandra Bosters, 'Van excentrieke dromer tot respectabel kunstenaar: Odilon Redon in de Nederlandse kunstkritiek, 1887–1916', *Jong Holland*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1994), pp. 40–41.
- Fred Leeman et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bongers Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009, p. 129.

EXHIBITIONS

- Rotterdam, Kunstzaal Reckers, *Exposition de peintures, dessins, lithographies par Odilon Redon*, May 1907, no. 34, *Iseult*.
- Amsterdam, Larensche Kunsthandel, *Catalogus der tentoonstelling van werken van Odilon Redon (alles particulier bezit)*, 7–14 May 1909, no. 58, *Iseult*.
- Arnhem, Vereniging voor beeldende kunst, *Tentoonstelling van Odilon Redon: Schilderijen, tekeningen, litho's*, 26 March–4 April 1948, no. 15, *Jeune fille au bois*.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bongers en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 39, *Staande jonge vrouw in een bos*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De Bongers collectie: Werken van Odilon Redon en Emile Bernard*, 2 July–31 October 2004.
- Holte, Fondation Gl. Holtegaard Breda-Fonden, *Sjaelens malere: Den idealistiske symbolisme i Frankrig*, 5 September–6 November 2004, no. 76, *Ung kvinde i en skov*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Bongers Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 150, *The Girl in the Wood*.

3

At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya

Cat. 6

Cat. 6 Odilon Redon, *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya*, 1878. Various charcoals with fixative application on cream wove paper, 44.9 × 33.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Vincent van Gogh Foundation, d1048V1996

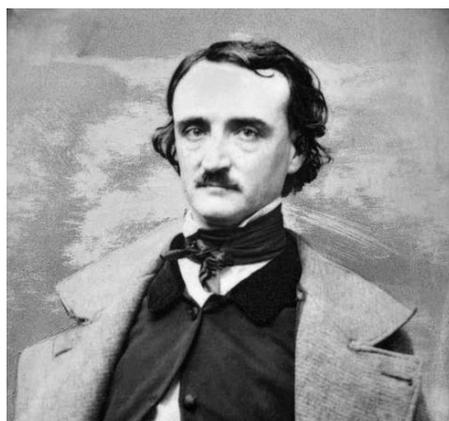


Fig. 3a Edgar Allan Poe

At the Window is one of the most unsettling works in the Van Gogh Museum's collection. It is definitely among the 'classic' Redons, in so far as the dark charcoal drawing is firmly in keeping with the Frenchman's reputation as the artist of monsters and nightmares.¹ He made several drawings around 1878 of 'thinkers' wrestling with malign forces, be they interior or exterior,² probably under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe. Translations of and allusions to Poe's stories by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and Joris-Karl Huysmans had turned the American horror writer into a cult figure by then. He was a hero of the literary and artistic circles that constituted French Symbolism, to whom his bizarre and grotesque tales represented the unprecedented riches that could be obtained by blending the worlds of reality and fantasy. This drawing seems to refer to the countless stories of aristocrats in their remote country houses who find themselves tormented by the darkest reaches of their subconscious minds. Hallucinations and terrifying effects loom up beyond the window of a darkened interior. A man with wide-spaced eyes holding a skinny finger to his lips stares through the glass. His refined appearance might be a reference to Poe,³ who shared the hollow gaze, the collar-length hair with a receding hairline, the suit and even the moustache (fig. 3a). The face is not dissimilar to that of Redon either, which lends the drawing the possible dimension of a troubled self-portrait.⁴ All sorts of associations are evoked, meanwhile, by the enigmatic silencing gesture. The space itself is likewise open to multiple interpretations: is the sad-eyed figure standing outside looking in, sending a chill down the viewer's spine, or is the pale face the reflection of someone on the inside, confronted by a frightening reflection of himself and his subconscious?

Multiple layers and ambiguity of this kind were precisely what Redon was seeking to achieve in his *noirs*. The dark drawings he produced between around 1870 and 1890 showed him to be a master of suggestion, his clouds of powdered charcoal acting as an imaginative smokescreen. Redon wrote: 'My drawings inspire and do not define themselves. They determine nothing. They place us just as music does in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate.'⁵ With a little imagination, a malevolent creature can be made out in the darkness outside the window along with the silhouette of a row of houses (fig. 3b).⁶ The lines are ambiguous, but

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. 365. Gamboni defined 'potential images' as 'those established – in the realm of the virtual – by the artist but dependent on the beholder for their realization, and their property is to make the beholder aware – either painfully or enjoyably – of the active,

subjective nature of seeing'. Referring specifically to Redon, he wrote: 'Many other drawings confirm that this effect of half-hiding and half-revealing to which Redon's favourite working materials particularly lent themselves, was accepted, exploited and at times actually sought after by him.' Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002, pp. 18, 71.

¹ Redon is described in such terms in virtually all contemporary reviews; see, for example, Emile Hennequin, 'Beaux-Arts. Odilon Redon', in *La Revue littéraire et artistique* (4 March 1882); Jan Veth, 'Odilon Redon', *De Nieuwe Gids*, vol. 2 (1886–87), pp. 64–72; Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains*, Paris 1889.

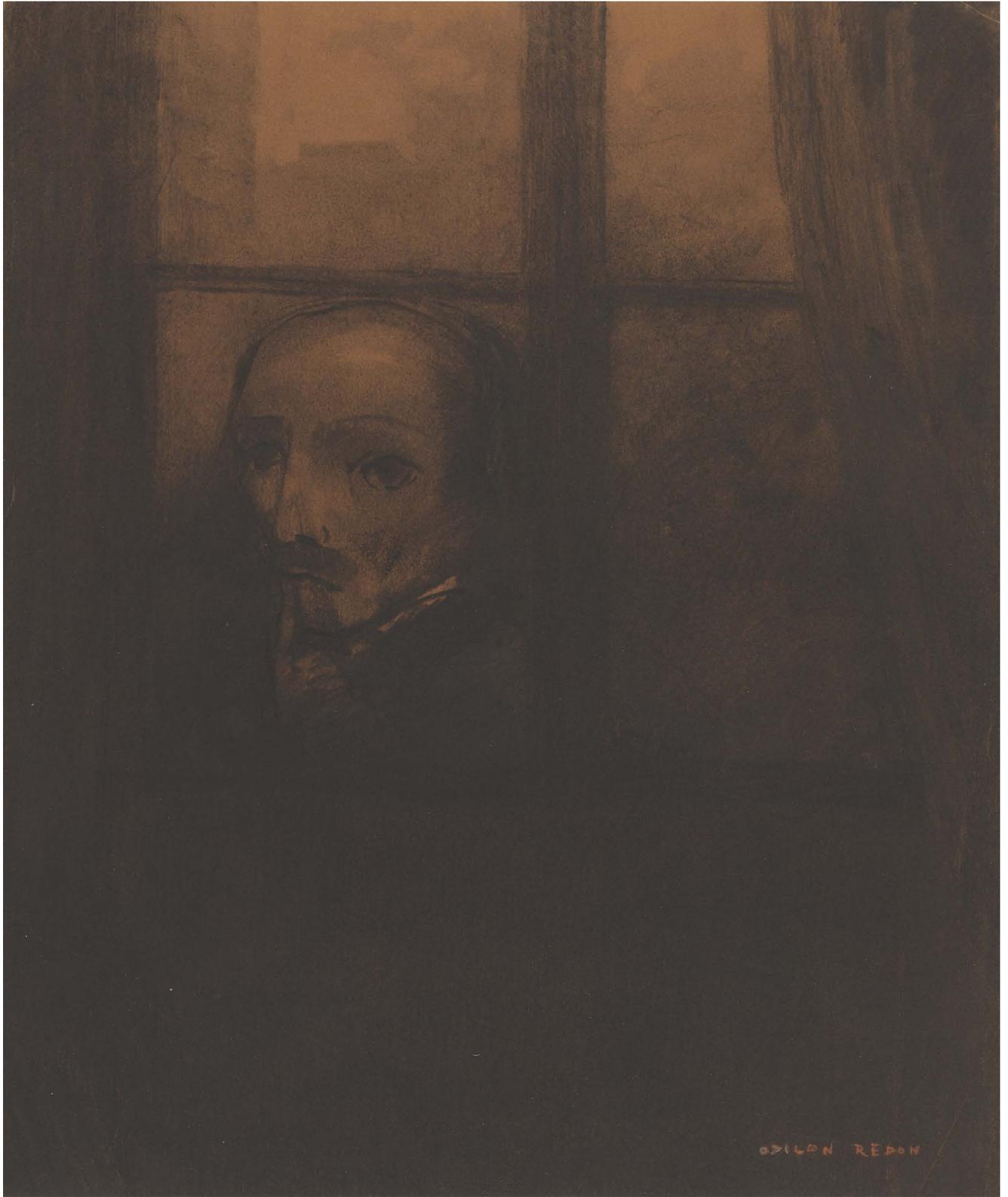
² See Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98, vol. 2 (1994): *Mythes et légendes*, nos. W1064–1069.

³ Fred Leeman, in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, no. 121, no. 20. Redon's interest in Poe, which he shared with his clientele, was pursued in greater depth in the 1882 print series *À Edgar Poe*.

⁴ Margret Stuffmann, 'Self-Portraits?', *Odilon Redon: As in a Dream*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, p. 191.

⁵ Redon (1895), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 22. ('Mes dessins inspirent et ne se définissent pas. Ils ne déterminent rien. Ils nous placent, ainsi que la musique, dans le monde ambigu de l'indéterminé.')

⁶ Regarding Redon's *pentimenti*, see Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Douglas W. Druick *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon*



Cat. 6 Odilon Redon, *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya*

Fig. 3b Detail of cat. 6

Fig. 3c Odilon Redon, *Le rêve s'achève par la mort*, from the print series *Le Juré*, 1887. Lithograph in black on chine collé on wove paper, 23.8 × 18.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, on loan from the Netherlands Art Property Collection, consisting of works recovered from Germany after World War II and held in trust by the Dutch State, p2751-008N2012



whatever they are meant to be, the artist placed them here deliberately.⁷ Redon left it up to the viewer to discover elements like this in his drawings. Whether or not they actually did so depended on their sensitivity 'and the aptitude of his [the viewer's] imagination to make things grow or shrink'.⁸

For his part, Redon suggested an affinity with the prints of Francisco Goya (1746–1828) by identifying the drawing in his account book as 'Dessin à la Goya "À la fenêtre"'.⁹ The fascination with nightmares and the ability to blend visible reality with the fantastic in ominous scenes was indeed something that Redon shared with the Spanish artist as well as with Poe (fig. 3d).¹⁰ In his novel of ideas, *A rebours*, Huysmans describes his protagonist Des Esseintes as: 'Overcome by an indefinable malaise at the sight of these drawings, the same sort of malaise he experienced when he looked at certain rather similar *Proverbs* by Goya; or read some of Edgar Allan Poe's stories, whose terrifying or hallucinating effects Odilon Redon seemed to have transposed into a different art'.¹¹ In a single sentence, the novelist succeeds in capturing the terrifying, hallucinatory visions in Redon's drawings, Goya's prints and Poe's stories. The drawing's first owner, the Belgian lawyer and author Edmond Picard, described the Redons in his collection using the term 'fantastique réel', which he had come across in Baudelaire's discussion of Goya's etchings, copies of which Picard also owned. According to Baudelaire, the works in question balance on the 'line of suture, the point of junction between the real and the fantastic [which] is impossible to grasp'.¹² Picard also forged a synthesis of the

⁷ Technical examinations carried out on 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. Stratis describes them here as 'deliberately drawn marks'.

⁸ Redon (1895), quoted in Gamboni 2002, p. 77.

⁹ Odilon Redon, *Mellerio Redon Chronology* (MRC), 1878, no. 72, published in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 451.

¹⁰ Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote a chapter on Redon's 'monsters', in which he linked the artist with Goya and Poe. See Huysmans 1889.

¹¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A rebours*, Paris 1922, p. 82: 'Pris d'un indéfinissable malaise, devant ces dessins, comme devant certains *Proverbes* de Goya qu'ils rappelaient; comme au sortir aussi d'une lecture d'Edgar Poe dont Odilon Redon semblait avoir transposé, dans un art différent, les mirages d'hallucination et les effets de peur.' English translation: Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (1956), Robert Baldick (trans.), London 2003, p. 60.

¹² Barbara Larson describes how Charles Baudelaire employed this term in his essay on the Spanish artist. See Barbara Larson, 'The Morbid and the Fantastic', in *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon*, University Park (Pennsylvania) 2005, p. 46. Picard also owned several

of Goya's prints. See Paul Aron and Cécile Vanderpel-en-Diagre, 'L'Esthète collectionneur: Contenu et fonction de la collection d'Edmond Picard', 2013, <http://hdl.handle.net/2013/ULB-DIPOT:oi:dipot.ulb.ac.be:2013/146448> (accessed 5 March 2022). See also the verse on Goya in Baudelaire's poem *Les phares* (*Les fleurs du mal*, VI): 'Goya, cauchemar plein de choses inconnu,/ De fœtus qu'on fait cuire au milieu

des sabbats,/ De vieilles au miroir et d'enfants toutes nues,/ Pour tenter les démons ajustant bien leurs bas.' ('Goya, nightmare full of unknown things,/ Of foetuses roasted in the midst of witches' sabbaths,/ Of old women at the mirror and of nude children,/ Tightening their hose to tempt the demons.' Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, William Aggeler (trans.), Fresno (California) 1954.)



Fig. 3d Francisco Goya, *Disparate General*, no. 9 from the series *Proverbios*, 1815–23. Etching and aquatint on paper, 24.5 × 35.2 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds

tangible and the fantastic in his own work, prompting him to ask Redon in 1887 to illustrate an edition of his play *Le Juré*,¹³ in which a jury member is tormented by his conscience after a man is sentenced to death. In 1889 Redon sold to Picard *At the Window* or *Drawing in the Manner of Goya* as a ‘preparatory drawing’ for the lithographs to illustrate the text. *Le Juré* does not, however, include a related composition and while the drawing does fit the macabre and hallucinatory passages of Picard’s text, it dates from an earlier period (fig. 3c).¹⁴

Picard delivered a lecture surrounded by twelve charcoal drawings from his collection at Redon’s first survey exhibition in the Netherlands at the Haagsche Kunstkring in 1894. The novice collector Andries Bongers was among those present. He later told the newspaper the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* how Picard ‘could speak about all those strange things in a low voice, there, in that little room in which Redon’s art haunted the beholders in the gathering darkness.’¹⁵ Bongers remembered the drawings and bought several of them when Picard’s collection came up for auction in Brussels ten years later. *At the Window* was sold under the title ‘Le penseur au vitrail’.¹⁶ With little competition from other collectors (Bongers expressed his indignation at the lack of interest in a letter to Redon), he was able to procure five important charcoal drawings to plug a gap in his by then impressive

Edmond Picard, auction catalogue (26 March 1904), no. 94, p. 58. Picard only applied the title ‘Penseur’ to this specific drawing at a later date. It is listed in the catalogue as: ‘Le Penseur au vitrail [Thinker with stained glass]. A questioning face, pensive and enigmatic, appears behind the stained glass of a window in a tragic chiaroscuro. Drawing. Signed on the right: Odilon Redon 39 × 33 cm.’ (‘Le Penseur au vitrail. Derrière le vitrail d’une fenêtre, dans un clair-obscur tragique, apparaît, songeur et énigmatique, une tête interrogative. Dessin. Signé à droite: Odilon Redon. 39 × 33 cm.’). Remarkably enough, the dimensions do not fit cat. 6.

¹³ Edmond Picard, *Le Juré. Monodrame en cinq actes: Sept interprétations originales d’Odilon Redon*, Brussels 1887.

¹⁴ 7 December 1889, ‘two preparatory drawings *Le juré*’ by Edmond Picard. See Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d’Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 1889, nos. 68–69, published as CD-ROM 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.

¹⁵ Anonymous, introduction to ‘Odilon Redon. Autobiografie’, *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (4 July 1894).

¹⁶ Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères, Brussels, *Catalogue de la collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M.*

17 Other purchases he made at the 'Vente Picard' besides *The Thinker* were *The Girl in the Woods* (W634, entry 2, cat. 5), *Spring* (W239), *The Masque of the Red Death* (W1171) and *The Thinker* (W1068). Bonger was surprised that the other 'amateurs' at the auction all focused on the work of Félicien Rops (1833–1898), while ignoring Redon. In letter 116 (4 April 1904), Amsterdam, he wrote: 'Alerted at the last moment by a local dealer, I was, happily, able to attend the sale of Edmond Picard's collection, which included several important drawings of yours. I was able to acquire: The Masque of the Red Death, *Isolde*, the two "Penseurs au vitrail" [Thinkers at the Window], *Spring* and some beautiful lithographic impressions I didn't know about: *L'œil fantastique* [The Fantastical Eye] (unique impression on white, 2nd plate), *Woman with Snake* (6th plate), *Chimaera* (1st state, 4th plate). The elements in the sale were very disparate and, I must say, I simply cannot comprehend the spirit in which they were collected. We're told that Picard was ruined by losing a number of court cases, but if he sold the collection in an attempt to get himself back on his feet, he must have been grievously disappointed. I was delighted to be able to rescue you from this shipwreck; I seriously believe that, if I had not been there, you would not have been sold at all. The taste of the people around me was a complete mystery. Two shabby drawings by Rops attained high prices, surely because they were so platitudinous, as did landscapes by a Belgian painter, Baron, no doubt for reasons of patriotism, while your admirable drawings went unnoticed.' ('Averti au dernier moment par un marchand d'ici, j'ai, heureusement, pu assister à la vente de la collection d'Edmond Picard, où se trouvaient plusieurs dessins importants de vous. J'ai pu acquérir: le Masque de la mort rouge, *Yseult*, les deux 'penseurs au vitrail', le Printemps et quelques belles épreuves de lithographies que je ne connaissais pas: *l'œil fantastique* (unique épreuve sur blanc, 2ème planche), la femme au serpent (6ème planche), la chimère (1er état, 4ème planche). Cette vente présentait des éléments bien hétérogènes et j'avoue ne rien comprendre dans quel esprit ils ont été rassemblés. On disait Picard ruiné par la perte de

collection.¹⁷ Early *noirs* were hard to come by on the market, as Redon had shifted to working entirely in colour. Such drawings as were still in his possession he held on to for himself, while the rest had previously gone to collectors and dealers.¹⁸

Although Bonger was more than satisfied with his purchases at the sale, he was less pleased with Picard's choice of frames, going so far as to call them 'hideous', which is understandable given Bonger's preference for Boyer's understated frames.¹⁹ Picard had the frames made specially for his public presentation of *Le Juré* at Les XX in 1887, at which the audience was surrounded by his Redon *noirs* on easels. The dramatic frames were intended to heighten the desired theatrical effect. He asked the 'artiste-encadreur' Lembrée in Brussels to come up with designs that would create the 'harmonie nécessaire' between work and frame.²⁰ Lembrée's label can be seen on the back of the work (fig. 3f). The frame is roughly decorated with beaten metal that, with a little imagination, suggests chains and window bars. The costly, artisanal surround provides the complex view with an additional window (fig. 3e).

plusieurs procès; mais s'il a vendu sa collection pour se remettre à flot, il a dû avoir une grande désillusion. J'ai été ravi d'avoir pu vous recueillir parmi ce naufrage; je crois bien que sans moi, vous n'auriez pas été vendu du tout. Le goût des gens autour de moi: un mystère; deux méchants dessins de Rops, sans doute à cause de leur platitude, des paysages d'un peintre belge, Baron, par patriotisme sans doute, ont fait des prix élevés, tandis que vos admirables dessins ont passé inaperçu.' In letter 119 (21 August 1904), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, Redon complimented Bonger on his purchase and was curious about these works, which had long since passed from his hands: 'I have none of your letters here but I remember the pleasure given me by your last one, when you were telling me you were present for the Picard sale, and that a few drawings from it had entered your gallery. I was very glad of your concern and felt, as a friend, touched that you took the trouble to go to Brussels. But I think you got some fine things there; and now I too know where I can see them again. I seem to remember that the Masque of the Red Death is a good solid charcoal.' ('Je n'ai point vos lettres ici, mais je me souviens du plaisir que me causa la dernière, alors que vous m'y contiez votre présence à la vente Picard, dont quelques dessins allèrent dans votre galerie. Je fus bien heureux de votre souci, amicalement touché de votre empressement à vous trouver à Bruxelles. Mais je crois que vous avez eu quelques bonnes pièces; de sorte que je sais où je les pourrai revoir aussi. Le masque de la mort rouge est, il me semble, un bon et solide fusain.')

18 Kevin Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace before 1900', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 237–56, pp. 242–44. Redon was no longer working in charcoal and was thus reluctant to sell his early drawings. He carefully managed any such sales, allowing only a few select collectors to purchase certain items.

19 Letter 116 (4 August 1904), Amsterdam. He announced that he would have his purchases reframed straight away by his regular framer, Boyer. However, this occurred for neither *At the Window* nor *The Masque of the Red Death*, the frame of which is decorated with bones and droplets of blood. See essay, "'Communion with the Chosen": Andries Bonger and Odilon Redon', box text 'Bonger's handwritten notes on Redon', fig. d.

20 Letter from Edmond Picard to Odilon Redon (3 February 1887), published in Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, pp. 150–51: 'I have just consulted an artist-framer to give them the surround they deserve before being shown on the 19th of this month at the exhibition of Les XX, the date on which I will give a public reading of *Le Juré*. I have every reason to believe that the relationship between the drawings and the frames will be achieved with the necessary harmony.' ('Je viens de conférer avec un artiste encadreur pour leur donner l'enveloppe qu'ils méritent afin de paraître le 19 de ce mois à l'exposition des XX, le jour où je lirai le *Juré* en public. Tout me fait croire que le rapport entre les dessins et les cadres sera établi avec l'harmonie nécessaire.')



Fig. 3e Cat. 6 in its original frame by Lembrée

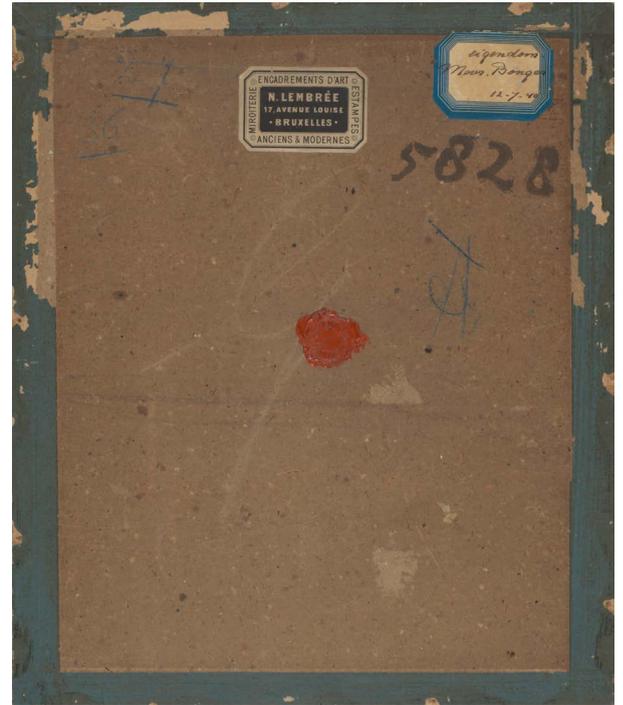


Fig. 3f Backboard of the frame for cat. 6



Fig. 3g Odilon Redon, *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1883. Charcoal and black chalk on paper, 43.7 × 35.8 cm (with original matting and frame). Museum of Modern Art, New York, The John S. Newberry Collection



Fig. 3h Theo Van Rysselberghe, Poster for the gallery and framer N. Lembrée, 1897. Colour lithograph on wove paper, 69.5 × 51 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Edmond Picard, Brussels, 7 December 1889; consigned by Edmond Picard to auction Brussels, Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères (Collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard), lot 94 (*Le Penseur au vitrail*), purchased by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 115 French francs, 26 March 1904; 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 Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 1996; since then on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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— Andries Bonger, letter 116 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (4 April 1904).

— Odilon Redon, letter 119 to Andries Bonger, Saint-Georges-de-Didonne (21 August 1904).

— Andries Bonger, letter 125 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (14 December 1904).

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Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal Academy of Arts), 1994–95, p. 146.

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— Margret Stuffmann, ‘Self-Portraits?’, in *Odilon Redon: As in a Dream*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 191–99.

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— Christopher Lloyd, *Impressionism: Pastels, Watercolors, Drawings*, exh. cat., Milwaukee (Milwaukee Art Museum)/Vienna (Albertina), 2011–12, p. 134.

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— Brussels, Galerie Georges Giroux, *Rétrospective Odilon Redon*, 18 December 1920–8 January 1921, nos. 81–87, *Dessins pour illustrer Le juré*.

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Fig. 3i Detail of cat. 6

4 A group of women's profiles

Cats. 7–12

Cat. 7 Odilon Redon, *Youth*, 1891. Various charcoals with fixative application on cream wove paper, 52.3 × 37 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1059N1996

Cat. 8 Odilon Redon, *Concern for the Absolute*, 1891. Various charcoals with fixative application on cream wove paper, 44.7 × 37 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1057N1996

Cat. 9 Odilon Redon, *Woman Looking at Flowers*, 1892. Various charcoals with black chalk and fixative application on cream wove paper, 51.1 × 37.6 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1058N1996

Cat. 10 Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Woman against a Background of Black Poppies*, 1893. Various charcoals with black chalk and fixative application on cream wove paper, 51 × 36.8 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1060N1996

Cat. 11 Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Pensive Woman*, 1896. Oil on cardboard, 28 × 24.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), s0467N1996

Cat. 12 Odilon Redon, *Profile against a Tapestry*, c. 1903. Pastel chalk with oil pastel, charcoal, black and red chalk on cream-coloured laid paper, 45.3 × 31.8 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1050N1996

No fewer than five drawings and one painting by Odilon Redon in the Van Gogh Museum collection feature a woman's profile: hardly surprising given that the artist made literally hundreds of them from the 1890s onwards.¹ When Redon held his first one-man exhibition at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1894, he showed several of these recent drawings, including *Youth* (cat. 7) and *Profile of a Woman against a Background of Black Poppies* (cat. 10), alongside his earlier work. Like his previous *noirs*, they were done in charcoal, but the mood and execution could hardly be more different from those gloomy scenes in deep-black tones, in which monsters and nightmarish visions loom out of the darkness (fig. 4a). Instead, Redon used his charcoal to produce serene female profiles, built up very subtly from small lines, thin layers and areas left open. The physiognomy of their high foreheads and refined facial features bears little resemblance to the low foreheads, pronounced noses and bestial characteristics of the figures that populate his black drawings and prints.² This remarkable transition from dark to light and from monstrosity to serenity, which had commenced in the 1880s, has often been attributed to changes in Redon's life to the more comfortable existence of a married man with a stable income, courtesy of a growing group of collectors.³

For all his more mondaine lifestyle, Redon remained far removed from the real world with his profiles: rather than flesh-and-blood women, the artist created one idealized image after another. With their robes and headdresses and surrounded by flowers and foliage, his dream figures evoke an ethereal beauty. Where the drawings are characterized by subtle tonal gradations, Redon generally used a single, confident line in charcoal or even harder black chalk to make the profile stand out from the charcoal backgrounds.⁴ Depiction from the side isolates the woman's gaze from that of the beholder, who is kept at even more of a distance by the parapet in the foreground of several versions.⁵ Redon seems to have been inspired in this respect by (early) Renaissance portraits in the Louvre by the likes of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and Pisanello (c. 1395–1455) (figs. 4g–4j).⁶

¹ Alec Wildenstein counted as many as 229 (W122–351) and this number does not include the portraits, larger compositions or any of the graphic works incorporating a profile. See 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*.

² See in this regard 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; Barbara Larson, 'Evolution and Degeneration in the Early Work of Odilon Redon', issue 'The Darwin Effect: Evolution and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* (April 2003), pp. 1–15.

³ See, for example, Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95; Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), 2011.

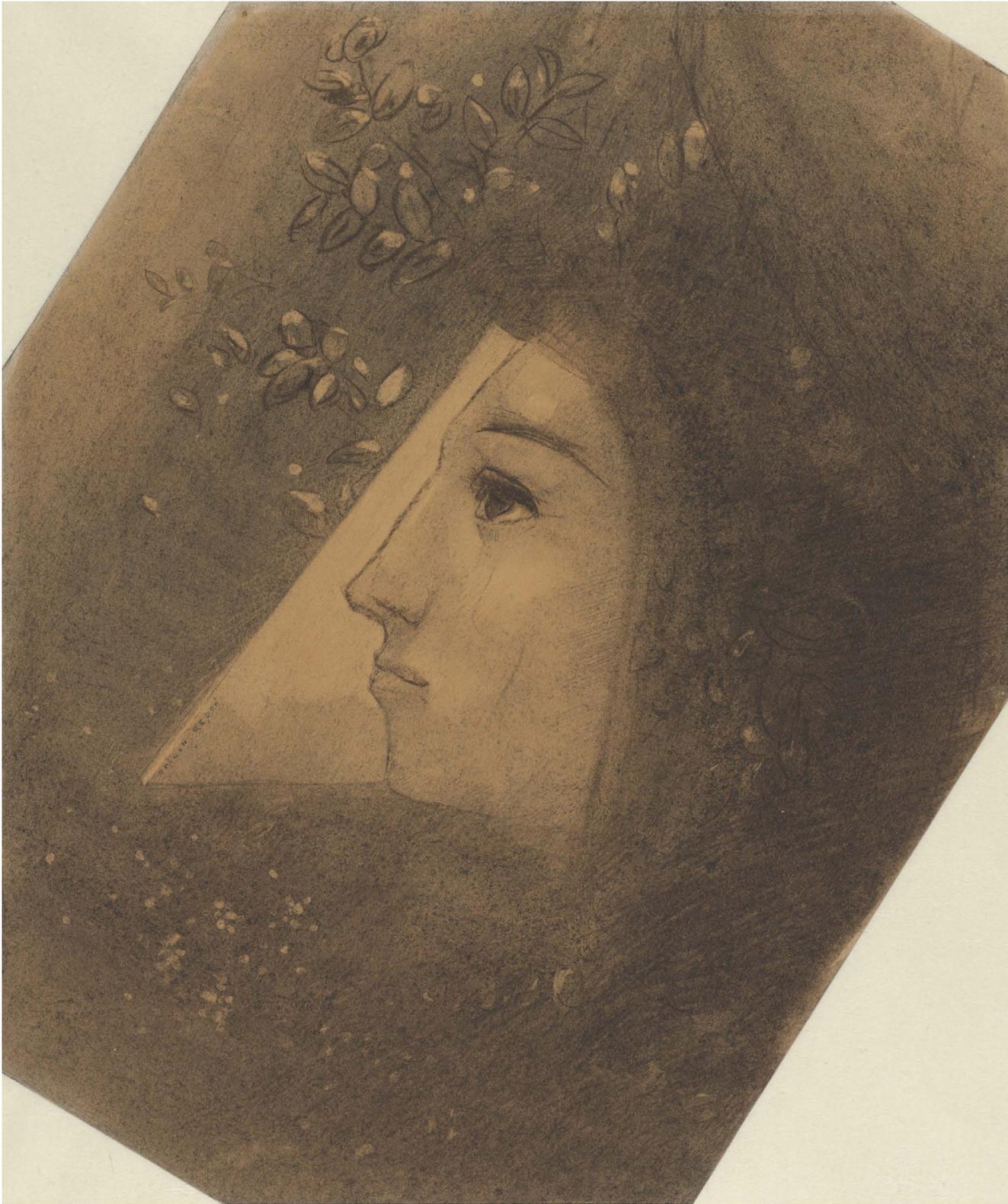
⁴ Technical examinations carried out on 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

⁵ Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Chicago/London 2011, p. 15 and n. 21.

⁶ Fred Leeman, *André Bongers, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).



Cat. 7 Odilon Redon, *Youth*



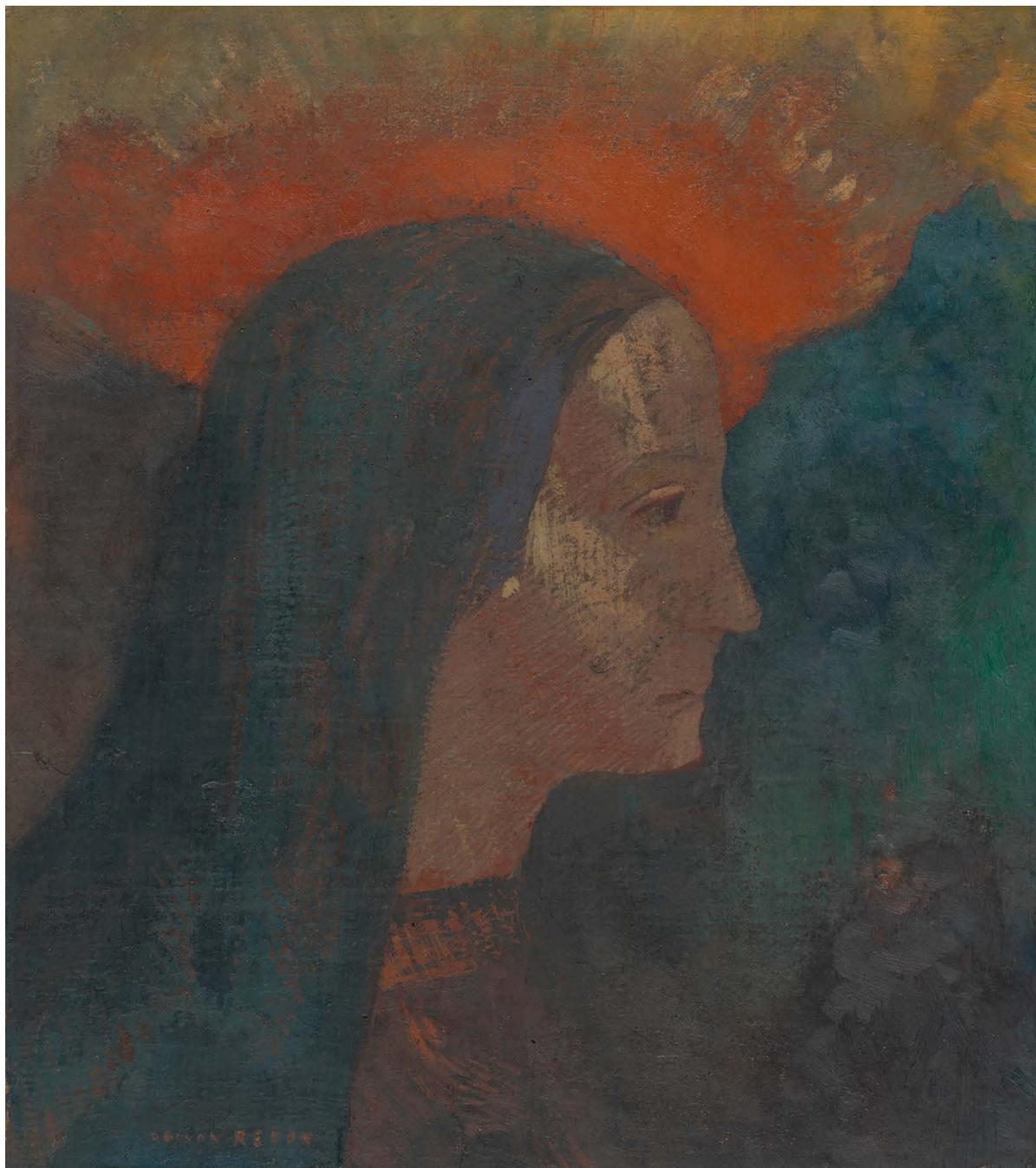
Cat. 8 Odilon Redon, *Concern for the Absolute*



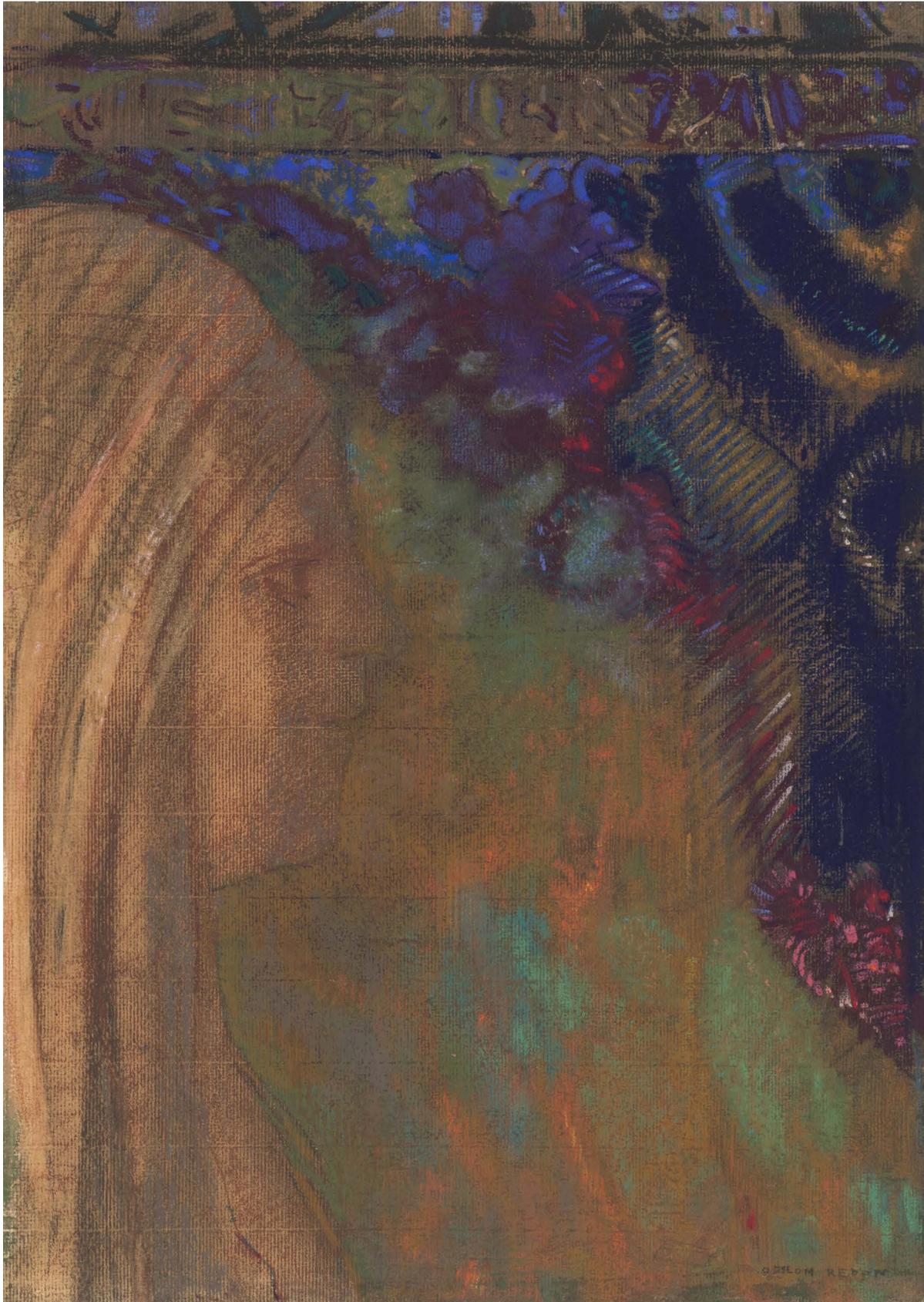
Cat. 9 Odilon Redon, *Woman Looking at Flowers*



Cat. 10 Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Woman against a Background of Black Poppies*



Cat. 11 Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Pensive Woman*



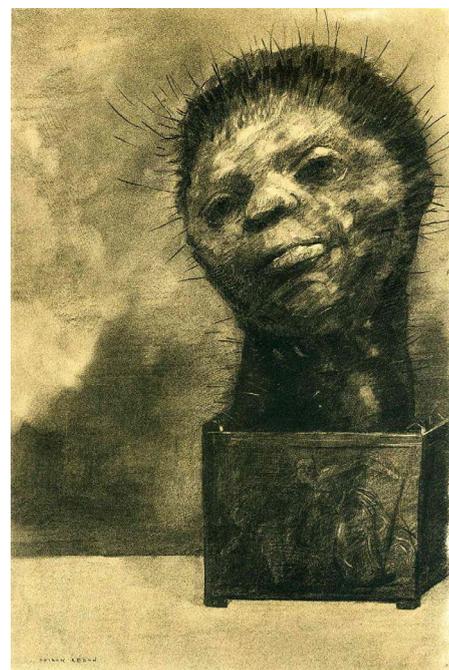
Cat. 12 Odilon Redon, *Profile against a Tapestry*

He found a female image in early-Italian art that fitted his artistic quest for a spiritual ideal. Where so many fin-de-siècle artists depicted the woman as the *femme fatale* whose sexuality brought the world to ruin, Redon remained true to her virginal antithesis.⁷ The same ideal of a divine Eros resonated elsewhere in the culture of the time too. Critics also sought cultural connections in contemporary literature and music. In 1894, for instance, Jean Lorrain (1855–1906) called Redon's female profiles 'daughters of Baudelaire' because of their mysterious immobility, and he also compared them to Richard Wagner's fairy-tale *filles-fleurs*, who tried to seduce Parsifal in the opera's second act.⁸ But the mystery of these drawings is by no means confined to the women themselves. While the figures are often laid down in just a few refined lines, the background contains an abstract dream world, filled with arabesques and lighting effects.

As Redon worked in oil and pastels increasingly frequently in the late 1890s, he began to use colour to evoke the suggestion of other worlds in the backgrounds of his paintings and pastels. In *Profile of a Pensive Woman* (cat. 11) – one of the first works in colour after he had barely painted for decades – he was still making somewhat tentative use of a few ground tones to suggest a mountain landscape with a red-orange sun. That this was a first careful attempt is also apparent from the poor-quality cardboard he used as a support.⁹ Andries Bonger spotted the work in the summer of 1897 during a visit to the painter and was able to buy it for just 60 francs.¹⁰ Redon had provided the painting with a 'small and modest' gold frame. The Dutchman was delighted: he had been pressing the artist for some time for a recent work in colour and had now achieved his wish. He wrote that it brought him consolation in the long, gloomy Dutch winter: 'I should have liked to talk to you straight away about the joy the little canvas has given me. It looks marvellous in its golden frame; one might think it several centuries old. Thank you so much for sending it; it gives my little collection a note of grave colour that fills me with pleasure.'¹¹

Redon drew the pastel *Profile against a Tapestry* (cat. 12) over a profile in black materials. He then used the pure pigments of the pastel chalk, bound to the paper solely by a tiny amount of oil and interacting with the chain lines of the laid paper, to create a woven tapestry full of lush, decorative forms in the background, where we find much more imagination and life than in the barely fleshed-out female figure itself.¹² Did Redon really intend this contrast to express the inner world of his dreaming, pensive women and did he succeed in doing so, or did he actually reduce them to nothing more than a lovely, oneiric and decorative husk: an ornament in itself?

In *Concern for the Absolute* (cat. 8) Redon traded organic motifs for a geometric background. He heightened the geometry by tipping the sheet and radically cropping the composition, which was initially drawn on the sheet straight.¹³ The artist had the drawing framed by his regular framer Boyer in a correspondingly angled mount: a remarkable invention that caused the work to leap out at the exhibitions in the Netherlands to which Bonger loaned it after acquiring the piece in 1901 (fig. 4c). Several critics made a point of commenting on the drawing in their



4a Odilon Redon, *Cactus Man*, 1882. Charcoal on paper, 46.5 × 31.5 cm. The Ian Woodner Family Collection

7 Redon was not the only artist to concentrate on this image of the virginal female in his art: see also Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) or Maurice Denis, for instance.

8 Jean Lorrain, 'Un étrange Jongleur', *L'Echo de Paris* (10 April 1894).

9 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. 69.

10 See letters 51 (4 September 1897), Hilversum, 52 (9 November 1897), Listrac, 53 (31 December 1897), Hilversum, 54 (16 January 1898), Paris, and 55 (17 January 1898), Hilversum.

11 Letter 55.

12 The association with textiles that this evokes might be linked to the textile designs he produced

around this time for the Gobelins company. See Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décorations*, W2529–2534; Leeman, in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, pp. 282–83.

13 The cropped shape shows that Redon originally placed the woman on the sheet straight and only tipped it afterwards. The fixative follows the form of the edge, making it clear that Redon personally cut the support into this non-standard shape before fixing it, rather than it being done later during framing. Technical examinations carried out on 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.

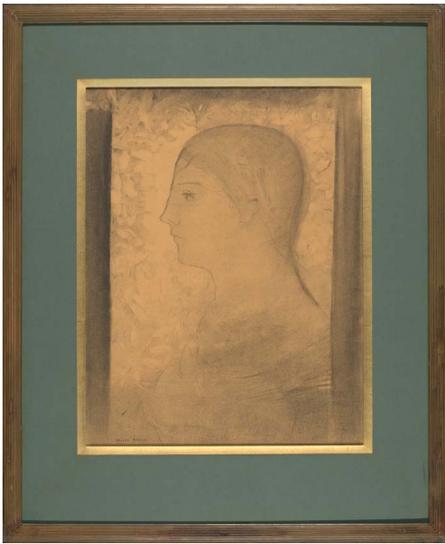


Fig. 4b Cat. 7 in a reconstructed matting and its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 4c Cat. 8 in a reconstructed matting and its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 4d Cat. 10 in a reconstructed matting and its original frame by Pierre Cluzel

14 Giovanni, 'De tentoonstelling van den Modernen Kunstkring', *Algemeen Handelsblad* (16 October 1911), p. 33: 'His charcoal *Souci d'absolu* is like the lithographs: we are very seldom able to explain them, yet they still suggest something to us. The same with this drawing, the tautness of which – the sharply profiled head between straight lines – fascinates us, even though it furnishes no clear answer to questions of meaning.' ('Zijn fusain *Souci d'absolu* is als die litho's: verklaren kunnen wij ze hoogst zelden, toch suggereeren ze ons iets. Zoo ook deze teekening, wier strakheid – die scherp geprofileerde kop tusschen rechte lijnen – ons boeit, ook al geeft ze op ons vragen naar den zin geen duidelijk antwoord.'). Frits Lapidoth, 'Odilon Redon', *De nieuwe courant* (28 May 1907), p. 15: 'I do not know what this means. It seems to have little effect on me. You sit down to look at it, let the composition spread its light over you as if from a dream [...] the dream world will open up to you. It is a pleasure, comparable to musical pleasure, which a composer must be able to inspire, that it must be possible to inspire through music. I experienced the same with most of the drawings. [...] One might see something entirely different, for instance, in the

reviews of the shows at Kunstzaal Reckers in Rotterdam in 1907 and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1911. They freely admitted to being baffled by the work's meaning, while being drawn equally firmly by its suggestive eloquence.¹⁴

Later art historians, by contrast, have been willing to venture an interpretation. The meaning of the triangle behind the veiled woman with the dark-black eye, for instance, has been sought in occult philosophy, in which the form represents the Holy Trinity and 'the mystic thought process that takes place behind closed eyes'.¹⁵ Reference has also been made to Redon's admiration for Albrecht Dürer's (1471–1528) *Melencolia I* (fig. 4k), a reproduction of which hung in his studio and combined all the wisdom and spirituality that Redon was seeking.¹⁶ In that work, Dürer depicts the pensive figure of Melancholy, whom he took to represent the artist himself, next to a geometric figure or octahedron. One could argue that the latter is echoed in Redon's peculiar matting for the drawing.¹⁷ Redon's artistic quest for 'higher truths' is expressed in the title: *Concern for the Absolute*. Although he sought in 1901 to play down this grandiose title by stating that titles 'determine either too much or too little', Bonger was very taken with it. He wrote: 'Lovely title. How you must have lived by the mind and suffered through it before attaining this intensity of expression.'¹⁸

garlanded woman in *Souci d'absolu* if one did not have a catalogue to hand. Yet this would not be an obstacle. The woman stays with you as something exalted.' ('Ik weet niet wat dit beteekent. Het dunkt er mij weinig toe te doen. Ge gaat er naar zitten kijken, laat deze compositie als uit een droom haar licht over u uitstralen [...] de droomwereld opent zich voor u. Het is een genot, waarbij muziekaal genot kan worden vergeleken, dat een componist moet kunnen inspireeren; dat door muziek geïnspireerd zou kunnen zijn. Ditzelfde vond ik van de meeste teekeningen. [...] Zoo kan men bijvoorbeeld in de omkranste vrouw van *Souci d'absolu* heel wat anders zien, mocht men geen catalogus bij de hand hebben. Toch zou dit niet hinderen. Die vrouw blijft bij u als wat heel verhevens.')

15 'het mystieke gedachteproces dat zich achter gesloten ogen afspeelt'. Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 215–36; Leeman, in Rapetti *et al.* 2012, pp. 216–17; Leeman 2007.

16 Leeman 2007.

17 Leeman, in Rapetti *et al.* 2012, pp. 216–17.

18 Letters 75 (22 July 1901), Amsterdam, and 76 (29 August 1901), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: 'Le titre est bien joli. Que vous avez dû vivre et souffrir par l'esprit avant d'arriver à cette intensité d'expression.'

19 Besides the works reproduced here from the Van Gogh Museum collection, these were the charcoal drawings *Spring* (W239), *Sleep* (W87), *Profile of a Woman under an Arch* (W329) and the pastel *Profile of a Girl against a Blue Background* (W177).



Fig. 4e Cat. 11 in its original frame by Boyer

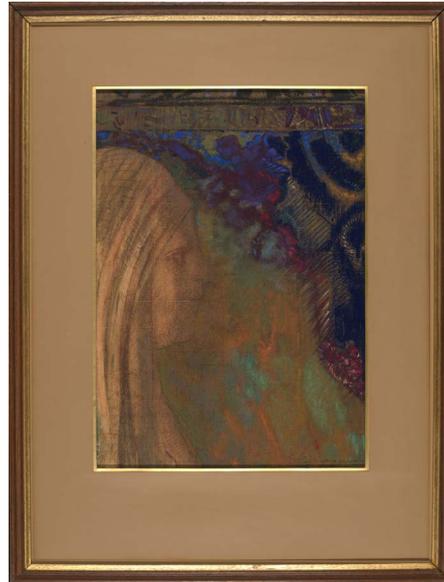


Fig. 4f Cat. 12 in its original matting and frame by Boyer

Bonger was immensely impressed anyway by Redon's female profiles. He acquired no fewer than ten of them over the years, seven in charcoal, two in pastels and one in oil paint.¹⁹ The first two were purchased in 1894, at and shortly after the exhibition at Durand-Ruel in Paris. In a first letter, which marked the beginning of a long and deep correspondence, he introduced himself to the artist as the purchaser of *Youth* and *Profile of a Woman against a Background of Black Poppies*.²⁰ Redon also treated his profiles as a kind of litmus test for collectors: only after they had displayed sufficient appreciation and understanding of these works were they deemed worthy of acquiring the earlier *noirs*. But Bonger continued to buy profiles, even after becoming one of the most important collectors of Redon's work: he acquired the final one, *Spring*, in 1904.²¹

Even though some of these works may appear almost identical to us, Bonger found something new that moved him in each one, and they continued to fascinate him throughout the years. In a letter of December 1894 he told Redon how, tired after a long working day, he could look endlessly at his two profiles of women and how they were a source of consolation in his banal everyday life.²² Although 'just a contour', to him they were 'an expression of such an intimate inner life [...] that I could not name an equal'.²³ He reiterated to the artist in 1896 what powerful

²⁰ It was long thought that *Profile of a Woman against a Background of Black Poppies* was listed in the account book under 'Profil au pavot, Le Pavot noir (à un amateur de Hollande)'. This seems to relate, however, to no. 2 in the exhibition catalogue for Odilon Redon, at Haagsche Kunstkring, The Hague, 20 May–1 July 1894: 'Le pavot noir (toebehoorende aan den Heer J. Zürcher te Enkhuizen)'. This Zürcher might have been the 'amateur' to whom Redon referred in letter 2 (30 May 1894), Paris, as 'l'amateur qui le désirait' but who was ultimately unable to acquire the work. See Odilon Redon, Mellerio Redon Chronology (MRC), 1892, no. 264, published in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 453. Bonger did manage to get his hands on *Le Pavot noir*, when another collector pulled out of a previously

agreed sale. See letter 3 (misdated 6 May 1894), Hilversum: 'Just a word to say I am purchasing the drawing *Profile of a Woman* for 250 frs and have warned Monsieur de Bock that it is no longer for sale.' ('Cher Monsieur Redon, Un mot pour vous dire que je suis acquéreur, au prix de: frs 250.- du dessin: "Profil de femme" et que j'ai prévenu M. de Bock qu'il n'est plus à vendre.')

²¹ Fred Leeman et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), no. 157, *Spring* (W239). See also Leeman 2007, *Jeunesse*. It is not surprising that the names of the profiles have become confused over time: the titles have been mixed up in various publications. Some confusion had already arisen during Bonger's

time, as witnessed by the incorrect title in the catalogue, Anonymous, *Isographieën systeem W. van Meurs: Volledige Geïllustreerde Catalogus*, Amsterdam after 1914, no. 71. *Jeunesse, Femme regardant des fleurs, La jeunesse* and *Profil de femme (fonds de pavots noirs)* were, after all, drawn using the same method on exactly the same kind of paper.

²² Letter 11 (31 December 1894), Hilversum: 'And then, having returned to the daily task and the great weariness I feel of an evening, what I had to say to you no longer seemed worth saying. [...] I love your drawings more and more and, of an evening, too weary to read, I gaze and gaze at them.' ('Et puis, une fois la tâche quotidienne reprise, avec de grandes fatigues le soir, ce que j'avais à vous dire n'en semblait plus la peine. [...] Vos dessins, je les aime de plus en plus et le soir, trop fatigué pour lire, je les regarde longuement.')

²³ Andries Bonger, 'Lezing ter gelegenheid van de Redon-expositie in de Larensche Kunsthandel, voorgedragen op 7 mei 1909', in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, C, p. 23. ('Er waren op die kleine tentoonstelling van zulk een innig zieleleven – sommige slechts een contour.')



Fig. 4g Leonardo da Vinci. *Portrait of Isabelle d'Este*, 1499–1500. Red and black chalk and stumping, ochre chalk, white highlights on paper, 61 × 46.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 4h Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Woman (after Leonardo da Vinci)*, date unknown. Black chalk on paper, 30 × 22.5 cm. Collection unknown



Fig. 4i Pisanello, *Portrait of a Princess of the d'Este family*, 1441–43. Oil on panel, 43 × 30 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 4j Leonardo da Vinci, *La Belle Ferronnière*, 1490–97. Oil on panel, 63 × 45 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

feelings and daydreams Redon's female profiles evoked in him: 'Just now I was lost in reverie before your profile of a woman. How does this outline manage to convey an enveloping and unspeakable anxiety unless your hand has been guided by the most profound imagination! Fundamentally, I mean only this: (and I express myself so poorly, you will surely smile) when we are talking about art, there is no limit to its revelation.'²⁴ These rich experiences on the part of an empathetic collector were precisely what the artist himself had in mind with these works: 'the repercussion of a human experience placed by permitted fantasy in a play of arabesques, where [...] the action which will be derived in the mind of the spectator will incite him to fictions'.²⁵ It is up to us as contemporary viewers to continue to lose ourselves in the 'play of arabesques' that the artist offers and to project our own stories and interpretations onto these still and elusive profiles.

24 Letter 35: 'Tout à l'heure je me perdais en rêverie devant votre profil de femme. Comment donc ce contour arrive-t-il à communiquer cet enveloppant et indicible trouble, sinon que votre main ait été guidée par la plus profonde imagination! Au fond, je ne veux dire que ceci: (et vous devez bien sourire à ma pauvre façon de m'exprimer) quand il s'agit d'art, il n'y a pas de limite à sa révélation.'

25 Redon (1895), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 22.



Fig. 4k Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514. Engraving on paper, 23.9 × 18.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

CAT. 7**PROVENANCE**

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Hilversum for 100 French francs, during the exhibition at Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris (Exposition Odilon Redon), no. 2 (*La Jeunesse*), 1894; 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. 8**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. 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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- Venice, xxxIe Biennale, 16 June–7 October 1962, no. 47, *Souci d'absolu*.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 41, *Kop in profiel naar links, door ranken omkranst*.
- Shimane, Shimane Art Museum, 2 August 2002–23 September 2002/ Gifu, Museum of Fine Arts Gifu, 8 October–8 December 2002, *Odilon Redon: Le souci de l'absolu*, no. 133, *Concern for the Absolute*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De Bonger collectie: Werken van Odilon Redon en Emile Bernard*, 2 July–31 October 2004.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 164, *Concern for the Absolute*.
- Madrid, Fundación Mapfre, *Odilon Redon*, 11 February–29 April 2012, no. 62, *Inquietud de absoluto*.

CAT. 9

PROVENANCE

Given by the artist to Sara de Swart, 1892; consigned by Sara de Swart to auction Amsterdam, Frederik Muller & Cie (Tableaux modernes aquarelles – atelier Jacob Maris, collection J.M. Rodenberg et autres), lot 241 (*Femme regardant des fleurs*), purchased by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 31 Dutch guilders, 11 March 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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- Andries Bonger, letter 79 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (28 May 1902).
- Andries Bonger, inventory list, c. May 1903, no. 22, in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, E.2-9. Referred to as 'femme regardant des fleurs (dessin exposé au Haagsche Kunstkring en 1894, appartenant à Mlle Sara de Swart) acheté en vente publique à Amsterdam, le 11 Mars 1902 pour fl 31,-'.
- Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, 2 vols., Geneva 1956, vol. 1: *La vie et l'œuvre*, pp. 58, 108, 124.
- Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.
- Klaus Berger, *Odilon Redon: Phantasie und Farbe*, Cologne 1964, no. 682, p. 232.
- Irene M. de Groot et al. (eds.), *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum), 1972, pp. 27–28.
- 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. 162, p. 75. Referred to as 'Jeunesse'.

- Fred Leeman and Kevin Sharp, 'Vroege verzamelaars van Redon in Nederland 1885/1900', *Jong Holland*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1994), pp. 22–23.
- Ronald de Leeuw, 'Richard Wagner's Influence on the Visual Arts', in *Symbolism in Art: In Search of a Definition*, Amsterdam summer university, Van Gogh Museum, 22 August–2 September 1994, lecture 12, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives.
- Fred Leeman et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009, pp. 98–99.
- Jaap Versteegh, *Fatale kunst: Leven en werk van Sara de Swart (1861–1951)*, exh. cat., Rotterdam (Kunsthall Rotterdam), 2016, p. 82.

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- The Hague, Haagsche Kunstkring, *Odilon Redon*, 20 May–1 July 1894, no. 10, *Femme regardant des fleurs*.
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- Amsterdam, Larensche Kunsthandel, *Catalogus der tentoonstelling van werken van Odilon Redon (alles particulier bezit)*, 7–14 May 1909, no. 51, *Femme regardant des fleurs*.
- Arnhem, Vereniging voor beeldende kunst, *Tentoonstelling van Odilon Redon: Schilderijen, tekeningen, litho's*, 26 March–4 April 1948, possibly no. 5 or 12, *Jeune Fille*.
- Bern, Kunsthalle Bern, *Odilon Redon 1840–1916*, 9 August–12 October 1958, no. 40.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 42, *Meisje met bloemen, in profiel naar links*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De Bonger collectie: Werken van Odilon Redon en Emile Bernard*, 2 July–31 October 2004.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 167, *Woman looking at flowers*.
- Rotterdam, Kunsthal Rotterdam, *Fatale kunst – Sara de Swart, muze der tachtigers*, 19 March–5 June 2016.

CAT. 10

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Hilversum for 250 French francs, 9 July 1894; 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.

LITERATURE

- Odilon Redon, letter to Jan Toorop, Paris (7 March 1893), published in Victorine Hefting and Sadi de Gorter (eds.), *Jan Toorop 1858–1928: Impressionniste, symboliste, pointilliste*, exh. cat., Paris (Institut Néerlandais), 1977, no. 99a, n.p.
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- Odilon Redon, letter 1 to Andries Bonger, Paris (7 May 1894).
- Odilon Redon, letter 2 to Andries Bonger, Paris (30 May 1894).
- Odilon Redon, letter 4 to Andries Bonger, Paris (9 June 1894).
- Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 9 July 1894, no. 175, published as CD-ROM 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. Referred to as 'De Mr Bonger litho *Profil de femme* 250'.

- Andries Bonger, letter 11 to Odilon Redon, Hilversum (31 December 1894).
- Andries Bonger, inventory list, c. May 1903, no. 3, in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, E.2-9. Referred to as 'Profil de femme (fonds de pavots noirs) dessin de 1893 fait en été à la campagne. Exposé chez Durand-Ruel Mars–Avril 1894 (le no. 40 du catalogue) et au Haagsche Kunstkring en 1894. acheté à Mr Redon en 1894 frs. 250,-'.
- Odilon Redon, letter 130 to Andries Bonger, Paris (17 January 1905).
- Andries Bonger, letter 131 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (12 February 1905).
- Odilon Redon, letter 161 to Andries Bonger, Paris (23 February 1906).
- Johan Cohen Gosschalk, 'Odilon Redon', *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*, vol. 46 (December 1910), p. 65.
- Anonymous, *Isographieën systeem W. van Meurs: Volledige Geïllustreerde Catalogus*, Amsterdam after 1914, no. 71, p. 76.
- André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon: Peintre, dessinateur et graveur*, Paris 1923, p. 148.
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- Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie) 1956–57, pp. 25–26, 58.
- Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.
- Klaus Berger, *Odilon Redon: Phantasie und Farbe*, Cologne 1964, no. 691, p. 233.
- Roseline Bacou, 'The Bonger Collection at Almen, Holland', *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*, vol. 80 (November 1964), p. 401.
- Irene M. de Groot et al. (eds.), *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum), 1972, p. 28.
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- Suzy Lévy (ed.), *Lettres inédites d'Odilon Redon à Bonger, Jourdain, Viñes ...*, Paris 1987, pp. 15, 17–18.
- 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. 335, p. 137. Referred to as 'Les pavots noirs' and 'Le printemps'.
- Fred Leeman and Kevin Sharp, 'Vroege verzamelaars van Redon in Nederland 1885/1900', *Jong Holland*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1994), pp. 24–25, 27–28, n. 35.
- Ronald de Leeuw, 'Richard Wagner's Influence on the Visual Arts', in *Symbolism in Art: In Search of a Definition*, Amsterdam summer university, Van Gogh Museum, 22 August–2 September 1994, lecture 12, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives.

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- The Hague, Haagsche Kunstkring, *Odilon Redon*, 20 May–1 July 1894, no. 25, *Profil de femme*.
- Rotterdam, Kunstzaal Reckers, *Exposition de peintures, dessins, lithographies par Odilon Redon*, May 1907, no. 40, *Profil de femme*.
- Amsterdam, Larensche Kunsthandel, *Catalogus der tentoonstelling van werken van Odilon Redon (alles particulier bezit)*, 7–14 May 1909, no. 39 or 56, *Profil de femme*.
- Arnhem, Vereniging voor beeldende kunst, *Tentoonstelling van Odilon Redon: Schilderijen, tekeningen, litho's*, 26 March–4 April 1948, no. 14, *Profil de femme sur fonds de feuillage*.
- New York, Jacques Seligmann, 22 October–10 November 1951/Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 29 November 1951–20 January 1952/

Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1 February 1952–1 March 1952, *Odilon Redon*, 1951–52, no. 21, *Printemps*.

— Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie, *Odilon Redon*, October 1956–January 1957, no. 46, *Pavot noir*.

— Den Haag, Gemeentemuseum, *Odilon Redon*, 3 May–23 June 1957, no. 27, *Pavot noir*.

— Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 44, *Meisjeskop in profiel naar links met bloemen*.

— Enschede, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, *Odilon Redon. Tekeningen, Litho's, Pastels en Schilderijen uit Nederlands bezit*, 1 December 1984–20 January 1985, no. 14, *Meisjeskop in profiel naar links met bloemen*.

— Holte, Fondation Gl. Holtegaard Breda-Fonden, *Sjaelens malere: den idealistiske symbolisme i Frankrig*, 5 September–6 November 2004, no. 77, *Kvindeprofil*.

— Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Émile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 169, *The Black Poppy*.

CAT. II

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Hilversum for 60 French francs, January 1898; 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.

LITERATURE

— Andries Bonger, letter 51 to Odilon Redon, Hilversum (4 September 1897).

— Odilon Redon, letter 52 to Andries Bonger, Lustrac (9 November 1897).

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— Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 5 January 1898, no. 298, published as CD-ROM 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. Referred to as 'Bonger, expédié ce jour une: *Tête de femme pensive* (peinture sur carton), en profil, sur soleil rouge orangé. Elle est coiffée d'un fond vague de montagnes violettes'.

— Odilon Redon, letter 54 to Andries Bonger, Paris (16 January 1898).

— Andries Bonger, letter 55 to Odilon Redon, Hilversum (17 January 1898).

— Odilon Redon, letter 56 to Andries Bonger, Lustrac (12 August 1898).

— Andries Bonger, letter 68 to Odilon Redon, Hilversum (4 June 1900).

— Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.

— Irene M. de Groot *et al.* (eds.), *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum), 1972, p. 16.

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— Fred Leeman and Kevin Sharp, 'Vroege verzamelaars van Redon in Nederland 1885/1900', *Jong Holland*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1994), pp. 26–28, n. 46.

— Aukje Vergeest, *The French Collection: Nineteenth-Century French Paintings in Dutch Public Collections*, Amsterdam 2000, no. 845, p. 267.

— 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.

EXHIBITIONS

— Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 9, *Vrouwenkopje in profiel naar rechts tegen een rode achtergrond*.

— Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 101, *Head of a woman, pensive (Tête de femme pensive)*.

CAT. 12

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*), no. 29 (*Profil sur Tapisserie*), 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.

LITERATURE

— Galeries Durand-Ruel Paris, invoice to Andries Bonger, n.d., in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, E.24. Referred to as 'no. 29 *Profil sur tapisserie* pastel 300'.

— Andries Bonger, letter 100 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (22 March 1903).

— Odilon Redon, letter 101 to Andries Bonger, Paris (25 March 1903).

— Odilon Redon, letter 103 to Andries Bonger, Paris (5 April 1903).

— Andries Bonger, letter 105 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (26 April 1903).

— Andries Bonger, inventory list, c. May 1903, no. 30, in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive, E.2-9. Referred to as 'profil sur tapisserie, pastel exposé chez Durand-Ruel du 12 au 26 Mars 1903 (No. 29 du catalogue) acheté à Mr Redon en Mars 1903 pour: frs 300,-'.

— Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.

— Irene M. de Groot *et al.* (eds.), *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum), 1972, p. 23.

— 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. 306, p. 128. Referred to as 'Profil sur tapisserie'.

— Fred Leeman, in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, pp. 282–83.

— Abigail Eileen Yoder, *Decoration and Symbolism in the Late Works of Odilon Redon*, unpublished diss., University of Iowa, 2013, pp. 118–19, 304.

EXHIBITIONS

— Paris, Galeries Durand-Ruel, *Pastels et peintures de Odilon Redon*, 12–26 March 1903, no. 29, *Profil sur Tapisserie*.

— Arnhem, Vereniging voor beeldende kunst, *Tentoonstelling van Odilon Redon: Schilderijen, tekeningen, litho's*, 26 March–4 April 1948, no. 18, *Profil d'homme sur fonds de tapisserie*.

— Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bonger en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 29, *Gesluisde kop in profiel naar rechts, tegen een geweven of geborduurde achtergrond*.

— Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 135, *Profile on tapestry*.

— Madrid, Fundación Mapfre, *Odilon Redon*, 11 February–29 April 2012, no. 104, *Perfil sobre tapiz*.

5 *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*

Cat. 13

Cat. 13 Odilon Redon, *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*, 1889. Thinned oil (*peinture à l'essence*) on orange wove paper on cardboard, 45 × 35 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), 50500N1999

1 'Bought a painting [by] Odilon Redon, Woman with Aureole' ('Gekocht een schijf Odilon Redon Femme à l'Oreole'), Theo Van Gogh and Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, *Account Book*, 8 July 1889, p. 7, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, b2205V1982. Although the frame looks Dutch as far as weight and material are concerned, the label on the backing is clearly that of the frame-maker Cluzel. Theo's account book reveals that he did indeed purchase a frame from Cluzel for the steep price of 40 francs. By way of comparison, Redon generally spent between 5 and 30 francs for a frame made by his regular frame-maker, Boyer, but those frames were less sturdy and of inferior quality; see Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, "'L'intérieur qui est l'image de votre pensée': Odilon Redon chez Andries Bongher", in Dario Gamboni and Merel van Tilberg (eds.), *'Sans adieu'. Andries Bongher – Odilon Redon, correspondance 1894–1916*, 11, Paris 2022, pp. 776–808, pp. 792–96.

2 The purchase of this icon of Symbolism puts into perspective the overly simplistic contrast between Theo as a champion of Naturalism in art and Bongher as a pioneer of Symbolism, a polarity that Bongher did in fact experience as such. See the general essay "'Communion with the chosen": Andries Bongher and Odilon Redon'.

3 In this case Theo used the 678 francs that had been left to Vincent by their father, but which Vincent had stubbornly refused to accept. Their sisters Wil and Lies (Elisabeth; 1859–1936) transferred this amount anyway, to pay for Vincent's upkeep in Arles. By investing it in art intended as stock in trade for the art dealership they dreamt of opening in the future, Theo was acting in his brother's interest as well.

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

This painted figure with closed eyes and a halo is the first ambitious painting that Odilon Redon exhibited, presumably on the initiative of its new owner, Theo Van Gogh. Theo, who in the autumn of 1889 was working hard with the organizer Octave Maus to get the paintings of his brother Vincent displayed at the group show of Les XX in Brussels, offered to make available to the exhibition his newly acquired Redon, which was given pride of place as number 1 in the catalogue.

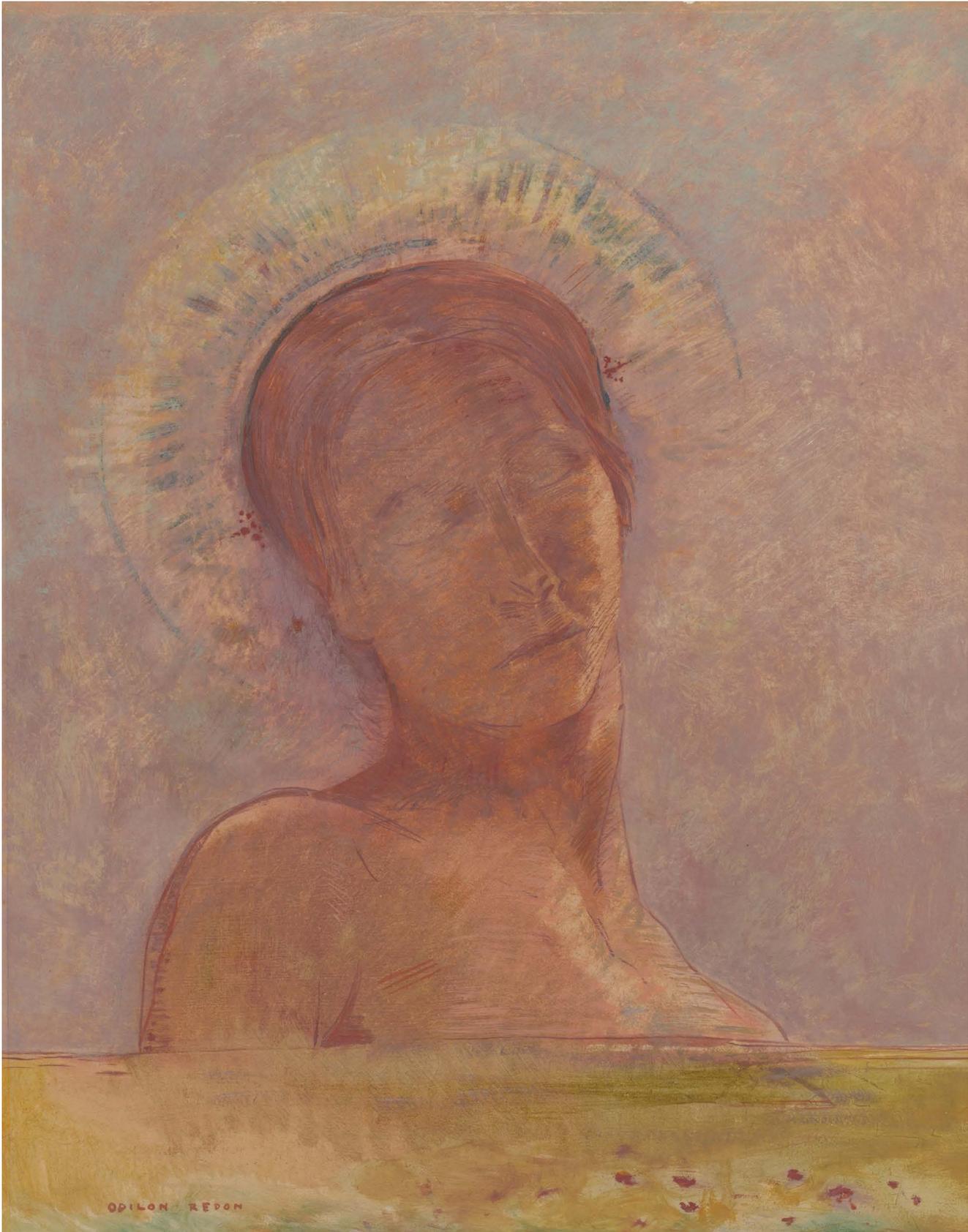
Redon's work was exhibited at Les XX at the beginning of 1890 under the title *Au ciel (In Heaven)*. While Redon was mainly known for his drawings and prints in sober black, these first cautious steps in colour alerted them to a new direction in his practice. Theo Van Gogh, who acquired more work by the artist for the art dealer Boussod, Valadon & Cie (formerly Goupil & Cie), had bought the painting for himself in July 1889 under the title *Femme à l'Oreole (Woman with a Halo)* and had it put in a heavy oak frame by the frame-maker to the avant-garde, Pierre Cluzel (fig. 5a).¹ The purchase can be thought of as both a declaration of love and a business investment.² Together with his brother Vincent, Theo dreamed of an existence as an independent art dealer, and he occasionally bought artworks for their private collection that could serve as starting capital.³

The bust of the woman with a halo was put on paper with thinned oil paint, which produced a flat, transparent and draughtsmanlike effect.⁴ The orange wove paper covered with a preparatory layer of cream-coloured paint shines through everywhere, and, together with the wispy lines and strokes, makes it seem as though the figure might vanish into thin air at any moment.⁵ The mysterious woman is, after all, *In Heaven*, as Redon himself called the work, and her halo emphasizes her immateriality. At the same time, there is something solid about her. All the orifices in her head (eyes, nose, mouth and ears) are smoothed over, so that she is hermetically sealed off from us. The purplish red points near both temples, as well as the lines projecting from her halo, might suggest the energy emanating from her inner world. The parapet, which displays an abstract landscape consisting of thin washes and a few spots of pigment, shows us something of the dream landscape in which she finds herself. This dream landscape is quite discoloured, however, as is the

Museum', *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art*, vol. 3 (2005), pp. 66–81, pp. 69 and 73. Additional observations made by René Boitelle, conservator of paintings, on 16 March 2021: 'All the brushstrokes in the painted version have remained, there are no clear traces of wet-in-wet and drips, nor is there any darkening of the ground, caused by an excess of binding medium, in the immediate proximity of brushstrokes. Neither the *frottis*-like

brushstrokes in the figure and background nor the contour lines and hatching became blurred after application, and seem to have dried without lustre soon after being applied. In conclusion, the dearth of analyses and lack of deeper insight into Redon's studio practice justifies the hypothesis that what we see here is *peinture à l'essence*, possibly in combination with other binding media.'

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



Cat. 13 Odilon Redon, *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*



Fig. 5a Cat. 13 in its original frame by Cluzel

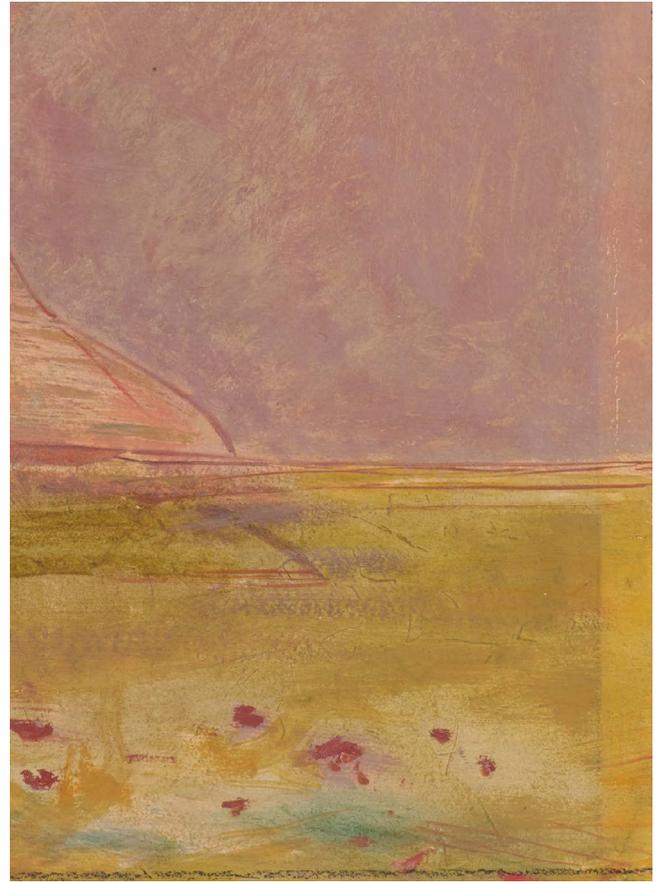


Fig. 5b Detail of cat. 13

6 Observations made by René Boitelle, conservator of paintings, on 16 March 2021: 'Along the edges, which were long covered by a frame and were therefore not exposed to daylight or artificial light, it can be seen that the background was originally light purple-pink, whereas the part that was exposed to light now looks slightly more blue, and that the foreground was brighter yellow where it is now greener. It seems that, with the exception of the edges that were covered by the frame, the work was once covered with a finishing coat that gave the whole surface a somewhat glossier appearance. The extent to which this layer is discoloured, thus contributing to the discoloration observed, is still uncertain.'

7 Letter from Odilon Redon to Octave Maus, December 1889: 'Van Gogh, whom I met, will send a

background. The paint layers that were covered by the frame and therefore less exposed to light reveal that the purplish pink of the background now looks more blue, and the yellow of the foreground more green (fig. 5b).⁶

The paintings that Redon had made before 1889 served as personal studies, which he did not show in public. That the decision to exhibit *In Heaven* was an unexpected move, even in his own eyes, is apparent from the many exclamation marks placed by Redon in his announcement to Maus that Van Gogh would be submitting a painting by him.⁷ The work must have been well received in Brussels, for shortly afterwards the co-organizer and art lover Edmond Picard, writing in the magazine *L'Art moderne*, reminded his readers of the painting and announced the appearance of a lithographic version in an edition of fifty, 'for you Aesthetes, just for you'.⁸ In this lithograph of 1890, the halo has disappeared and the landscape is less ethereal (fig. 5c). These changes possibly explain Redon's new title, *Closed Eyes*. That same year Redon also made a new painted version of the work of approximately the same format as *In Heaven*. In this painting, conceived in cool blue tones, the

painting (!!!)' ('Van Gogh, que j'ai [sic] vu, enverra une peinture (!!!)'), quoted in Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, p. 286. See also Fred Leeman, *André Bongher, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

8 *Yeux clos* (M107). See Edmond Picard, 'Yeux clos',

L'Art Moderne, vol. 10 (28 December 1890), p. 412: 'a painting at the exhibition of Les XX, [...] here she is in lithography, with this title: CLOSED EYES. In fifty impressions, for you Aesthetes, just for you' ('un tableau à l'exposition des XX, [...] la voici en lithographie, avec cette désignation: YEUX CLOS. En cinquante exemplaires, pour vous Esthètes, pour vous seuls').



Fig. 5c Odilon Redon, *Closed Eyes (Yeux clos)*, 1890. Lithograph on chine collé on wove paper, 56.5 × 40.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), p0880N1996

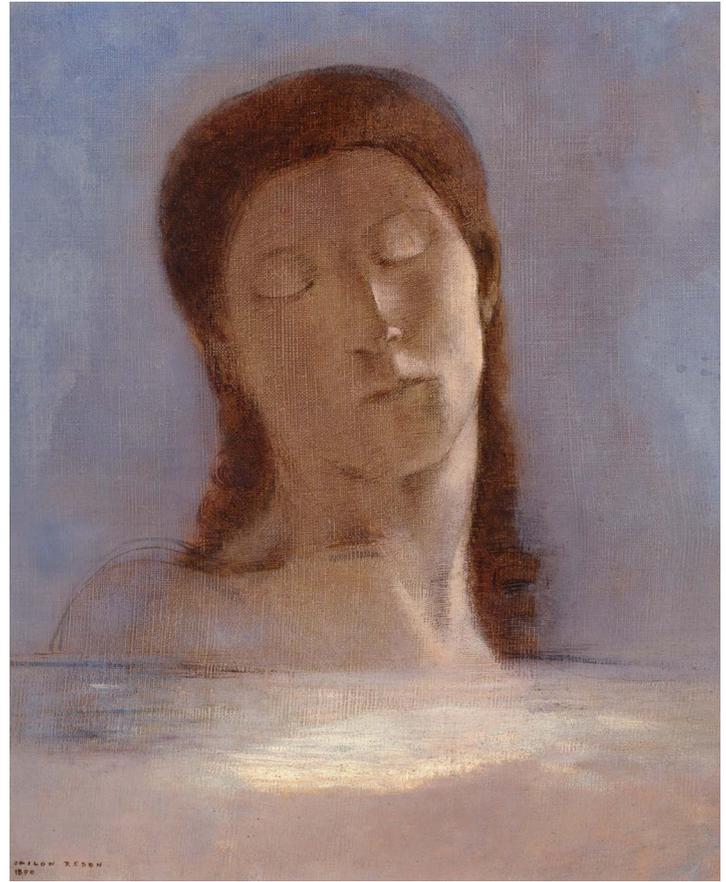


Fig. 5d Odilon Redon, *Closed Eyes*, 1890. Oil on cardboard, 44 × 36 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

figure seems to rise like an island out of the water, in which the light is reflected (fig. 5d).⁹ The lithograph was shown at various exhibitions of contemporary prints, and soon another fifty impressions were pulled to meet the demand from collectors.¹⁰ Léonce Bénédite (1859–1925), himself a connoisseur of prints, was prompted by the iconic lithograph to acquire, in 1904, the painted version of 1890 for the Musée du Luxembourg, and thus Redon joined the official canon of French art.¹¹ The great demand among collectors for this particular motif continued in the following years, as did Redon's personal fascination for the subject, and until 1913 he therefore went on painting new variants of it, producing a total of twelve.¹²

The female figure with closed eyes has been interpreted by critics, then and now, in various ways. The contemporary authors Edmond Picard and Jules Destrée saw the print – and thereby indirectly the painting – as the antithesis of the typology of the woman as a threatening *femme fatale*. Instead of stirring up unhealthy passions with a seductive glance and voluptuous body, this chaste vision aroused noble thoughts and feelings of purity.¹³ The halo in the painting heightens the suggestion

⁹ This work, too, is discoloured. As early as 1904, Redon had written to Bongier that in those twelve years it had aged 'a bit'. Letter 114 (5 February 1904), no location.

¹⁰ The lithograph *Yeux clos (Closed Eyes)* was displayed at the *Peintres-graveurs* exhibition of 1891 (no. 272), the *Exposition générale de la lithographie* of 1891 (no. 967) and the large retrospective exhibition

of the *Centenaire de la lithographie* of 1895, as well as at the monographic overviews of Redon's oeuvre at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in 1894 and at the Salon d'automne of 1904.

¹¹ In 1903 Redon had already been awarded the Legion of Honour. He was happy about this official purchase, but complained to Bongier that in order to ensure the 'necessary zone of isolation' that his work

required, at least two works should have been purchased. Letter 114: 'Pour l'instant il n'y aura que cette pièce, et ce n'est pas assez pour créer, autour d'elle, la zone d'isolement.'

¹² See Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné: mythes et légendes*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98; vol. 1, *Portraits et figures* (1992), nos. 467–78. 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, p. 278, with regard to the enormous popularity of the motif and Redon's reaction to this.

¹³ See Picard 1890; Jules Destrée, *L'œuvre lithographique de Odilon Redon: Catalogue descriptif*, Brussels 1891, p. 74. See also Fred Leeman, *Confidentie van een kunstenaar*, Amsterdam 1994, p. 227.

Fig. 5e Odilon Redon, *Closed Eyes* (Camille Redon), 1890. Graphite, black chalk and lithographic chalk on transfer paper, 35.7 × 26.1 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Ian Woodner Family Collection



of a holy virgin. Moreover, Destrée praised this female figure 'of the most highly vaporious ideality' for her inner life full of 'brave and pure thoughts with just a touch of melancholy'.¹⁴ He therefore saw the woman as a mother figure, as a calm and more mature woman.

It is interesting in this respect to note that Picard thought he recognized the woman as a likeness of Redon's wife, Camille, who had just given birth to their son, Arī (1889–1972).¹⁵ And although Redon played down the idea, he admitted that those close to him sometimes turned up in his work, unintentionally, because he hesitated to use professional models. He wrote to Picard: 'An overly laudatory article, surprising me about everything you saw in it and all that I unconsciously put into this androgyne's head. You saw the features of Madame Redon in it! Perhaps rightly so. Hardly ever using live models, it happens that I capture the faces surrounding me; but never for the monsters.'¹⁶ However, Redon's modelling of the woman after his wife seems to have been deliberate in this case. There exists a preparatory study on tracing paper of exactly the same format as the lithograph with her likeness in reverse and lithographic chalk on the back, to transfer the composition to the lithographic stone (fig. 5e).¹⁷ The discovery of this portrait study with the same dimensions as the lithograph suggests the possibility that Redon's print preceded the painting and that this study might therefore have been made before July 1889. This would mean the painted versions were made after the print, a working method that Redon used more often in the years to come.

In any case, all three – the study, the lithograph and the painted version in the Musée d'Orsay – share a number of interesting features with the version in the Van Gogh Museum. The lines of the shoulder and neck correspond, as do the jaw

¹⁴ Destrée 1891, p. 74: 'de vaillantes et chastes pensées y sommeillent, des pensées déjà graves'.

¹⁵ Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers saw this connection with a birth even more strongly in the second version of *Closed Eyes* and go further in their interpretation of the motif; see Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, 'In the Public Eye, 1879–1889', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 120–74, p. 171: 'Depicting a monumental haloed female, her eyes closed, emerging from the sea, Redon transformed the theme of evolution from primal waters into a celebration of fecundity, alluding both to the birth of Venus and to the miracle of the Nativity.'

¹⁶ Letter from Odilon Redon to Edmond Picard, 10 January 1891; see also Fred Leeman, cat. 51 in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, p. 228: 'Article trop élogieux, et me donnant la surprise de tout ce que vous y avez vu et de tout ce que j'y ai mis si inconsciemment dans cette tête d'androgyne. Vous y avez vu les traits de Madame Redon! Peut-être bien. Usant peu du modèle vivant, il m'arrive de refléter les visages que m'entourent; pourtant point pour les monstres.'

¹⁷ *Closed Eyes* (W 467) and Leeman, in Madrid 2012, p. 229.

lines of the face. But all the other contours, such as those of the head and the hairstyle, are different in the Amsterdam version, in which the eyes, nose and mouth are turned more to the right. It is this less frontal view that makes the head in the Van Gogh Museum version look narrower.¹⁸ Thus it is possible that Redon used the preparatory drawing or another, earlier study or sketch of his wife as the basis of both the lithograph and our painting. Unfortunately, the genesis and chronology of the various versions made in different media cannot be determined precisely, but it is clear that Redon worked with a kind of template based on the features of Madame Redon.

To deflect from Picard's identification of the woman as his wife, Redon thus described the image as 'this androgyne's head'.¹⁹ This designation shows that Redon shared the fascination, common in his day, for the androgyne. Symbolist authors saw this third manifestation of the sexes as a spiritual ideal, in which the fragmented qualities of man and woman merged to form the perfect whole.²⁰ In their view, the androgyne could therefore serve to bind reality and the higher realm. Interestingly, a male model for this figure has also been suggested: Roseline Bacou was the first to point out the similarity of the pose of Redon's female figure to that of Michelangelo's (1475–1564) *Dying Slave*, which he could have admired in the Musée du Louvre (fig. 5f).²¹

In his art, Redon always strove for higher ideals, of which this androgynous figure in heaven was one of the most powerful examples, in the eyes of Redon's admirers.²² By closing her eyes to the visible world, the dream figure communes with her soul, thus uniting her earthly nature and the divine ideal.²³ In the oeuvre catalogue, the authors noted: 'There is one lacuna in the oeuvre of Odilon Redon: the gaze.'²⁴ Indeed, almost all of Redon's figures avoid our gaze, and *Closed Eyes* does this most emphatically. The many versions of the work, as well as the numerous publications about Redon that feature it on their cover, indicate that *Closed Eyes* has become the icon of Redon's artistry. The figure's purity and apparently rich inner life also inspired meditative calmness and lofty thoughts in the minds of the collectors of Redon's art. 'Art that makes one think! Art that makes one dream!' exclaimed Picard with great admiration.²⁵

Andries Bonger saw both the lithograph and the painting, which had meanwhile been named *Closed Eyes* after the print, at the Redon exhibition that he had helped to organize at the Haagsche Kunstkring in 1894. The works must have made a deep impression on him, because in the following years he actively hunted for both the print (meanwhile sold out) and a painted version of the composition.²⁶ Redon, who was helping Bonger in his search, alerted him on 18 March 1907 to the existence of a small, greyish version of the motif – admittedly 'inferior to the one in Holland and the one in the Musée du Luxembourg' – that had come onto the market via Jules Destrée.²⁷ Bonger decided not to buy it, but Redon's suggestion had fuelled his desire for the version 'in Holland'. Bonger wrote to the artist, saying that he still had an indelible memory of the work but did not know where it was.²⁸

¹⁸ With thanks to the observations made by René Boitelle, conservator of paintings, and a tracing he made of the lithograph, which was placed on the painting on 16 March 2021.

¹⁹ Letter from Odilon Redon to Edmond Picard, 10 January 1891, quoted in Madrid 2012, p. 198: 'cette tête d'androgyne'; Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, pp. 215–36, p. 228.

²⁰ Madrid 2012, p. 198; see also Joséphin Peladan, *L'Androgyne*, Paris 1891.

²¹ Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie), 1956–57, p. 68.

²² Redon wrote in 1869, quoted in Madrid 2012, p. 198; Leeman, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, p. 228: 'The beautiful and the good are in heaven. Science is on earth; it crawls' ('Le beau et bien sont au ciel. La science est sur la terre; elle rampe').

²³ Redon probably took these ideas from the diaries of Maurice de Guérin (1810–1839), whom he greatly admired; see Barbara Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon*



Fig. 5f Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, 1513–15. Marble. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Redon, University Park (Pennsylvania) 2005, p. 140: 'The true knowing eye for Guérin was "the interior eye of the soul". [...] when our eyes are closed we can establish contact between nature and the soul.'

²⁴ Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 1 (1992), p. 173: 'Il y a une absence dans l'oeuvre d'Odilon Redon: le regard.'

²⁵ Picard 1890, p. 412.

²⁶ In 1903, after searching for a long time, Bonger finally acquired the lithograph through Camille Redon for 100 francs. Letter 111 (24 November 1903), Amsterdam.

²⁷ Letter 188 (18 March 1907), no location: 'Elle est bien inférieure (c'est une sorte de réplique variante) à celle qui est en Hollande, et celle du Musée du Luxembourg.'

28 Letter 189 (31 March 1907), Amsterdam.

29 After a period of relative coolness between these friends and brothers-in-law, a period of intensive contact began in 1889; see Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, *Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger* (Cahier Vincent; 7), Leo Jansen, Jan Robert and Han van Krimpen (eds.), Amsterdam/Zwolle 1999. Regarding their personal acquaintanceship, see Fred Leeman *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009 and Fred Leeman, 'Que voyait Andries Bonger en Redon', in Garboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 676–718.

30 Letter 189 (31 March 1907), Amsterdam: 'très-malade'.

31 Letter 197 (2 August 1907), Freiburg-in-Brisgau: 'Madame Bonger, dont nous avons reçu quelque nouvelle: vous avez acquis une sanguine des *Yeux-clos* me dites-vous: c'est une peinture légère (sur papier). Je ne l'ai pas vue depuis longtemps. Vous m'avez toujours dit qu'elle était bien. Vous me serez toujours fidèle.'

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Theo Van Gogh, Paris for 200 French francs, 8 July 1889; after his death on 25 January 1891 transferred by his widow Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum, to his sister Willemien Van Gogh, Leiden; sold by Willemien Van Gogh, probably through Joan van Houten, to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, between March and August 1907; 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; donated by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1999.

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It stands to reason that Bonger had seen the work back in 1889 at his friend Theo's in Paris, which was possibly his first introduction to Redon's oeuvre and in any case preceded his making the artist's personal acquaintance on 8 November 1891 through their mutual friend Emile Bernard.²⁹ After Theo's death on 25 January 1891, the work was inherited by his sister Wil (Willemien; 1862–1941), but she had meanwhile been admitted to a psychiatric institution and Mrs Van Gogh, their mother (Anna; 1819–1907), was 'severely ill'.³⁰ Shortly after Redon's above-mentioned communication of March 1907, Bonger must have actively pursued the painting by approaching the family, because in August of that year, Redon wrote that Bonger's wife, Annie, had told him about the recent purchase of 'the sanguine of *Closed Eyes* [...]. It is a light painting (on paper). I haven't seen it for a long time. You always told me that it was good. You have always been so faithful to me.'³¹ Bonger must therefore have acquired the work sometime between March and August 1907 from Wil's possessions. In 1999 Bonger's heirs donated the painting via the Dutch state to the Van Gogh Museum, and thus the work has come full circle. Thanks to Theo Van Gogh's exceptionally early appreciation of Redon and to Andries Bonger's loyalty to the artist, as well as the generous gesture of Bonger's heirs, this key piece in Redon's oeuvre is still part of the Dutch national heritage.

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6

Drawings related to *Les Fleurs du Mal*

Cats. 14–17

Cat. 14 Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Veiled Woman with Halo*, c. 1871. Graphite on cream wove paper, 12.7 × 12 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1078N1996

Cat. 15 Odilon Redon, *Two Female Nudes in an Oriental Temple*, c. 1890. Graphite, with brush and grey wash on cream wove paper, 20.2 × 12 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1081N1996

Cat. 16 Odilon Redon, *Pensive Figure with Butterfly Wings*, c. 1871. Graphite on ivory wove paper, 15.7 × 13.1 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1080N1996

Cat. 17 Odilon Redon, *Head of a Man Placed in a Bowl*, c. 1888–90. Black lithographic crayon on ivory wove transfer paper, 18.2 × 12 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1079N1996

This group of four drawings by Odilon Redon is preserved in the Van Gogh Museum in its original portfolio bearing the inscription ‘Baudelaire. Les Fleurs du Mal. Cinq dessins originaux, inédits, de Odilon Redon’ (fig. 6a). A fifth drawing became separated from the group and is now elsewhere (fig. 6b).¹ Despite this title, Redon seems not to have made these drawings, which date from different periods and are made from different materials, specifically for the famous volume of poetry by Charles Baudelaire. It was their first owner, the Belgian publisher and collector Edmond Deman (1857–1918), who sold them under this header at a sale of his collection in 1903.²

Redon’s early clientele consisted for the most part of writers, publishers and other literary figures. Around 1900, this new group of regular customers also often approached Redon’s oeuvre out of literary interest. In selling these early drawings, Deman was targeting this bibliophile market, which seems to be the reason why he advertised them as five original designs for Baudelaire.³ This also explains the suggestion made in the catalogue to insert the drawings in the luxury bibliophile editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, illustrated by the artist Carlos Schwabe (1866–1926) or by Armand Rassenfosse (1862–1934).⁴ Deman did not record his name in the provenance; instead, he called himself an ‘anonymous Paris collector’, undoubtedly with a view to making the works even more desirable to the targeted group. Redon’s loyal collector Andries Bongers saw through this false provenance, but bought the drawings anyway, by his own account in order ‘to gather them in, so you will at least know where they went’.⁵ Bongers complained about the low turnout at the sale and about the young people who paid large sums for ‘little drawings’ by the then popular Félicien Rops but otherwise had no eye for Redon’s art.⁶ In Bongers’s opinion, there were but few collectors like himself, informed intellectuals who could assess the true value of Redon’s art.

Redon, too, experienced a public auction as a vulnerable moment, when his work might suddenly end up in the wrong hands or context. He therefore thanked Bongers for ‘saving’ the sheets, and complimented him on his purchase of the ‘good’ drawings for *Les Fleurs du Mal*.⁷

1 This fifth drawing was sold at Christie’s in 1993 by descendants of Andries Bongers. See Fred Leeman *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bongers Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), no. 152, *Man with a Chain around his Neck* (W381, whereabouts unknown).

2 Sale Brussels 1903, sold for 30 fl., ‘cinq petits dessins, dans un carton pour illustrer *Les Fleurs du mal*’ (‘five small drawings, in a portfolio, to illustrate *Fleurs du mal*’).

3 See Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Chicago/London 2011, pp. 184–85, 189; Fred Leeman, *André Bongers, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

4 Charles Baudelaire and Armand Rassenfosse (ill.), *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Paris 1899 (edition Les cent bibliophiles); Charles Baudelaire and Charles Emile Martin Schwabe, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Paris 1900.

5 Letter 108 (28 June 1903), Amsterdam: ‘Je me suis empressé de les recueillir; au moins vous saurez où ils ont passé.’

6 *Ibid.*: ‘Not many people at the sale! Young people who paid high prices for little drawings by Rops, who

is very fashionable here; they barely seemed aware of the presence of your art.’ (‘Peu de monde à cette vente! De jeunes gens qui mettaient des prix élevés à de petits dessins de Rops, bien à la mode ici, ne paraissaient pas se douter de la présence de votre art.’)

7 Letter 109 (20 June 1903), Paris: ‘The drawings of *Les Fleurs du mal* were good ones.’ (‘Ces dessins des *fleurs du Mal* étaient bons.’)



Cat. 14 Odilon Redon, *Profile of a Veiled Woman with Halo*



Cat. 15 Odilon Redon, *Two Female Nudes in an Oriental Temple*



Cat. 16 Odilon Redon, *Pensive Figure with Butterfly Wings*



Cat. 17 Odilon Redon, *Head of a Man Placed in a Bowl*

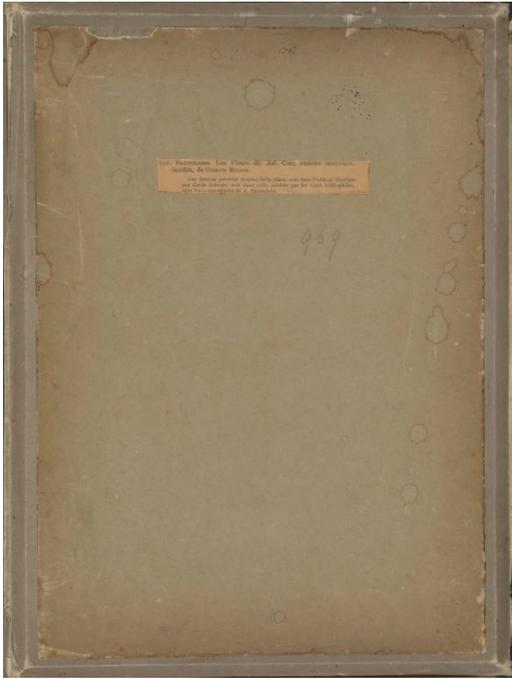


Fig. 6a Portfolio in which the group of drawings was sold in 1903



Fig. 6b Odilon Redon, *Man with a Chain around his Neck*, c. 1875. Black chalk on paper, 13 × 11.7 cm. Whereabouts unknown.

However, these drawings were never used for the edition of Baudelaire's book that Deman published in 1890. That edition contains nine completely different works by Redon's hand, reproduced in photogravure, the process perfected by Léon Evely (1849–1937).⁸ These nine original drawings also belonged to the publisher's collection, and he lent them to the exhibition of Les XX in 1890.⁹ It is therefore possible that Redon was thinking about these works when he congratulated Bonger on his purchase.¹⁰

The question remains, then, whether Redon had Deman's illustrated edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in mind when he handed the present drawings over to the publisher, or whether Deman conveniently linked them to this project to make them more interesting to potential customers. While *Les Fleurs du Mal* was in preparation, Redon possibly sent a number of drawings to Deman that did not make it into the final book, including this group. But another course of events is equally plausible, because between 1887 and 1890 the publisher prepared various other publications with frontispieces by Redon, and also bought and traded several individual drawings and prints by the artist.¹¹

The fact that Redon did not believe in the literal illustration of a text, but rather saw his drawings as a world that ran parallel to the realm of words, means that, in any case, these drawings cannot be directly linked to passages in Baudelaire's book of poetry. Redon felt that his drawings corresponded on a higher spiritual level to

editions of Baudelaire. The idea of doing the same thing with these drawings therefore seems to have come from Deman himself.

¹⁰ This emerges from the fact that, in the letter, he connects the drawings directly with Deman's edition; see letter 109.

¹¹ Including *Religion or Mystical Veil* (entry 7, 'Two Noirs with Religious Themes', cat. 18), which Bonger also acquired at the sale.

¹² Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 178–89; Fred Leeman, 'Odilon Redon: The Image and the Text', in *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. 175–94, p. 179.

⁸ See Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Second cahier*, Ms 42 822, nos. 57–64: 'Croquis pour les *Fleurs du Mal* de Baudelaire'; 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. 2 (1994): *Mythes et légendes*, nos. 794, 941, 1103, 1190, 2382–86. For the final prints, see André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon:*

Les estampes – The Graphic Work: Catalogue raisonné (1913), Alan Hyman (ed.), San Francisco 2001, nos. 198–206.

⁹ Catalogue 1890 Les XX, see Octave Maus, *Les XX, Bruxelles: Catalogue des dix expositions annuelles*, Brussels 1981, p. 208. Deman also published these high-quality reproductions in a smaller format, intended for insertion in the various bibliophile

the ideas and mood of the poet. Following this line of reasoning, Redon justified his decision not to produce illustrations specifically for the book, but to plunder the portfolios containing drawings he had made in the preceding decades. It is precisely their affinity to the subject matter in combination with the discrepancies between the nature of the text and the content of the drawings that intensified the suggestive quality and mystery that Redon sought.¹²

If this was indeed the course of events, the selection of drawings that the artist chose to hand over to Deman was highly arbitrary, for they vary in terms of period, material, support, format and signature. The pensive figure and the female profile were laid down quite precisely in graphite with fine hatching and sharp contours, whereas the two female nudes and the head of a man placed in a bowl were drawn much more sketchily, with loose, exploratory – but also more expressive – lines in graphite and chalk, respectively.¹³ Yet this technical and stylistic diversity connects the group of works all the more to the set of drawings that constitute the final print series *Les Fleurs du Mal*. A number of authors have commented upon the unevenness, to put it mildly, of Redon's selection for Deman.¹⁴

All of these drawings do feature a dark area, applied by Redon to introduce more tone and spatiality and to add a mystical element. As is the case with the drawings that ended up in Deman's album, the works discussed here are characterized by an emphasis on line, presumably to simplify graphic reproduction. *Head of a Man Placed in a Bowl* was drawn with lithographic chalk on transfer paper and thus intended for transfer to lithographic stone. Given that Deman chose a photomechanical process for his edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Redon's use of lithographic chalk in this particular drawing underscores the very tenuous connection that the group of works in its entirety has with the published series of photogravures.

¹³ Technical and stylistic comparisons (note the early signature, for example) have led us to date cat. 14, *Profile of a Veiled Woman with Halo*, to c. 1871.

Technical examinations carried out on 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.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Richard Hobbs, *Odilon Redon*, New York 1977, p. 71; Gamboni 1989, pp. 184–87.

Owing to the somewhat haphazard compilation and because Redon himself was not involved in the transfer of the images to the copper plates and the printing of the series, this series of photogravures is not so highly regarded. Mellerio even published it as a separate section in his catalogue, to emphasize that he considered the series to be of inferior quality.

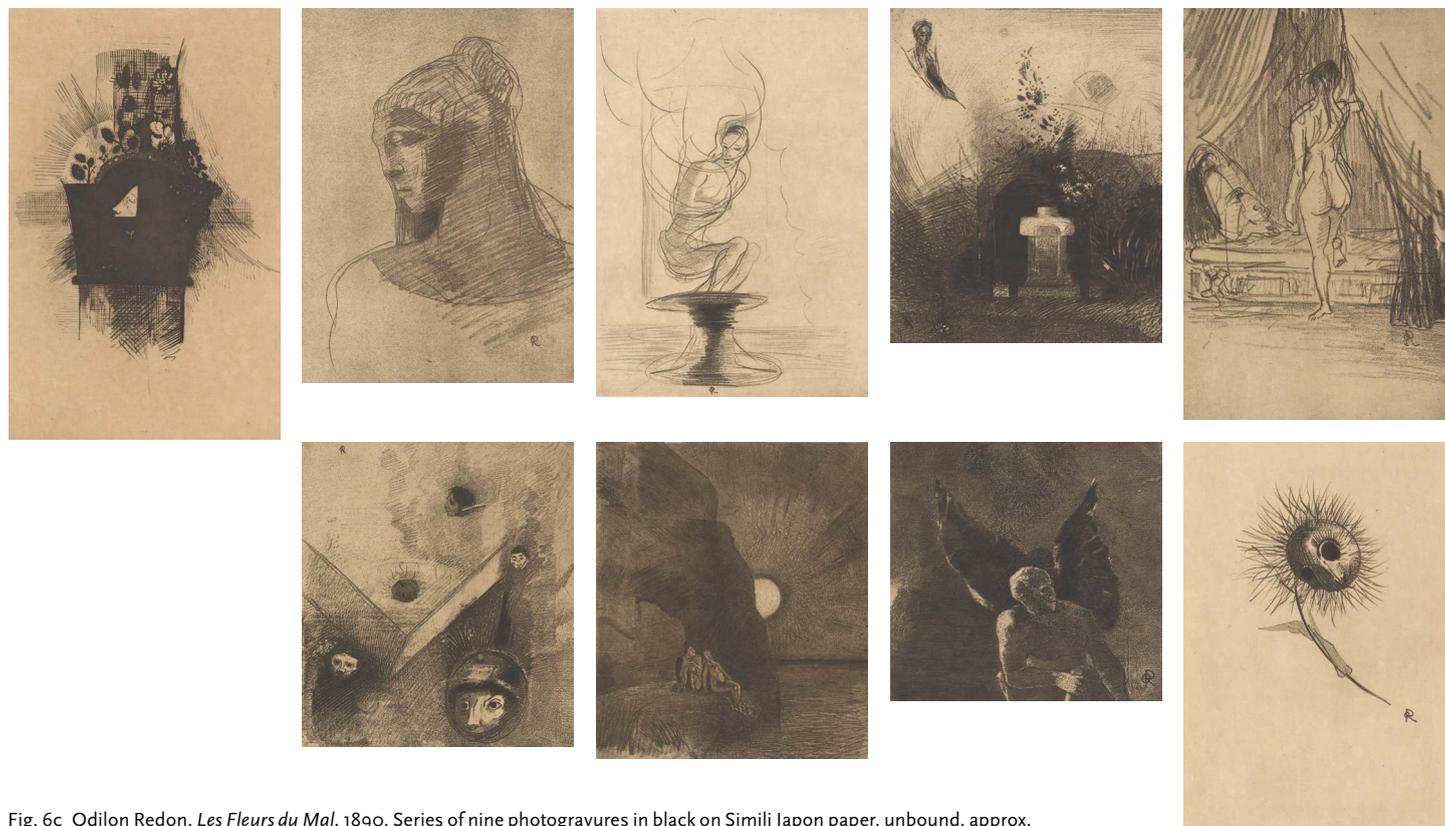


Fig. 6c Odilon Redon, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1890. Series of nine photogravures in black on Simili Japon paper, unbound, approx. 43 × 31 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (this work is part of the Netherlands Art Property Collection (Nederlands Kunstbezit-collectie) consisting of works recovered from Germany after the Second World War and held in trust by the Dutch State. The work is on loan to the Van Gogh Museum), p2755N2012

CAT. 14**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Edmond Deman Brussels, probably between 1887 and 1890; probably consigned by Edmond Deman to auction Brussels, Deman, E. (*Livres anciens et modernes, dessins & estampes*), referred to as 'cinq petits dessins, dans un carton pour illustrer les Fleurs du mal', 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.

LITERATURE

- Andries Bonger, letter 108 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (28 June 1903).
- Odilon Redon, letter 109 to Andries Bonger, Paris (30 June 1903).
- Andries Bonger, letter 110 to Odilon Redon, Zandvoort (15 September 1903).
- Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, 'Biographie et bibliographie d'Edmond Deman', *Bulletin du bibliophile*, nos. 3, 4 (1986), pp. 309–79, 485–582.
- Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 184–85, 189.
- 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. 185, p. 82. Referred to as 'Femme de profil à gauche'.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, *Edmond Deman éditeur (1857–1918)*, Brussels 1997, pp. 137, 147.

EXHIBITIONS

— Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 151, *Head of a veiled woman in profile to the left, with halo*.

CAT. 15**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Edmond Deman Brussels, probably between 1887 and 1890; probably consigned by Edmond Deman to auction Brussels, Deman, E. (*Livres anciens et modernes, dessins & estampes*), referred to as 'cinq petits dessins, dans un carton pour illustrer les Fleurs du mal', 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.

LITERATURE

- Andries Bonger, letter 108 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (28 June 1903).
- Odilon Redon, letter 109 to Andries Bonger, Paris (30 June 1903).
- Andries Bonger, letter 110 to Odilon Redon, Zandvoort (15 September 1903).
- Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, 'Biographie et bibliographie d'Edmond Deman', *Bulletin du bibliophile*, nos. 3, 4 (1986), pp. 309–79, 485–582.
- Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 184–85, 189.

- 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. 4 (1998): *Etudes et grandes décorations*, no. 2411, p. 141. Referred to as 'Deux femmes nues dans un temple oriental'.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, *Edmond Deman éditeur (1857–1918)*, Brussels 1997, pp. 137, 147.

EXHIBITIONS

— Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 163, *Two female nudes in an oriental temple*.

CAT. 16**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Edmond Deman Brussels, probably between 1887 and 1890; probably consigned by Edmond Deman to auction Brussels, Deman, E. (*Livres anciens et modernes, dessins & estampes*), referred to as 'cinq petits dessins, dans un carton pour illustrer les Fleurs du mal', 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.

LITERATURE

- Andries Bonger, letter 108 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (28 June 1903).
- Odilon Redon, letter 109 to Andries Bonger, Paris (30 June 1903).
- Andries Bonger, letter 110 to Odilon Redon, Zandvoort (15 September 1903).
- Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 294, n. 3.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, 'Biographie et bibliographie d'Edmond Deman', *Bulletin du bibliophile*, nos. 3, 4 (1986), pp. 309–79, 485–582.
- Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 184–85, 189.
- 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. 2 (1994): *Mythes et légendes*, no. 911, p. 85. Referred to as 'Le penseur aux ailes de papillon'.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, *Edmond Deman éditeur (1857–1918)*, Brussels 1997, pp. 137, 147.

EXHIBITIONS

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 148, *Pensive figure with butterfly wings*

CAT. 17**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Edmond Deman Brussels, probably between 1887 and 1890; probably consigned by Edmond Deman to auction Brussels, Deman, E. (*Livres anciens et modernes, dessins & estampes*), referred to as 'cinq petits dessins, dans un carton pour illustrer les Fleurs du mal', 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.

LITERATURE

- Andries Bonger, letter 108 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (28 June 1903).
- Odilon Redon, letter 109 to Andries Bonger, Paris (30 June 1903).
- Andries Bonger, letter 110 to Odilon Redon, Zandvoort (15 September 1903).
- Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, pp. 293–94, n. 3.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, 'Biographie et bibliographie d'Edmond Deman', *Bulletin du bibliophile*, nos. 3, 4 (1986), pp. 309–79, 485–582.
- Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 184–85, 189.
- 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. 2 (1994): *Mythes et légendes*, no. 1148, p. 207. Referred to as 'Tête d'homme posée sur une coupe'.
- Adrienne Fontainas and Luc Fontainas, *Edmond Deman éditeur (1857–1918)*, Brussels 1997, pp. 137, 147.

EXHIBITIONS

- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 161, *Head of a man placed in a bowl*.

Fig. 6d Detail of cat. 15



7

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*

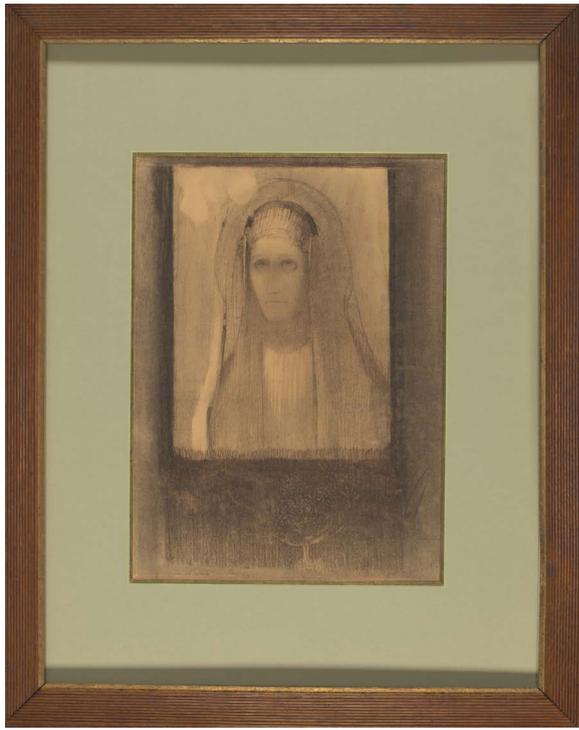


Fig. 7a Cat. 18 in a reconstructed matting and its original frame by Boyer



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

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.*

(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.



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 Bonger 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 Bonger was referring to.¹¹ He therefore suspected that Deman had given it that title himself. It was not until 1905, when Bonger 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 Bonger's request, Redon subsequently gave the work a new title: *Voile mystique (Mystical Veil)*.¹⁶

That these drawings held a mystical attraction for Bonger 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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8 *The Boat*

Cat. 20

Cat. 20 Odilon Redon, *The Boat*, 1898. Pastel on blackish-brown wove paper, 44.2 × 28 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the Rembrandt Association, the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Culture), do809M1986

This enigmatic pastel has led to many far-reaching iconographic interpretations and identifications of the solitary, haloed figure, hidden in shadow, on the prow of a boat gliding through calm water towards a cave in the rocks. By way of comparison with the mysterious menhir – a tall upright stone that served in the Stone Age as a landmark for Druidic rituals and has sometimes been identified with a Gallic goddess – the female figure has been placed in France’s mythic past.¹ In the Christian tradition, too, various readings of the composition have been put forward, one possible motif being Christ in the storm on the Sea of Galilee. But the interpretation that has found the largest following in the literature is Sven Sandström’s explanation of the image as Mary, the ‘vierge nimbée’ (haloed virgin), who as Stella Maris (Star of the Sea) protects seafarers from the doom foreboded by St Elmo’s fire.² Other authors argue for a mystical meaning gleaned from a book written in Odilon Redon’s own time, Edouard Schuré’s *Les grands initiés* of 1889, in which a neophyte thinks he sees the boat of Isis sailing through the atmosphere to the realm of the stars.³ Redon’s composition displays a striking number of similarities to one of the most famous paintings of his own day, Arnold Böcklin’s *Isle of the Dead* (fig. 8a), in which a deceased figure, clad entirely in white, is conveyed at dusk by rowing boat across a placid Styx to the rocky realm of the dead.⁴ Redon’s composition was attributed with a more personal spiritual meaning by Fred Leeman, who interpreted Redon’s boats as ‘a metaphor for negotiating the perils of the unconscious’.⁵

And Redon himself? As usual, he refused to commit himself and simply recorded the pastel in his account book as ‘*La bargue*’.⁶ This evasive strategy was effective: Redon’s sources of inspiration, dreams, ideas and feelings with regard to this work are just as shrouded in mist as the female figure herself, so that the mystery of the work and the artist remain unfathomable and at the same time personally interpretable. Even so, Redon’s diary contains poetical musings about seafaring, with repetitions of the phrase ‘And the rhythm of the waves cradles the spirit like a gentle harmony’.⁷

In this pastel Redon used colour and tone to create a mystical musicality akin to that found in his text. The golden garland, which stands out brightly against the very dark passages, flutters over the sheet like a melody. Clouds of pure pigments of pastel flicker in the gloom. Redon lent the scene depth by choosing a sheet of blackish-brown wove paper as the support. The dark background emphasizes, moreover, the luminosity of the aureole and the golden beams.⁸ In the oeuvre catalogue, the dozens of mysterious marines Redon created are nicely summarized: ‘But in this marine theme, the essential theme in Redon’s oeuvre, the silhouettes are mostly nothing but a pretext for a subtle play of light and colour. The only thing that counts is the melancholic and luminous poetry that accompanies the initiatory

1 Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné: mythes et légendes*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98; vol. 3, *Fleurs et paysages* (1996), no. 1948, p. 349; Dominique Jarrassé, *Odilon Redon: Le rêve*, Paris 1996, p. 34.

2 Sven Sandström, *Le monde imaginaire d'Odilon Redon: Étude iconologique*, Lund 1955, pp. 165, 226; Fred Leeman, ‘Redon’s Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism’, 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. 215–36.

3 Edouard Schuré, *Les grands initiés*, Paris 1889, p. 152; Leeman, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 233.

4 Böcklin painted no fewer than five versions of this work between 1880 and 1886, and huge numbers of reproductions were in circulation. With thanks to my colleague Lisa Smit for this suggestion.

5 Leeman, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 233–35.

6 In 1913 he referred to the pastel in letter 295 (7 April 1913), no location, as ‘The golden prow’ (‘La proue d’or’).

7 Odilon Redon (1885), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 79: ‘et le souffle de l’air et le rythme du flot bercent l’esprit comme une douce harmonie’.

8 Technical examinations carried out on 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.



Cat. 20 Odilon Redon, *The Boat*



Fig. 8a Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*, 1883. Oil on panel, 80 × 150 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

9 Wildenstein Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 3 (1996), p. 326 and nos. 1931–59: 'Mais dans ce thème marin, thème essentiel de l'oeuvre de Redon, les silhouettes ne sont le plus souvent que le prétexte à un subtil jeu de la lumière et de la couleur. Seule compte la poésie mélancolique et lumineuse qui accompagne le voyage initiatique du timonier'.

10 Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 1898, no. 324: 'Ciel sombre brun avec nuages violet et rouge, à gauche un être auréolé sur une barque. Des gerbes d'or à la proue de la barque, et sur les eaux une sorte de fosforescence bleue, comme un feu-follet'.

11 Dario Gamboni, "'Why a Blue Here and Gold There?'" – The Golden Cell: The Significance and Reception of Color in the Art of Odilon Redon', in Margret Stufmann et al. (eds.), *As in a Dream: Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 123–32.

12 Maclair (1894), quoted in *ibid.*

13 Harriet Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London, 1994–95, pp. 354–77, p. 374.

14 *Ibid.*

voyage of the helmsman.⁹ That the figure and her story are not necessarily of more importance than the abstract play of colour and light is also apparent from the description that Redon added to the neutral title in his account book: 'Dark brown sky with purple and red clouds, to the left a haloed being on a boat. Garlands of gold at the prow of the boat, and over the water a kind of phosphorescent blue, like a will-o'-the-wisp'.¹⁰

The overpowering intensity of the colours transports viewers almost instantly to supernatural worlds. In this respect, too, the work differs in essence from the *Isle of the Dead*, the mimetic colours of which make it feel more like an extension of the world as we know it. Redon came to his palette intuitively, just as his compositions emanated organically from his dialogue with the materials, while at the same time the colours enhance certain iconographic associations. Blue has traditionally been used for the robes of the Virgin Mary, but this is not necessarily the key to the meaning of the work.¹¹ Critics wrestled with Redon's semantic games. In 1894 Camille Maclair admitted that he was perplexed by Redon's blue female profile in *The Golden Cell* (fig. 8b): 'But I do not understand the relationship between the colours and the composition and the subject. Why a blue here and a gold there? [...] There is some reason and I do not understand it.'¹²

And then there is another complicating factor: was the pastel originally as intensely blue as it is now? Attentive viewers may well have detected a discrepancy between Redon's description and the cobalt blue and pink hues that the sky and clouds later took on. In fact, the work is severely discoloured, as can be seen on the edge of the pastel that was shielded from the light by the frame (fig. 8c). Although Redon used brightly coloured pastel crayon, some of its aniline pigments discoloured as soon as they were exposed to light.¹³ Even though the artist eventually became aware of this problem, he must have been greatly shocked in 1912, when he saw his pastel again after fourteen years.¹⁴ Its owner, Andries Bonger, had sent the

work to him for repair, but he was extremely hesitant to undertake such invasive treatment. As Redon wrote to Bonger: 'As to the pastel, that's another matter: I consider it respectfully and though it's already out of its frame, here beside me, I still haven't dared touch it. But I'll try hard not to spoil it.'¹⁵

Bonger subsequently urged Redon to send the pastel back as soon as possible, because the 'empty space' on the wall was becoming too much for him, and he was yearning to see the work again.¹⁶ He had managed to buy it in 1902 at the sale of Sara de Swart's collection, probably after admiring it at her home. In the catalogue it was described as 'Phantasmagoria: a haloed virgin on a blue background', from which it emerges that the pastel must have discoloured from purple to blue within a couple of years.¹⁷ Because of the change in title and colours, Redon could not imagine which pastel this was, even though he had presented it only four years earlier to his friend Sara.¹⁸ The Dutch sculptor was one of the earliest collectors of Redon's work, having bought her first drawing from him in 1892.¹⁹ She also organized the second large retrospective exhibition of Redon's work, in The Hague in 1894, shortly after his first exhibition at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris.²⁰ In 1902, when she was forced by financial difficulties to sell a few drawings from her collection, Bonger seized the opportunity. He bought four works, which he did not want to be 'touched by the hands of an indifferent person'.²¹ These words reveal the high regard in which Bonger held the work of his favourite artist and friend, and he could barely stand to see others handling it disrespectfully. The select group of Redon's devoted collectors shared a pride in their recognition and appreciation of

¹⁵ Letter 289 (19 November 1912), Paris.

¹⁶ Letters 281 (10 May 1912), Amsterdam, and 291 (15 December 1912), Amsterdam.

¹⁷ Letter 81 (8 June 1902), Amsterdam, and Frederik Muller & Cie, Amsterdam, *Tableaux modernes: Aquarelles: atelier – Jacob Maris, collection – J.M. Rodenberg et autres*, auction catalogue (11 March 1902), no. 243, n.p.: 'Phantasmagorie: une vierge nimbee sur fond bleu'.

¹⁸ Letter 80 (30 May 1902), Paris.

¹⁹ Jaap Versteegh, *Fatale kunst: Leven en werk van Sara de Swart (1861–1951)*, exh. cat., Rotterdam (Kunsthal Rotterdam), 2016, p. 82.

²⁰ The Hague, Haagsche Kunstkring, *Odilon Redon*, 20 May–1 July 1894.

²¹ Letter 81, *op. cit.*, note 17.



Fig. 8b Odilon Redon, *The Golden Cell*, 1892. Oil and coloured chalk with gold on paper, 30.1 × 24.7 cm. British Museum, London, Campbell Dodgson Bequest



Fig. 8c Detail of cat. 20

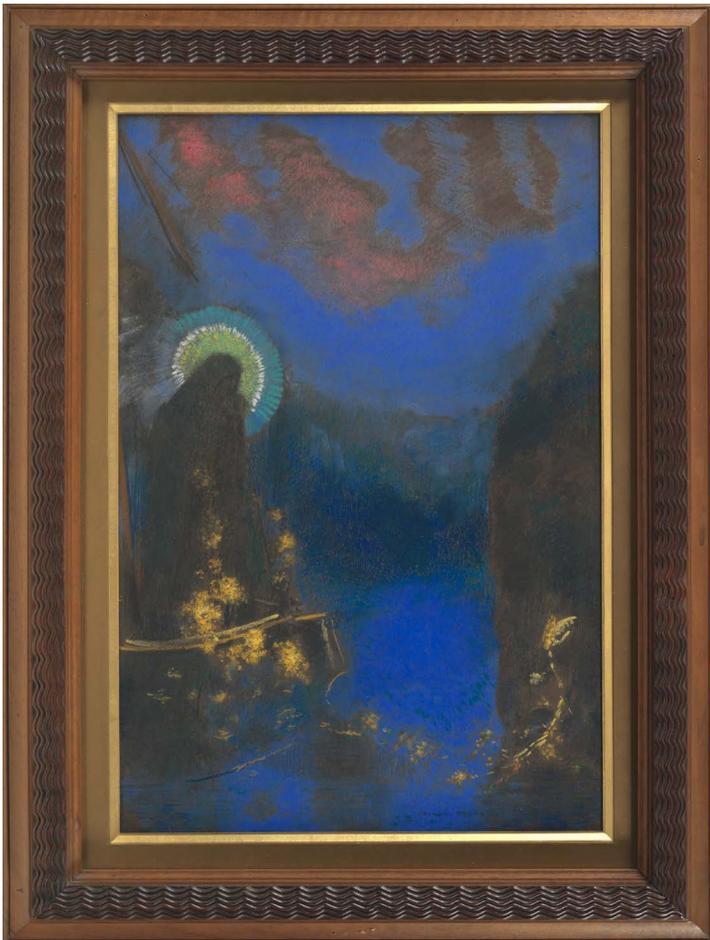


Fig. 8d Cat. 20 in its original frame by Dosbourg or Boyer

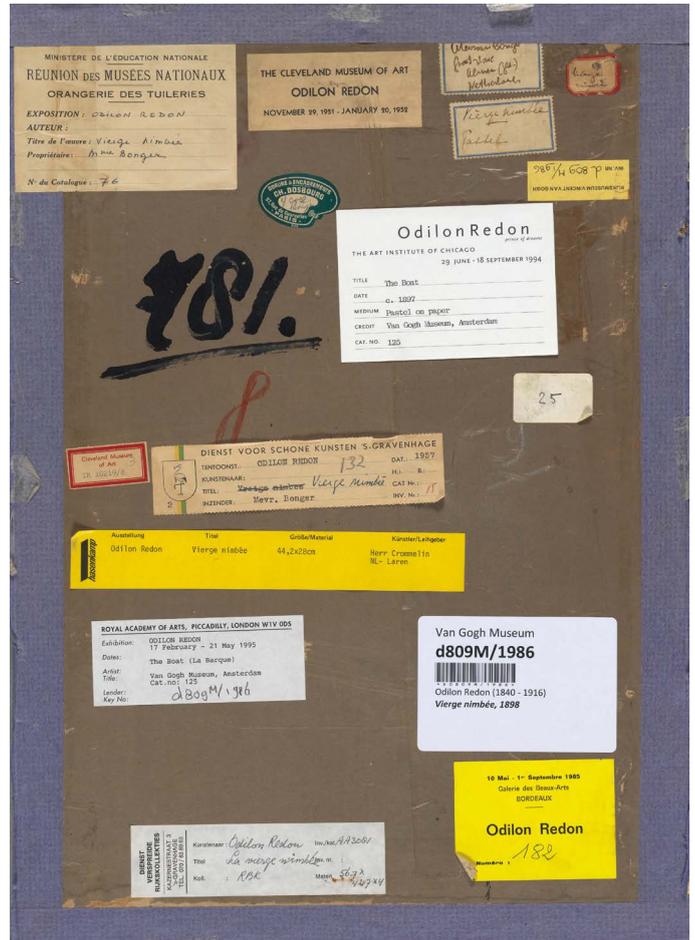


Fig. 8e Reverse of cat. 20 with a label by Dosbourg

22 Letter 91 (31 December 1902), Amsterdam. The question, however, is whether the frame had actually been made by Boyer or whether Redon or De Swart had already chosen it earlier. Both aesthetically and in terms of craftsmanship, the frame is not of the same quality as other Boyer frames; moreover, the label on the back bears the name of the frame-maker Ch. Dosbourg, 97 rue de Courcelles, Paris.

something that was puzzling to most people. As one of the few ‘initiates’ to the oeuvre of Redon, Bonger felt called upon to act as protector of the works that appeared at public auction and to save them from ‘indifferent’ hands and eyes.

A large box from Paris containing numerous works purchased from Redon arrived at the Bonger residence, like a belated Christmas present, on 31 December 1902. Bonger enjoyed unpacking his latest acquisitions and, in a letter to Redon, praised the frame that the frame-maker Boyer had made for ‘the boat’, which was now ‘worthily presented’.²² The walnut frame surrounding the pastel is indeed remarkably elegant and sculptural (figs. 8d and 8e). The undulating profile contrasts well with the glassy smooth water and adds to the vibrations of the figure’s halo, whoever she may be.

PROVENANCE

Given by the artist, Paris to Sara de Swart, December 1898; consigned by Sara de Swart to auction Amsterdam, Frederik Muller & Cie (*Tableaux modernes: aquarelles: atelier – Jacob Maris, collection – J.M. Rodenberg et autres*), lot 243 ('Fantasmagorie'), purchased by Andries Bongers, Amsterdam, for 39 Dutch guilders, 11 March 1902; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongers-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the Rijksmuseum, Vincent van Gogh, 28 May 1986, since 1 July 1994 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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9 Family pastels

Cats. 21–22

Cat. 21 Odilon Redon, *Woman and Child (Camille and Ari Redon)*, c. 1898. Pastel on brown wove paper with a grey ground, 59.8 × 44 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the Rembrandt Association, with the additional support from the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, the Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, and the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture), do811M1987

Cat. 22 Odilon Redon, *Childhood (Ari Redon)*, c. 1895–98. Pastel with black and red chalk on blue wove paper, 44.4 × 31.1 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), d1049N1996

Odilon Redon's wife, Camille Falte, and their son, Ari, are recognizable in these two works, which testify to the artist's love of his family and his penchant for working in pastel. In 1889, three years after Odilon and Camille lost their first son, Jean, their second son, Ari, was born. The boy betokened an inexhaustible source of love and happiness for the artist, who mentioned him often in his letters to Andries Bongger: 'Moreover, every time I've been separated from him, even by coming here, I have clearly felt that, hereafter, I could never be happy anywhere but where he and his mother are.'¹ Camille brought stability and cheerfulness to the household and fulfilled the double role of business partner and artistic muse.² Almost every publication on Redon points out the transformation that took place in his art in the 1890s under the influence of his domestic bliss: from dark to light and from black to colour.

From 1895 on, Redon worked more and more in pastel, and repeatedly described the pleasure it gave him. This was due to the specific characteristics of the chalk pastels, which led him to make new artistic discoveries, though he almost certainly had a financial motive too for using this technique: the growing success on the art market of his coloured works in particular brought with it a corresponding increase in income.³

Although the facial features are precisely reflected in both works, which are apposite likenesses of his wife and son, these are by no means traditional portrait studies. Redon situated his loved ones in another realm, filled with colour and arabesques, far removed from daily life and visible reality. Just as he did when depicting his female profiles, Redon seems to have taken a good look at the Quattrocento portraits in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, such as those by Leonardo da Vinci and Pisanello, among others.⁴ The portrait sculptures by Francesco Laurana (c. 1420–c. 1502) – the bust of Battista Sforza, for example (fig. 9a) – might also have served as examples. He could have admired these works during his stays in Italy, or through the many postcards and other reproductions he collected.⁵ Redon's pastels display a similarly schematic, slightly idealized rendering of the facial features. The earth tones, the dreamy, contemplative gazes and the presence of a parapet also derive from Italian examples, and are instrumental here in removing the figures from the tangible world and keeping them at a distance from the viewer.

¹ Letter 47 (29 May 1897), Peyrelebad: 'Ensuite toutes les fois que je me suis séparé de lui, même en venant ici, j'ai bien senti que je ne pourrais être heureux, désormais, que là où il se trouvait avec sa mère.'

² See Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, Paris 1992–98, vol. 1 (1992): *Portraits et figures*, 'Portraits de Camille', pp. 10–17.

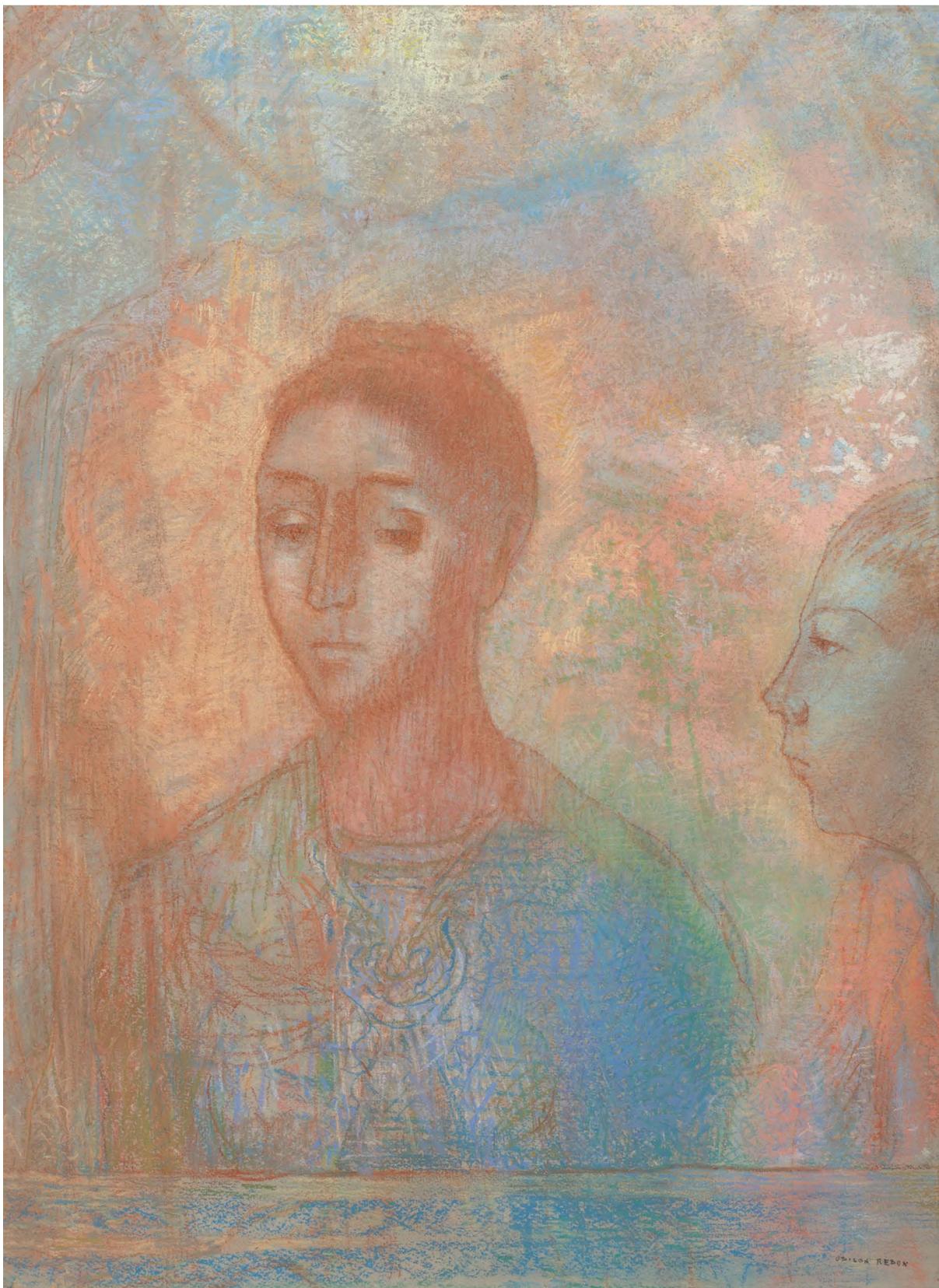
³ Letter 67 (3 January 1900), Paris: 'I take great joy in working on my pastels. And they give pleasure, they're

in demand, people take them as soon as they're finished. And I've rented a bigger apartment, same house, same storey, same landing, where I have a tiny studio.' ('Je travaille toutefois avec une grande joie à mes pastels. Et ils plaisent, on les désire, on me les prend aussitôt qu'ils sont faits. Puis j'ai pris un appartement un peu plus grand, même maison,

même étage, même palier, où j'ai un tout petit atelier.')

⁴ See also entry 4, 'A Group of Women's Profiles', cats. 7–12.

⁵ Fred Leeman, in Ineke Middag *et al.* (eds.), *Aanwinsten/Acquisitions: 1986–1991*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 1991, p. 50.



Cat. 21 Odilon Redon, *Woman and Child (Camille and Ari Redon)*



Cat. 22 Odilon Redon, *Childhood (Ari Redon)*



Fig. 9a Francesco Laurana, *Bust of Battista Sforza*, c. 1473. Marble, 50 cm (h). Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence



Fig. 9b Eugène Carrière, *Motherhood (Tenderness)*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas, 61 x 50.2 cm. Location unknown

Redon's inward-looking loved ones avert their gaze, thus cutting off all contact with the viewer. In *Woman and Child*, mother and son are one, conceived identically in colour and form, but otherwise they do not interact. Their rich inner world is suggested by the background, built up of many layers of pastel on a light blue ground that is completely filled with indefinable arabesques and areas of pure pigment, which also shine through their transparent faces.⁶ By accentuating their features in sharper black or red chalk, Redon oppositely yet subtly defined the figures against the intense background. He then applied extra layers of pastel in light hues around their heads, giving rise to glowing auras that further enhance the hallowed atmosphere.

These coloured passages around the heads are bound up with Redon's interest in the 1890s in the occult beliefs of theosophy, including the conviction that a person's spirituality could reveal itself to a sensitive observer through a visually perceptible aura.⁷ That Redon was convinced of this idea emerges from a remark he made in 1899 about a performance by his pianist friend Ricardo Viñes (1875–1943), whom he described as 'an artist full of refinement and subtlety [...] as if there were a fluidum hanging [around him]'.⁸ The still visible red-brown passage below the bright blue cloud of pastel above Ari in *Childhood* suggests, however, that he also applied this extra layer of pastel in order to conceal a second figure. Was the child originally accompanied by a woman bending over him in motherly fashion? Redon deliberately let such *pentimenti* exert an effect on the finished picture, with a view to rendering visible the artistic and intellectual creative process, enhancing the multilayered character and complexity of the work, and thus also heightening its mysterious appeal to the viewer.⁹

From a note Redon jotted in the margin of an article Emile Bernard wrote about him in 1904, it appears that Redon attempted to reflect the soul of his relatives by his use of abstract pictorial elements like colour and line: 'I believe that a portrait is

⁶ 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. Redon bought a sheet with a commercially prepared blue-grey ground for *Woman and Child*; *Childhood* is drawn on a sheet of blue paper. Redon used fixative between the many layers of pastel to avoid smudging. See also Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Douglas W. Druick *et al.* (eds.), exh. cat., *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840–1916* Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal Academy of Arts), 1994–95, pp. 353–77, pp. 368–77.

⁷ See Fred Leeman, *André Bongér, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

⁸ Ricardo Viñes (1899), in Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 215–36, p. 236.

⁹ See Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002.



Fig. 9c Cat. 21 in its original frame by Boyer

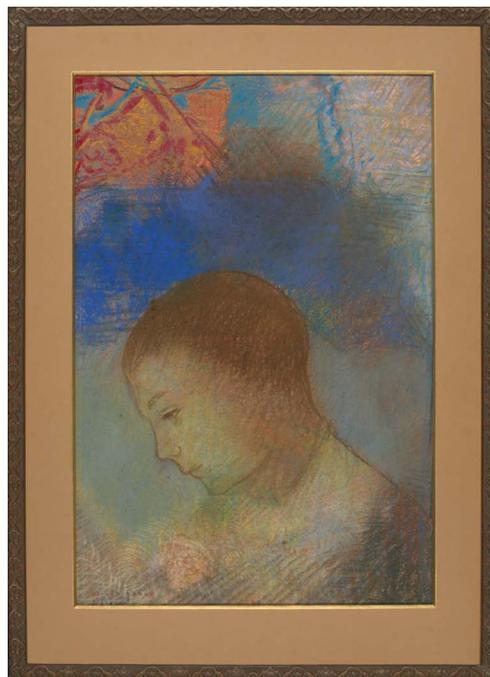


Fig. 9d Cat. 22 in its original matting and frame by Boyer

one of the most significance-laden objectives of art. And I have always worn myself out (and sometimes I have succeeded) in conveying only the character of a human being, his character as such. Making a good portrait seems to me to be the ultimate and highest task of the painter.¹⁰ Redon's choice of generic titles such as *Woman and Child* and *Head of a Child*, or *Childhood*, suggests, however, that via his own relatives he also sought to evoke something of the universal nature of motherhood and childhood, as the Symbolist artist Eugène Carrière (1849–1906) did, but in Redon's work any physical interaction is completely lacking, and instead the connection is spiritual (fig. 9b).

It is indeed telling that when Bonger bought *Woman and Child* in 1898, he seemed to have no idea that it was a portrait of Redon's wife and child. Shortly after purchasing the work in November 1898, he asked the artist for the title of the pastel,¹¹ and thanked him in the same letter for the suitable frame. Redon had gone to Boyer, his regular frame-maker, and chosen for Bonger a gold-coloured frame with a brick-red upper layer, which harmonizes with the ubiquitous red in the composition (fig. 9c).¹² With the purchase of this work and two other pastels, the collector fulfilled a long-cherished wish.¹³ After Redon had informed him in April 1896 that he had made 'several pastels', Bonger let him know that he hoped to enliven his collection of monochrome drawings and prints by Redon's hand with something colourful.¹⁴ And thus it came to pass in 1898, and sixteen more pieces would follow, including *Childhood*, although it is unclear when exactly Bonger acquired this work.¹⁵ In a photograph of his home taken in 1904, we see how Bonger combined Redon's pastels with a large decorative panel of 1902, turning them into an ensemble, which – thanks to the colourful artworks on the yellow wallcoverings – must have been a sight to behold (fig. 9e).¹⁶

pronounced. Could it be the pastel that was exhibited at Vollard's in 1898 or at Durand-Ruel's in 1900? It is impossible to say, which is why a dating to 1895–98 was finally decided upon.

¹⁶ Letter 73 (10 June 1901), Amsterdam: 'I followed

the advice that you once gave me to use a yellow background and your pastels and charcoals look quite wonderful on it.' ('J'ai suivi l'indication que vous me donâtes autrefois de prendre un fond jaune, sur lequel vos pastels et fusains font merveille.')

¹⁰ Translation from Leeman, in Amsterdam 1991, p. 50.

¹¹ Letters 62 (31 December 1898), Hilversum, and 64 (4 January 1899), no location.

¹² Letter 61 (17 December 1898), Paris.

¹³ *Woman with Halo* (W407) and *Profile of a Girl against a Blue Background* (W177).

¹⁴ Letter 36 (28 April 1896), Paris, and letter 37 (21 June 1896), Hilversum: 'You speak of the pleasure you take in doing pastels! You must let me have one, one day, so that I can have your colour alongside your charcoals.' ('Vous me parlez du plaisir que vous éprouvez à faire du pastel! Il faudra qu'un jour que vous m'en cédiez un pour avoir de la couleur de vous à côté de vos fusains.')

¹⁵ This pastel could very well be *L'enfance* (*Childhood*), which is listed under 1895 in the Mellerio Redon Chronology, an attribution that comes from Leeman 2007. On the basis of style and technique, Harriet Stratis would prefer to date the pastel somewhat later, approximately contemporaneous with *Woman and Child*. 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. In 1898 Arī was nine years old, which could accord with his appearance in *Childhood*. Contradicting this, however, is the fact that his profile differs subtly from that in the double portrait of c. 1898, in which his features are slightly more

Fig. 9e The Interior of Andries Bonger's home at 56 Stadhouderskade, 1904. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest



CAT. 21

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger for 600 French francs, Hilversum, November 1898; 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 Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, November 1987, since 1 July 1994 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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CAT. 22

PROVENANCE

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Andries Bonger; 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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Painted flower still lifes

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), so469N1996

Cat. 26 Odilon Redon, *The Black Bowl*, c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 46.7 × 61.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so471N1996

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

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.¹ 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.² 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.⁴

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>).

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 exaltons, 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 × 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).⁵ 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'.⁶ 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).⁷

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.⁸ 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.¹⁰ Redon 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.¹¹ 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.¹³

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. 10e Cat. 25 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

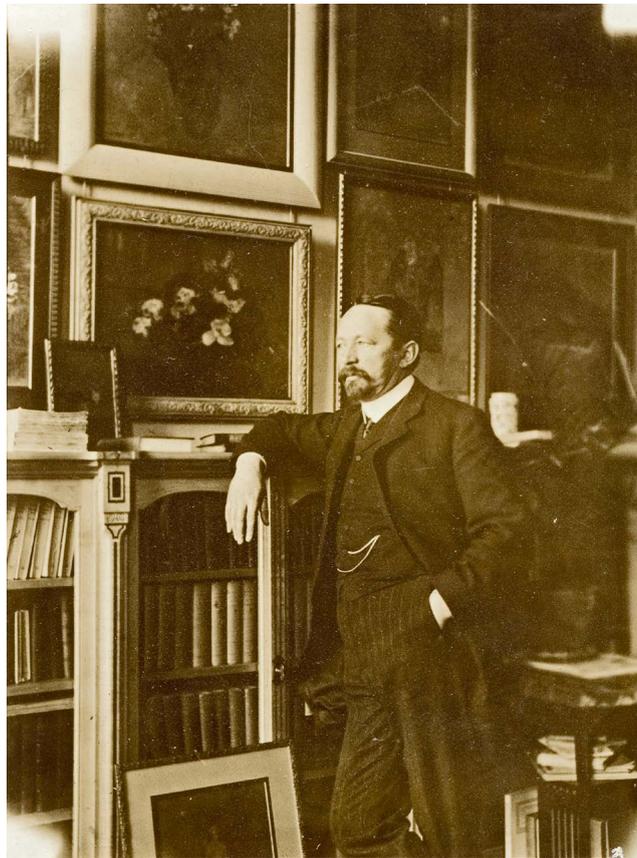
The small flower still lifes demanded relatively little of the artist's time and attention, but *The Black Bowl* is a different thing altogether. Redon used a much richer palette, subtly alternating radiant and more subdued passages and giving each individual flower its own colour scheme. The bowl in 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.' ('J'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



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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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!’¹⁸ 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.

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 zorgvolvs, 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.’



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 demi-gods 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.²³ 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

²⁰ 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.'

²¹ *Ibid.*

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

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

²⁴ 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

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- 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. 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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- Aukje Vergeest, *The French Collection: Nineteenth-Century French Paintings in Dutch Public Collections*, Amsterdam 2000, no. 848, p. 268.
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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 un 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, 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 135 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (6 July 1905).
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- Odilon Redon, letter 137 to Andries Bonger, Saint-Georges-de-Didonne (8 August 1905).
- 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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EXHIBITIONS

- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 118, *Vase of flowers against a blue background (Vase de fleurs sur fond blue)*.

Fig. 10j Detail of cat. 24



11

Vision. Vase of Flowers

Cat. 28

Cat. 28 Odilon Redon, *Vision. Vase of Flowers (Vision. Vase de fleurs)*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 73.2 × 60.1 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so470N1996

Both artist and collector agreed: this colourful bunch of wild flowers formed the glorious focal point of the collection.

The wild flowers, which include daisies, cornflowers, poppies and ears of wheat, must have been picked by Odilon Redon or his wife and painted immediately, presumably during their stay at the Villa Goa in Saint-Georges-de-Didonne in the summer of 1900.¹ Redon generally based his flower paintings on real bouquets. More so than his monsters and profiles of dreaming figures, Redon's flowers are therefore rooted in reality.² In the literature it is assumed that Camille Redon often arranged the bouquets in the vases, thus contributing to the composition of her husband's artworks.³ In any case, either Redon or his wife placed these flowers in one of the most distinctive ceramic vases they had at their disposal, which had been made by a friend, the Russian artist Maria Sergeevna Botkina (1870–1960), whom Redon called Marie Botkine (fig. 11a).⁴ Redon explicitly recorded in his account book that this vase was her creation, so he was very much aware of the fact that he was integrating her art into his work.⁵ Her vases were never put into large-scale production; fortunately, this unique object survives (fig. 11b). Comparison of the vase itself with its rendering in the painting shows that, in *Vision*, Redon did not depict the vase literally, but used it as a point of departure. He turned the heavily outlined, almost graphic patterns with fairly uniform areas of colour into more ambiguous and cloudy passages, against which the wild flowers stand out freshly. In another majestic flower still life in pastel, Redon depicted the same vase in more detail, so that the capricious forms of the coloured glazing are more easily distinguishable, but there, too, he heightened the intensity of the colours (fig. 11c).

In *Vision*, Redon created a subtle transition by having the green of the lowest leaves recur in the colour scheme of the vase. The background has also been filled in very subtly with thin layers of pastel shades, which, by progressing gradually from earth tones to light blue, could suggest heaven and earth. Otherwise, however, no effects of light and shade, nor of opaque and transparent colours, have been used to suggest depth.⁶ Moreover, because Redon did not depict a tabletop, wall or any other element of tangible reality in this work, the vase seems to float in a vacuum.

Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), 2011, cat. 24. See also 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. 305–52, pp. 321–22. With regard to all of Redon's

flower still lifes in which this particular vase by Botkina appears, see Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 3, *Fleurs et paysages* (1996), nos. 1526–36.

⁶ 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. 74.

¹ Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie), 1956–57, p. 73. See also Fred Leeman, *André Bonger, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

² Redon continually stressed that his monsters were based on precise anatomical studies, according to the laws of nature. On this subject, see Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists* (1922), New York 1986.

³ See entry 10 on Redon's painted flower still lifes (cats. 23–27).

⁴ Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné: mythes et légendes*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98; vol. 1, *Portraits et figures* (1992), no. 81, p. 44; O.L. Leikind, K.V. Makhrov and D.J. Severyukhin, *Художники русского зарубежья 1917–1939. Биографический словарь [Artists of the Russian Diaspora 1917–1939: Biographical Dictionary]*, St Petersburg 1999, p. 168. I am greatly indebted to the researcher Mira Kozhanova for finding this information and translating it from the Russian. Botkina is presented here as a painter and printmaker, but there is no mention of her work as a ceramicist. She studied painting in Paris in the 1890s and in Italy from 1906. She was the daughter of the well-known physician and public figure Sergej Petrovitsj Botkin (1832–1889) and Anastasia Alexandrovna Botkina, née Krylova (d. 1873). The Musée d'Orsay has in its collection a Symbolist landscape in pastel by her hand that dates from 1900 (inv. no RF 55291).

⁵ Dario Gamboni even speaks of a 'collaboration' between the painter and the ceramicist, which he compares to that between artist and printer in the production of a lithograph; see Gamboni, in Rodolphe



Cat. 28 Odilon Redon, *Vision. Vase of Flowers*, 1900



Fig. 11a Odilon Redon, *Marie Botkina in an Astrakhan Coat*, 1900. Pastel on paper, 61 × 50.4 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo (acquired with support from the Rembrandt Association)



Fig. 11b Maria Sergeevna Botkina, decorated ceramic vase, c. 1900. Glazed ceramics, 30 × 19 cm. Private collection



Fig. 11c Odilon Redon, *Bouquet of Flowers*, c. 1900–5. Pastel on paper, 80.3 × 64.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. George B. Post, 1956

Fig. 11d *Vision. Vase of Flowers* in its original frame by Boyer



Andries Bonger bought this magnificent flower still life from the artist in 1901 as part of a group consisting of both older and more recent works that, taken altogether, represented ‘a complete range’ of Redon’s art.⁷ As usual, Redon had had this painting framed by his regular frame-maker, Boyer, who produced a frame of exceptional quality. It is a so-called Degas frame of white pine, handmade with a profile of reeded wood, called a *cadre baguette*, and gold inlay (fig. 11d).⁸ Redon’s choice of a more expensive, handcrafted frame instead of the industrially produced frames he generally used underlines the importance of this work to him.⁹ Bonger was jubilant when he received it: ‘The big bouquet of flowers in the white frame is wonderful, a sumptuous piece, of the greatest beauty.’¹⁰ Redon replied that ‘the definitive effect’ of the work was indeed determined by the frame.¹¹ Both artist and collector were so happy with the frame that they had an identical one made for the other first-rate flower painting of the same format, which Bonger had purchased from Redon the year before.¹² The paintings hung as pendants in Bonger’s home.¹³

The two summery flower paintings gave him pure pleasure during the wet and sombre days of winter.¹⁴ Bonger carefully arranged his pieces to form an ‘ensemble’, consisting of work by Redon from various periods and in a variety of media. Though

⁷ Letter 75 (22 June 1901), Amsterdam. *Landscape, Two Figures* (W613, entry 1, cat. 4); *Landscape* (W613, entry 1, cat. 3); *In the Font* (W1070), *Sleep* (W187), and *Concern for the Absolute* (W148, entry 4, cat. 8).

⁸ The frame bears this designation because the original profile was designed by Edgar Degas (1834–1917) for his own work. See also Isabelle Cahn,

‘Degas’s frames’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 131, no. 1033 (April 1989), pp. 289–92.

⁹ For the frames, 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*, vol. 2, Paris 2022, pp. 776–808, pp. 792–99.

¹⁰ Letter 75 (22 July 1901), Amsterdam: ‘Le grand bouquet de fleurs, dans le cadre blanc, fait merveille; c’est une pièce somptueuse, d’une grande beauté.’

¹¹ Letter 76 (29 August 1901), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: ‘l’effet définitif doit être bien.’

¹² *Vase of Flowers, Yellow Broom Peonies* (W1526).

¹³ See interior photo no. 96 in Fred Leeman *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009, p. 96, in which W1526 can be seen in the same frame.

¹⁴ Letter 89 (16 December 1902), Amsterdam.



Fig. 11e The Interior of Andries Bonger's Home at 56 Stadhouderskade, 1904. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest

Fig. 11f Interior of Kunstzaal Reckers during the Redon exhibition of 1907, Rotterdam. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest



he had originally hung *Vision* by the window (fig. 11e), after moving to Vossiusstraat 22 in 1906 he gave it pride of place in the centre of a wall, with Redon's other paintings and pastels grouped around it. He wrote to the artist: 'The walls are now fully accoutred and look well. The long side, above the new low bookcase, is occupied by a whole series of your pastels, with the vision of flowers at the centre: the effect is splendid.'¹⁵

After every purchase, Bonger asked Redon for the title of the work, but in the case of his still lifes, he would usually offer nothing more than a descriptive title such as 'vase of flowers'.¹⁶ *Vision*, too, was referred to in his account book with the customary 'flowers in a vase' ('fleurs dans un vase').¹⁷ After one of his visits to Bonger, during which Redon had enjoyed his long talk with the collector as usual, surrounded by his own work, he wrote wistfully about this particular flower still life: 'Even now I have before my eyes that vase of flowers, one of the really good things I have painted – it has stayed with me like a vision!' Thus, Redon himself provided a lyrical description that would eventually become the title of the work.¹⁸ 'I am delighted, dear Monsieur Bonger, to know that piece is in your hands', Redon added.¹⁹ Bonger thanked him for the compliment and wrote to say that the artist's approval of his interior as a suitable setting had now endowed the artwork with 'more intimate value'.²⁰

¹⁵ Letter 175 (19 September 1906), Amsterdam. 'Les murs sont garnis, et sont beaux. Le grand côté au-dessus de la nouvelle bibliothèque basse est occupé par toute une série de vos pastels, avec la vision de fleurs au centre: d'un effet splendide.'

¹⁶ Bonger immediately asks in letter 75: 'Would it be indiscreet to ask you for their dates and titles?' ('Y aurait-il indiscretion à vous demander les dates de facture avec les titres?'). Redon replies in letter 76, but gives no title to this particular flower still life.

¹⁷ Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Second cahier*, Ms 42 820, June 1901, no. 481.

¹⁸ Letter 77 (30 December 1901), Paris: 'Oh! j'ai dans les yeux, comme étant une des bonnes choses que j'ai peintes, ce vase de fleur qui m'est resté comme une vision.' Redon later attributed the description to Bonger's wife, Annie; see letter 80 (30 May 1902), Paris: 'the one that Mme Bonger thinks of as a vision' ('celui que Madame Bonger trouve être une vision'). In letter 96 (21 February 1903), no location, Redon

described the work as 'the one we call: *Vision*' ('celui que nous appelons: vision').

¹⁹ Letter 77: 'Je suis heureux, cher Monsieur Bonger, de savoir que cette pièce est en vos mains.'

²⁰ According to the artist, the immediate surroundings of an artwork were a decisive factor in the effect it produced. Redon intended his work primarily for intimate settings, such as the home of a sympathetic collector, where the desired interiorization could take place in the utmost peace and seclusion. See Roos Rosa de Carvalho, in Gamboni and Van Tilburg 2022 and the essay "'Communion with the chosen": Andries Bonger and Odilon Redon'. Letter 78 (31 December 1901), Amsterdam: 'Croyez bien qu'elle nous a été précieuse, et que les pièces que nous avons de vous ont acquis à nos yeux une valeur plus intime encore depuis que nous savons que vous sembliez satisfait du milieu'.

Vision was given on loan to the Redon exhibition held in 1907 at Kunstzaal Reckers, where it was placed prominently above the mantelpiece (fig. 11f). Moreover, several critics singled it out in their reviews and praised it as ‘one of the glories’ of the show.²¹ Frits Lapidoth wrote about ‘the charm of a flower piece such as no. 1, a work from the collection of A. Bongers: I know of no painting in which the simple flowers shine more freshly, in more natural loveliness, with greater fealty to the character of each flower depicted and in more perfect harmony, where the painter’s technical skill is more wonderfully revealed. Not for a moment does one think of intentional arrangement, not for a second of paint and canvas.’²²

It is striking that this Dutch critic praised the work for its simplicity and lifelikeness, while the artist himself referred to it as nothing less than a vision. By means of the previously described artistic devices, Redon transformed ‘the mere flowers breathing the air in their vase’ into a vision and created the synthesis between reality and a dream world that the artist strove to achieve throughout his whole career.²³ That Redon himself considered it a successful realization of his artistic ambitions is apparent from the fact that, for his two important retrospective exhibitions in Paris in 1903 and 1905, he asked Bongers to lend him this very work.²⁴

21 A.v.V., ‘Kunstzalen Reckers: Odilon Redon’, *Algemeen Handelsblad* (18 May 1907): ‘Delightful, unbelievably thinly painted vase of flowers (1), which, placed as an overmantel, is one of the glories of this wonderful exhibition’ (‘Verrukkelijke, ongelooflijk dun geschilderde vase de fleurs (1), die als schoorsteenstuk geplaatst een van de glorien is van deze heerlijke tentoonstelling’). At Bongers’s house, too, the work was unanimously admired as ‘a wonder’ (‘een wonder’); see letters 93 (1 February 1903), Amsterdam and 97 (23 February 1903), Amsterdam.

22 Frits Lapidoth., ‘Odilon Redon’, *De nieuwe courant* (28 May 1907): ‘de bekoring van een bloemstuk als no. 1, een werk uit de verzameling A. Bongers: Ik weet

geen schilderij waarop frischer, de eenvoudige bloemen staan te prijken, in natuurlijker bekoorlijkheid, in met strenger trouw weergegeven karakter van elk bloempje en waarvan de harmonie meer volkomen is, de technische vaardigheid van den schilder heerlijker uitkomt. Men denkt geen moment aan opzettelijk rangschikken, geen seconde aan verfgaan en doek.’

23 Letter 80 (30 May 1902), no location: ‘de simples fleurs respirant l’air dans leur vase.’

24 See Paris, Galeries Durand-Ruel, *Pastels et peintures de Odilon Redon*, 12–26 March 1903, no. 2, *Vase de fleurs* and Paris, Grand Palais, *Salon d’automne, 3ème exposition*, 18 October–25 November 1905, no. 1308, *Vase de fleurs*. Letter 99 (6 March 1903), Paris: ‘The big vase holds up well, it will be a success.’

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Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bongers, Amsterdam, June 1901; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongers-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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— Odilon Redon, letter 95 to Andries Bongers, Paris (20 February 1903).

— Odilon Redon, letter 96 to Andries Bongers, Paris (21 February 1903).

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— Odilon Redon, letter 99 to Andries Bongers, Paris (6 March 1903).

— F.H. de Plancoët, ‘Galerie Durand-Ruel’, *Le Courrier des arts* (15 March 1903).

— René-Marc Ferry, ‘Beaux-Arts: Les Petites Expositions – Chez Durand-Ruel: M. Odilon Redon’, *La Liberté* (21 March 1903), p. 2.

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— Andries Bongers, letter 146 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (3 October 1905).

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— Andries Bongers, letter 159 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (8 January 1906).

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12

Flower still lifes in pastel

Cats. 29–31

Cat. 29 Odilon Redon, *Flowers in a Black Vase*, c. 1905. Pastel and black chalk on blue-grey wove paper, discoloured to brown, 61.7 × 48.8 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent Van Gogh Foundation), do688V1962

Cat. 30 Odilon Redon, *Flowers, Fancy Stoneware Vase*, c. 1905. Pastel and black chalk on blue-grey wove paper, discoloured to brown, 61.8 × 49 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1052N1996

Cat. 31 Odilon Redon, *Geranium, Vieillard Stoneware Vase*, c. 1905. Pastel and black chalk on blue-grey wove paper, discoloured to brown, 62 × 49 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1082N1996

Ageing is, quite simply, a law of nature, and this means that not one of the nineteenth-century works in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum still looks the same as it did when the artist signed it, even if it has been kept under optimal conditions. Some works, however, have undergone such fundamental changes that the artist's intentions are difficult to discern. This is true to a great extent of some fifty flower still lifes that Odilon Redon drew around 1905 in pastel on blue-grey wove paper, most of them measuring 62 × 49 cm. Three of these works are in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum.¹ Just as he did when depicting flower still lifes in oil paint, Redon worked from real bouquets of flowers that his wife, Camille, picked and arranged in various vases and jugs during their summers in Saint-Georges-de-Didonne.² Working with vivid pastel colours on large sheets with ample margins while giving no specific spatial indications, the artist's primary concern was not the portrayal of reality; instead, the red of the geraniums or the yellow of the sunflowers now assumed a more decorative role in relation to the surrounding sea of blue-grey paper. To accentuate the petals and sprigs, the artist added contours and fine lines in pencil and black chalk.³

A number of critics discussed Redon's flower still lifes in musical terms, with each colour and each line functioning like a note in yet another new symphony.⁴ If we leaf through the oeuvre catalogue and view these 'symphonies' in their entirety, it becomes clear that Redon's manner of working had a repetitive and even formulaic aspect.⁵ Around 1905, Redon was embroiled in a lengthy court case involving the family estate of Peyrelebadé, and he was urgently in need of money. Churning out flower still lifes, whether in paint or pastel, was a lucrative source of income, because his supply could barely meet the demand from old and new clients alike. Among them was his loyal customer Andries Bonger, who acquired the pastel *Pansies* for 200 francs in 1905 (fig. 12a).⁶

Bonger praised the 'great intensity' of this particular still life, by which he must have been referring to the play of colour between the deep cobalt blue in the violets and vase against the blue-grey background.⁷ The fixative – its particles can be discerned across the sheet, when viewed from close up – has caused considerable darkening of the whole, but even the paper and the pastel itself are discoloured.⁸

1 See Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné: mythes et légendes*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98, vol. 3 (1996): *Flours et paysages* (1996), for an overview of all the flower still lifes, ordered by species and vase.

2 See entry 10, 'Painted Flower Still Lifes', cats. 23–27.

3 Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', 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 and the 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.

4 Claude Roger-Marx, 'Odilon Redon', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 36 (June 1920) no. 27, pp. 269–75.

5 See, for example, the seven versions of geraniums

in a jug, one of which is *Geraniums in an Old Earthenware Jug*: Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 3 (1996): *Flours et paysages*, nos. 1419–25.

6 *Pansies* (W1480, now in another private collection).

7 Letter 139 (14 August 1905), Amsterdam.

8 Stratis, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 373.



Cat. 29 Odilon Redon, *Flowers in a Black Vase*



Cat. 30 Odilon Redon, *Flowers, Fancy Stoneware Vase*



Cat. 31 Odilon Redon, *Geranium, Vieillard Stoneware Vase*



Fig. 12a Odilon Redon, *Pansies*, c. 1905. Pastel and black chalk on blue-grey wove paper, discoloured to brown, 62.3 × 48.5 cm. Private collection

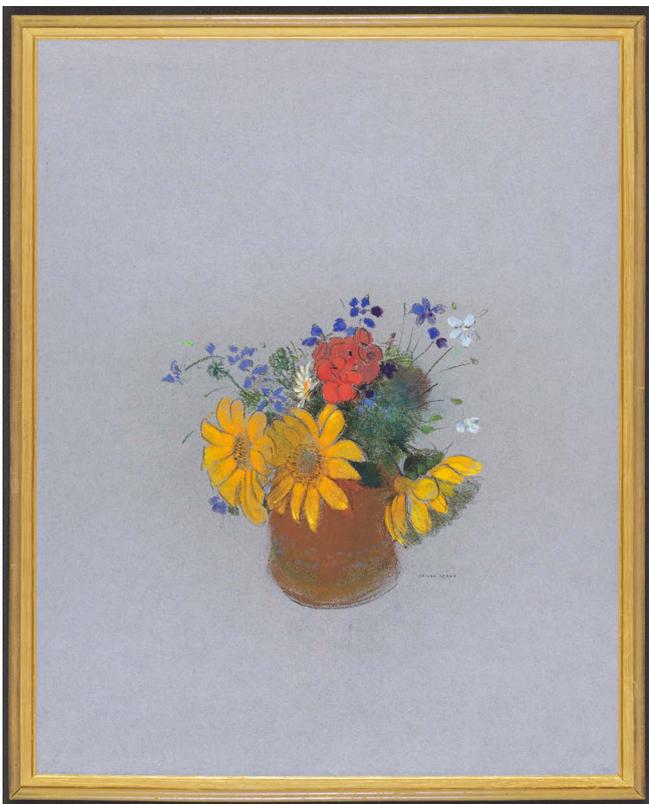


Fig. 12b Reconstruction of the paper colour and frame of cat. 30, fabricated by conservator Nico Lingbeek in September 2021 for the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Fig. 12c Cat. 30 in its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 12d Odilon Redon, *Poppies and Daisies in a Blue Vase*, c. 1905. Pastel on grey-blue paper, discoloured to grey, 56 × 45.5 cm. Private collection, France

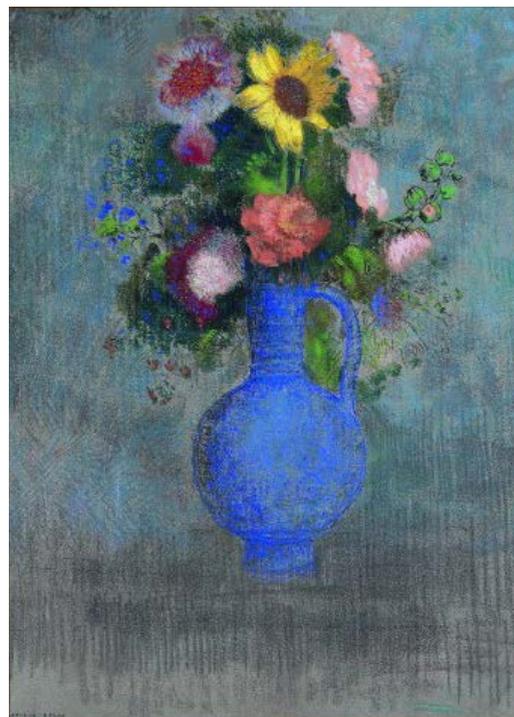


Fig. 12e Odilon Redon, *Fleurs*, c. 1904. Pastel on grey-blue paper, 60 × 40 cm. Private collection, Courtesy of Arthur Kohn SAS, Paris

Regrettably, the blue-grey background has discoloured to brown to such an extent that the original effect has been destroyed. Because Redon used the same kind of paper for the entire group of flower still lifes, each pastel, has undergone the same discoloration. It took only a few years for this process to set in, as revealed by a letter Redon wrote to the collector Gabriel Frizeau (1870–1938), in which he admitted to using mediocre paper for a pastel in Frizeau's collection and acknowledged that 'the colour of this paper having changed with time has disrupted the harmony'.⁹

The drastic fading can indeed be blamed on the mediocre, industrially produced paper, which contains large quantities of wood pulp and therefore discolours very quickly when exposed to light. It is telling that all of the pastels have undergone nearly uniform discoloration. Only one work from the above-mentioned group is several stages behind in discoloration, and therefore still preserves something of its original appearance (fig. 12d). A more ambitious flower still life made on paper of higher quality also gives an indication of what these works once looked like (fig. 12e).

A reconstruction of *Flowers, Fancy Stoneware Vase* (cat. 30), made especially for this entry, gives a slightly clearer picture of the colourful and decorative effect Redon had in mind when he made these works (figs. 12b–c).¹⁰ Seen against the blue-grey paper, the subtle accents on the vase and the blue-green of the insect suddenly pop out again. The reconstruction also includes the original frame, which Redon considered an integral part of the artwork. Its golden radiance has been restored. Redon wrote the following about Bongers's *Pansies*: 'For the blue vase with the pansies (pastel), I left a surface of grey paper that frames it very naturally, finished with a very simple beading.'¹¹ These relatively inexpensive frames, made of wood profiles and decorated with composite materials, were given a thin layer of gilt bronze, which over the years has oxidized to a greyer hue.¹²

⁹ Ibid., p. 430, n. 56. Stratis adds: 'Even through Redon expressed concern in his correspondence about the stability of materials, it is astonishing that he knowingly continued to use the same papers and pastels for his late drawings, well after the changes described were brought to his attention.'

¹⁰ Produced by paper conservator Nico Lingbeek at the Van Gogh Museum, September 2021. NB: this reconstruction was made for the purpose of giving an initial idea of the work's original appearance, but it could be done more thoroughly as part of long-term scientific research into a larger group of works.

¹¹ Letter 136 (21 July 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: 'J'ai laissé au vase bleu, avec pensées (pastel), une surface de papier gris qui l'encadre tout naturellement, terminé d'une baguette fort simple' and letter 134 (5 July 1905), no location: 'I shall have the pastel of pansies glazed with a border moulding of my own choice [...]' ('Je ferai mettre le pastel de pensée sous vitre avec une bordure de mon choix').

¹² Technical examinations carried out on 1 December 2017 by Guy Saint-Hill, Werner Murrer and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the frames by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. The author is indebted to these colleagues for their kind assistance.

Bonger was so ‘infinitely’ fond of his flower pastels that he acquired two more in the following months, and the artist even gave one to Bonger’s wife, in thanks for the couple’s purchase of a large group of works.¹³ Redon saw possibilities in this – evidently new – manifestation of the flower still life, for he asked Bonger if he could keep the works for a little while before sending them to Amsterdam, in order to show them to friends and to exhibit them at Galeries Durand-Ruel, as a means of attracting new customers.¹⁴

Tellingly, it was precisely these works that the Paris correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* singled out in his review of the exhibition held at Kunstzaal Reckers in 1907. He wrote: ‘Of magnificently pure, strong colour are also the pastels of vases of flowers; on the completely uniform grey background, without line or colour perspective, they actually look wholly decorative, like a play of colour that is sometimes fiery deep, then again delicate and moving.’¹⁵ Bonger translated the review into French for his friend Redon, but dismissed the assessment as that of an uninitiated Dutchman, who conveniently ignored Redon’s earlier ‘dreams’ and concentrated on the more easily digestible flower still lifes.¹⁶ However, Redon replied that he did not object to people dwelling on his most recent works, and even added that he could understand their preference: ‘Surely it’s no bad thing when people share a father’s weakness for his last-born?’¹⁷

then the colour is put on very soberly, with a brief touch, but strong and fresh, unspoiled’ (‘Meer nog dan de koppen zijn de met pastel geteekende bloemen van Redon, niets dan vizes! Met een dun zwart krijtstreepje is even de contour van ‘t potje en van de bloemen aangegeven en dan heel sober, heel even, maar sterk en Frisch, ongerept de kleur er op gezet’). Frits Lapidoth wrote in *De nieuwe courant* (28 May 1907): ‘No less perfect are [...] the splendid pastels, including those on grey paper, such as the Geranium in no. 23 and various wild flowers in blue pots with brown, such as no. 18 (Blue Vase), of which the pastel drawing is of a lightness and delicacy that drive us back to it again and again and make it difficult to take leave of such a work’ (‘Niet minder volkomen zijn [...] de prachtige pastels, waaronder die op grijs papier, zooals de Geranium op no. 23 en verscheidene veldbloemen in blauwe potjes met bruin als no. 18 (Vase bleu), waarvan de pastelteekening van een luchtigheid en een fijnheid is, die ons er telkens weer heendrijven en ‘t scheiden van zulk een werkje zóó moeilijk maken’). And Conrad Kikkert joined them in *De Telegraaf* (17 May 1907): ‘In this way Redon draws

bouquets, without surroundings. No foreground, no background. Only the grey paper ... or some colour. Because here he only wants to reproduce the pleasure of those vases of flowers, as he felt it. He does not draw the flowers precisely, but sets down with great care a colourful area in the form, as it were, of a flower. He gives only the broadest notion, for example: Roses and yellow flowers, or flowers (red vase) or Small jug of geraniums, and this notion only. Not of every flower, nor of details of the jugs, nor of how it stands before the background ... but only ... flowers!’ (‘Zoo teekent Redon bouquetten, zonder omeving. Geen vóór-, geen achtergrond. Alleen het grijze papier ... of wat kleur. Want hij wil hier alleen maar geven het genot van die bloemenvaasjes, zóó als hij het voelde. Hij teekent de bloemen niet nauwkeurig, maar met groote zorg zet hij een kleurig vlakje in quasi bloemvorm. Hij geeft alleen het grootste begrip, bijvoorbeeld: Roses et fleurs jaunes, of fleurs (vase rouge) of Petit cruche avec géraniums, en dit begrip alléén. Niet van ieder bloempje, noch van détails der kruikjes, noch van hoe het staat voor het fond ... maar alleen ... fleurs!’).

¹³ Letter 139 (14 August 1905), Amsterdam, letter 158 (3 January 1906), Paris, and letter 159 (8 January 1906), Amsterdam.

¹⁴ In letter 159, Bonger makes his flower still lifes available to the exhibition. In letter 161 (23 February 1906), Paris, Redon informs Bonger that, unfortunately, he can only display one of them. Because this work was exhibited under the general title ‘Fleurs. Appartient à M.A. Bonger’ (‘Flowers. Belongs to M.A. Bonger’), it is impossible to say which of the three pastels this was.

¹⁵ ‘Kleine tentoonstellingen: (Van onze Parijschen correspondent)’, *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (21 March 1906): ‘Van prachtige zuivere sterke kleur zijn ook de pastels van vaasjes met bloemen; op den geheel effen grijzen achtergrond, zonder lijn- of kleurspectief doen ze eigenlijk geheel decoratief aan, als een nu eens vurig diep, dan weder fijn en ontroerend kleurenspeel’ and letter 164 (18 April 1906), Amsterdam.

¹⁶ With regard to the appreciation of Redon’s early as opposed to his later period, see, among others, Kevin Sharp, ‘Redon and the Marketplace before 1900’, Kevin Sharp, ‘Redon and the Marketplace after 1900’ and Maryanne Stevens, ‘Redon’s Artistic and Critical Position’, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 237–56 and 408–11, 258–80 and 412–16, and 281–304 respectively; Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Chicago/London 2011, pp. 203–4.

¹⁷ Letter 165 (21 April 1906), Chaville: ‘N’est-il pas bon qu’on partage un peu le faible du père pour son benjamin?’ The same preference recurs in the Dutch reviews of the exhibition at Kunstzaal Reckers in 1907. A.V.V. wrote in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (21 March 1906): ‘Even more so than the heads, the flowers Redon drew in pastel are none other than visions! The contour of the flowerpot and of the flowers is indicated with a thin line of black chalk, and

CAT. 29**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, probably for 200 French francs, October 1905; presumably a gift from Andries Bonger to his sister Elisabeth Hortense Bonger, October 1905; after her death on 17 January 1944 entrusted by her sister-in-law Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam to Vincent Willem Van Gogh, Amsterdam; transferred by Vincent Willem Van Gogh, Laren, to the Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 10 July 1962; agreement concluded between the Vincent Van Gogh Foundation and the State of the Netherlands, in which the preservation and management of the collection, and its placing in the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, to be realized in Amsterdam, is entrusted to the State, 21 July 1962; on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh from the opening of the museum on 2 June 1973, and at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, since 1 July 1994.

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- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 142, *Flowers in a black vase (Fleurs vase noir)*.

CAT. 30**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 French francs, presumably October 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. 31

PROVENANCE

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 French francs, October 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. 12f Detail of cat. 31



PABLO PICASSO

13 Mystical paintings

Cats. 32–33

Cat. 32 Odilon Redon, *Woman in a Gothic Arcade and Profile with Flowers*, c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 43.5 × 60.8 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so472N1996

Cat. 33 Odilon Redon, *Stained-glass Window. Piety beside a Red Tree*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 73.7 × 50.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum (State of the Netherlands), so473N1996

In Redon's oeuvre the same motifs occur again and again. The window, the female profile, the meeting between holy figures, the flowers, the sky and the sea that we discern in the paintings *Woman in a Gothic Arcade and Profile with Flowers* and in *Stained-glass Window. Piety beside a Red Tree* of 1905 can be found in various manifestations and combinations in countless other works executed by Redon in a wide variety of techniques. In contrast to his early *noirs*, which he populated with monsters and nightmarish visions, Redon drew the motifs in these two works from a more charming reservoir of his imagination. The windows are colourful, the distant views and the sea are calm, the flower girls are serene. These motifs, which recall a bygone age of innocence and exude a religious feeling, were also being explored at this time by other Symbolist artists.¹ Redon, however, combined these symbols in an associative manner that makes it impossible to interpret these works as anything but devout dream images.

Each and every motif allows for all sorts of interpretations, which, owing to the lack of concrete clues, seldom take root in solid ground. Via a 'diffuse semantic field, a network of formal and iconographic associations', the artist achieved a symbolism and mysticism that transcend every religion, legend or myth.² In *Stained-glass Window. Piety beside a Red Tree*, for example, a Gothic window floats in a seascape; the cloudy sky seen above the seascape continues through the scene in the window, although there it is somewhat brighter. At the same time, the painting depicts a sketchy landscape with a red tree, in front of which two figures in coloured garments meet. The figures are only sketchily worked, and their contours consist of only a few fine lines painted with a thin brush.³ That Redon was still feeling his way with this painting is apparent from the fact that the composition initially extended further at the right-hand side and was signed there, but Redon subsequently cropped the canvas and put it back on the stretcher before continuing. He then painted over the old signature and signed the work again at bottom left.⁴ Although a meeting between two figures (one of which is tellingly dressed in blue) beneath an arcade is reminiscent of an Annunciation or a Visitation, labelling it as such would not fully reflect its content. Moreover, the arcade is not part of a more realistic architectural setting, such as those depicted in biblical scenes by, for instance, Giotto (c. 1267/76–1337) or Maurice Denis. It hovers between sea and sky as an abstract and alienating element.⁵ The sea, too, has an unsettling effect, because it functions not only as a distant view but also as an immaterial predella. The work seems to be overloaded with meaning, even if that meaning remains impenetrable.

The titles Redon gave his works usually do not help much either when trying to interpret their meaning. He intentionally confined himself to purely descriptive or general titles, thus preserving the suggestive and enigmatic power of his work. Even so, Redon's description of this work in his account book as *Stained-glass*

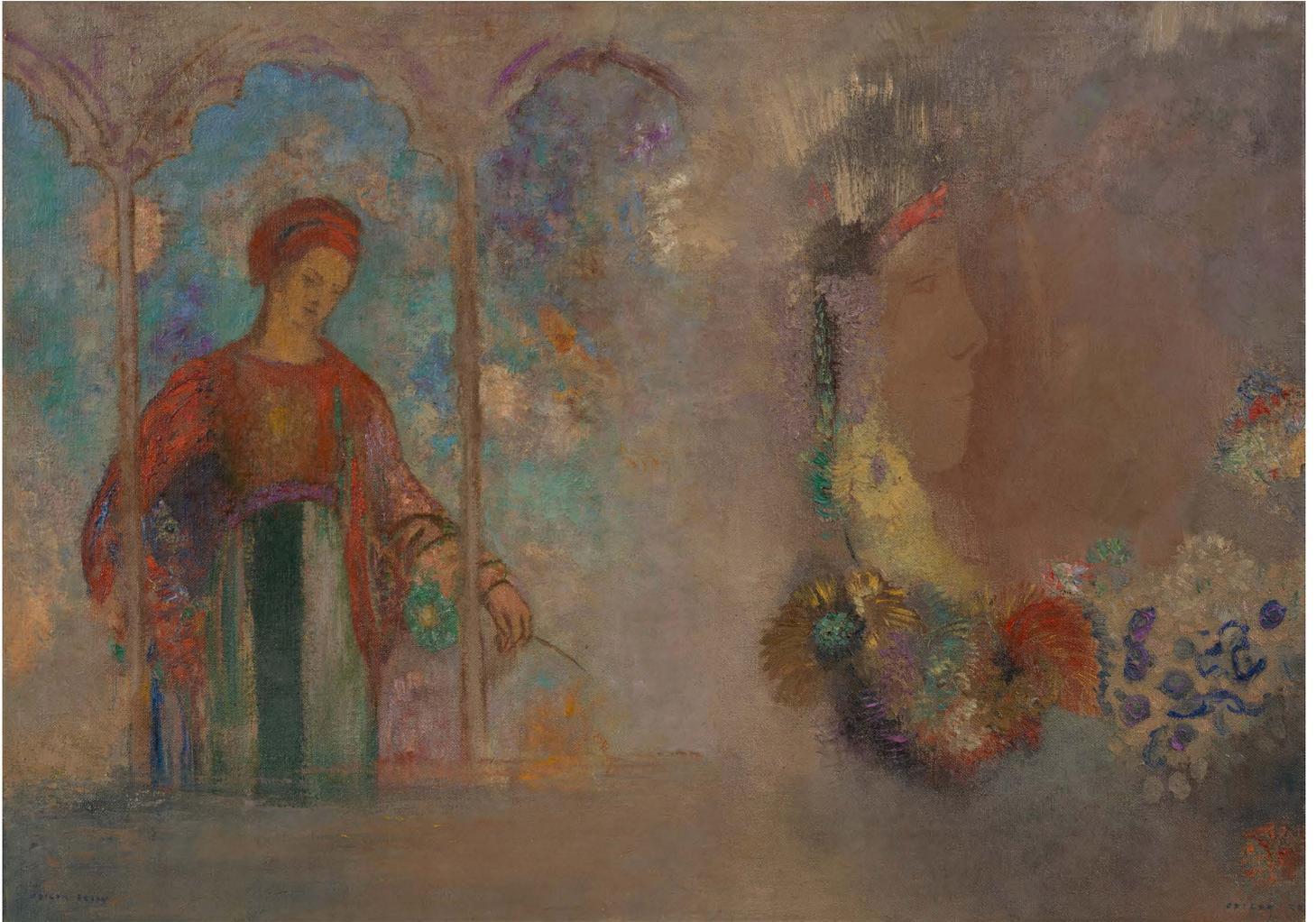
¹ The woman with floral finery, the 'fille-fleur', possibly originated in Wagner's opera *Parsifal* and was a popular subject among Symbolist artists. See Ronald de Leeuw, 'Richard Wagner's Influence on the Visual Arts', in *Symbolism in Art: In Search of a Definition*, Amsterdam summer university, Van Gogh Museum 22 August–2 September 1994, lecture 12, Amsterdam Van Gogh Museum Archives.

² Dario Gamboni, "'Why a Blue Here and Gold There?' – The Golden Cell: The Significance and Reception of Color in the Art of Odilon Redon', in Margret Stufmann et al. (eds.), *As in a Dream: Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 123–32, p. 129.

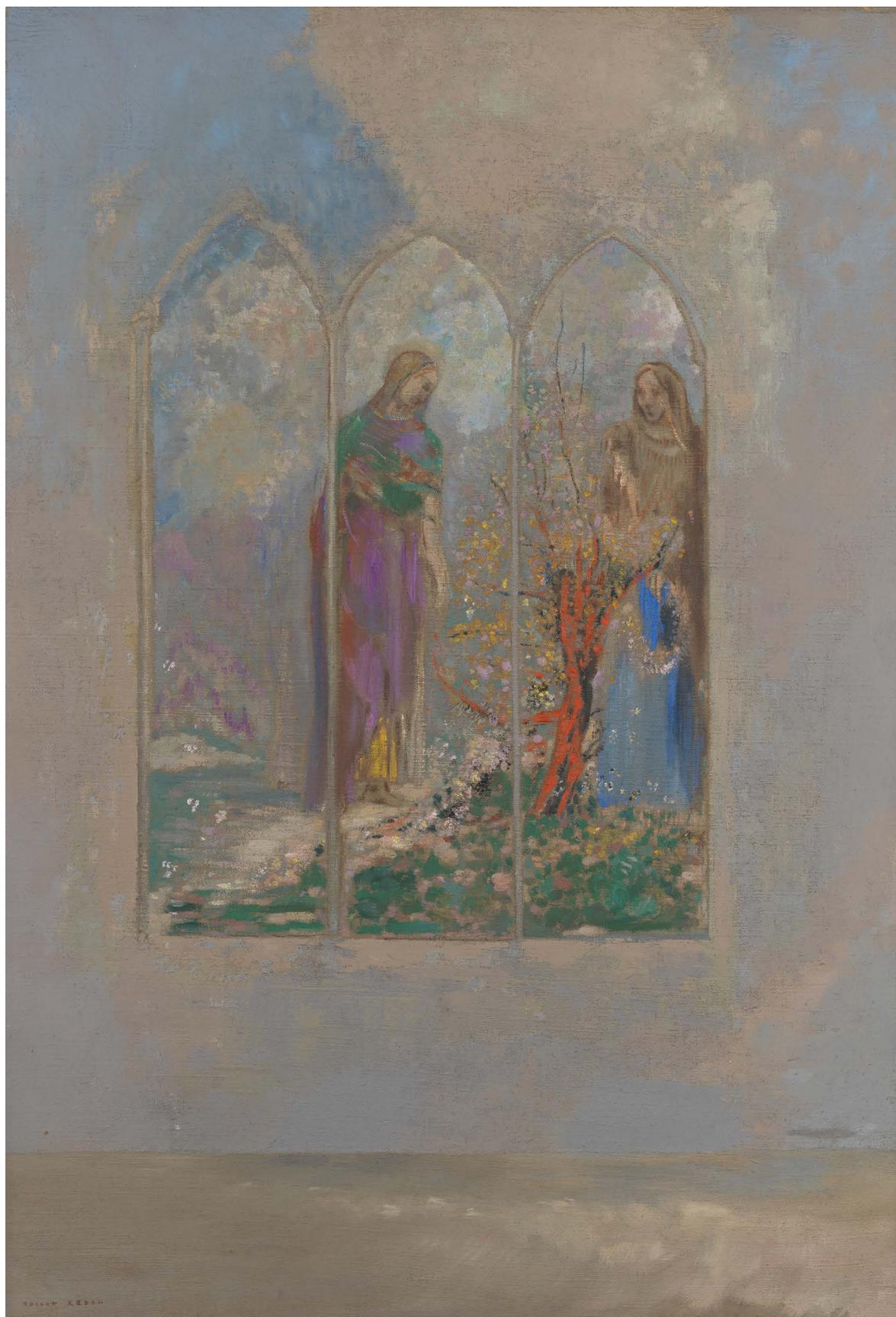
³ René Boitelle, Klaas Jan van den Berg and Eva Goetz, 'A Technical Examination of Odilon Redon's Paintings from the Bonger Collection, Van Gogh Museum', *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art*, vol. 3 (2005), pp. 66–81, p. 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵ This alienating combination of elements floating in the air recurs in the work of such Surrealists as René Magritte (1898–1967), whose evasive attitude towards critics who attempted to unravel the meaning of his work brings to mind the words of Redon. Magritte wrote: 'My painting is visible images which conceal nothing; they evoke mystery and, indeed, when one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question, "What does it mean?" It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable.'



Cat. 32 Odilon Redon, *Woman in a Gothic Arcade and Profile with Flowers*



Cat. 33 Odilon Redon, *Stained-glass Window. Piety beside a Red Tree*

Window. Piety beside a Red Tree does at least provide some basis for a further exploration of the composition.⁶

The stained-glass window testifies to a fascination for the French medieval heritage, which Redon shared with other artists and writers of his time. The figures' stately elegance recalls that of Gothic statues (fig. 13a). Redon wrote in 1906 to Andries Bonger, who had just acquired these paintings, that he had pinned various Gothic postcards to the wall: 'The longer I live, the more I put the spirit of Italian art behind me – except that of Leonardo, naturally. Here, on the wall, I have some fragments of French Gothic art. How sumptuous and mysterious it is, I would even say gracious, a kind of sterling grace. And all the faces of these statues are human, with something honest about them that comes from the very heart.'⁷ After 1900, Redon used not only the religious connotations of the stained-glass window but also, with increasing frequency, the decorative effect of this motif.⁸ The window becomes – on a more abstract level – a decorative surface, filled with colours and arabesques, while the faces and gestures sink into the background.

That Redon had not entirely left behind the 'spirit' of Italian art is evident in this work. The archaic, elongated female figures recall Gothic statues as well as women in early Italian Renaissance frescoes. The matt quality of the painting is also fresco-like. Redon consciously strove to produce a dry, matt surface by such means as the application of an absorbent ground that extracted the binding medium from his oil paint.⁹ In contrast to the decorative panels he made at this time, however, Redon partly counterbalanced the matt effect of his paintings by framing them behind glass. He did this to works in light colours 'to produce a relatively inward effect' and to make them even more difficult for viewers to decipher.¹⁰

The artist experimented with both foreground and background, and combined naturalistic precision with an almost abstract use of colour and form, thus attempting to detach the artwork from the laws of nature and traditional iconography, without brushing them completely aside. On this subject, the artist Emile Bernard wrote the following: 'I emphasize this point, finding it astonishing [...] that Redon can trace the outlines of dreams [...] through the service of tradition, and by applying to all that not the flat lessons [of the moderns] but those so deeply pondered and rich of the great masters.'¹¹ Yet Redon did take to heart the 'flat lessons' of younger generations, such as the Nabis, by exploiting the suggestive power of abstract elements as the colours and arabesques of the stained-glass window and turning them into the actual subject of this painting.

The word 'piété' in the title explicitly characterizes this work as a religious scene. The term can be narrowly interpreted as pious devotion according to certain conventions, such as the veneration of Mary within the Catholic Church, or as a more personal spirituality that falls outside the official liturgy. That the latter meaning is more in keeping with Redon's artistry is apparent from his flat refusal in 1911 to participate, at the invitation of Maurice Denis, in a group exhibition of Catholic art. The younger Denis campaigned actively for a modern art in which the Christian faith was expressly propagated, a movement that was referred to as neo-Catholicism. Redon emphasized in his letter to Denis that even though his art was sacred in nature, its subject matter could never be traced to a specific religion. His iconography was not taken literally from the Bible or Christian pictorial tradition.¹²

This is also true of the 'red tree' that forms the second part of the title. Redon's descriptive title explicitly points out this element of the composition, in which the mysticism of pure colour and form and the suggestion of religious meaning come together. Redon depicted a red tree or branch in a number of similar scenes. *The Red Branch* of 1905 was in the possession of Denis, who, remarkably, also used the

6 Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Second cahier*, Ms 42 820, October 1905, no. 634. Referred to as '*Arcade gothique, femme cueillant fleur verte* [Pour ces précédents ouvrages reçu de Mr Bonger à-compte [sic] 600]' ('Gothic arcade, woman picking green flower [Received for these previous works a down payment of 600 from Mr Bonger]').

7 Letter 173 (9 August 1906), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: 'Plus je vais plus je délaisse l'esprit de l'art italien, sauf celui de Léonard, bien entendu. J'ai là, au mur, quelques fragments de l'art gothique français. Comme c'est somptueux, mystérieux, gracieux même, une grâce de bon aloi. Et tous ces visages des statues sont humains, avec quelque chose du for intérieur plein de probité.'

8 Maryanne Stevens, 'Redon's Artistic and Critical Position', 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. 281–304, p. 287.

9 Boitelle, Van den Berg and Goetz 2005, p. 69. Here we read that *Stained-glass Window* has an 'artist-prepared priming, possibly with animal glue as the binding medium. It has an irregular texture, is opaque, often applied locally and with a colour that varies from a cool light grey to a warmer beige-grey. Its most distinct feature is a very porous and uneven texture. [...] The small amounts of oil identified in this ground layer may be explained by oil absorbed from the oil paint applied to the priming.'

10 Letter 140 (23 August 1905), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne: 'un effet plutôt intérieur.'

11 Emile Bernard (1893), in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 206.

12 Redon to Denis (4 July 1911), in Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 215–36, pp. 233–34.

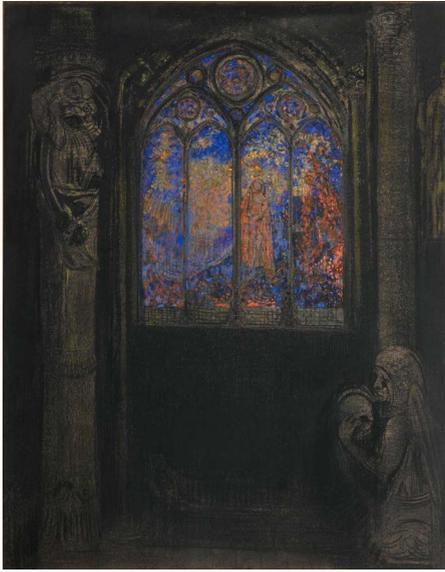


Fig. 13a Odilon Redon, *Temple. Stained-glass Window*, 1904. Charcoal and pastel on cardboard, 87 × 68 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 13b Maurice Denis, *Annunciation under the Arch with Lilies*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 74.6 × 48.2 cm. Private collection

motif of a red tree in his *Annunciation* of 1913 (fig. 13b). It is possible that Denis borrowed this from Redon; however, no source has been found that links, in terms of iconography, the red tree to this specific motif. In the decorative panel *The Red Tree*, also of 1905, it is suddenly Buddha who is portrayed, meditating, beneath this majestic, blossoming red tree.¹³

In Redon's earlier *Mystical Conversation*, too, temple-like architecture – through which the sky in the background is visible – functions as the meeting place for two mysterious figures, one of whom holds a prominent red branch (fig. 13c). It has previously been suggested that this red branch might be Redon's personal variant of the 'golden bough' of James Frazer's eponymous study of 1890 on myths, magic and religion throughout human history. That publication refers to mistletoe as a talisman to ward off evil spirits.¹⁴ The motif of the red tree has also been linked to the thirteenth-century romances of the Holy Grail, in which the Tree of Life planted by Eve after her expulsion from paradise changes in colour from green to blood-red after the fratricide of Cain and Abel.¹⁵

Redon himself might have dismissed the exploration of such iconographic connections as too limiting and too specific, because he shunned far-reaching interpretations of his work.¹⁶ His own description in his account book of the 'mystical conversation' featuring a red branch is telling in this context: 'one of the women holds a branch with red twigs, bizarre flowers of dreamed-up flora at her feet'.¹⁷ Redon therefore seems to have deployed the non-mimetic red for the branch of the tree primarily as an unnatural and expressive element, thus emphasizing the fantastical effect of the flora and enhancing the scene as a whole.¹⁸ The fact that a

¹³ See entry 14, 'Decorative Paintings', cat. 35: *The Red Tree* (<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/so465N1996>).

¹⁴ Leeman, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, pp. 228 and 407, n. 46.

¹⁵ Rodolphe Rapetti, 'L'arbre rouge', 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 (W608, private collection), p. 344.

¹⁶ See the 'Secret of Redon' in the introductory essay of this publication.

red tree at the same time carries all kinds of semantic associations with myths and legends only heightens the suggestive power of the work.

The other painting, *Woman in a Gothic Arcade and Profile with Flowers*, is summarily referred to in Redon's account book as 'Gothic arcade, woman picking green flower'.¹⁹ Redon's descriptive title refers to the left half of the composition; it does not mention the 'profile with flowers' on the right. The profile of the head receding into the background strongly recalls that of Redon's son Ari.²⁰ Did Redon paint two separate compositions on one canvas, and did he intend to cut it in two? The fact that both parts are signed and separated by an unpainted strip of canvas strengthens the assumption he intended to do so. A canvas bearing two separate compositions does not otherwise occur in his oeuvre. Although Redon often combined female profiles with flower still lifes, floral decorations and (Gothic) windows, he always integrated them into a single composition with a single signature.²¹

The fact that Redon did not separate the two compositions when he sold the canvas to Bonger means that he was in agreement about letting them form one artwork. Moreover, the palette and the technique reinforce the unity between the two parts. In both, Redon used the same pigments, and there is a subtle recurrence of the arched form next to the profile. This working method strengthens the assumption that the two compositions were created at the same time and in the same vein. Perhaps they originated associatively from one another? Redon played with foreground and background in a refined way by using the painted pink-grey ground to frame the stained-glass window, thus pulling it into the foreground and thereby enhancing the complexity and mysticism of this canvas.

In these two paintings by Redon, as in a dream, elements and scenes that are incompatible in reality glide subtly into one another, without disrupting the overarching atmosphere. They invite the viewer to lose themselves in their own purely personal musings and dreams.



Fig. 13c Odilon Redon, *Mystical Conversation*, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 65 × 46 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Gifu

17 Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, December 1897, no. 267. Referred to as '2 femmes variant l'Entretien mystique; l'une des femmes tient un rameau aux branches rouges, des fleurs bizarres d'une flore rêve [sic] à ses pieds, l'autre vêtue de jaune, et violet lui parle, deux colonnes, sommaire [sic] coupent le ciel bleu, taché de nuages roses' ('2 women, variant of *Mystical Conversation*; one of the women holds a branch with red twigs, bizarre flowers of dreamed-up flora at her feet; the other, dressed in yellow and violet, talks to her; two cursory columns cut into the blue sky, flecked with pink clouds'). It is striking how often and in what detail Redon describes the colours of his works in his account book.

18 See entry 8, cat. 20: *The Boat*, with regard to Redon's palette as a possible signifier of iconographic

meanings (<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/do809M1986>).

19 Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Second cahier*, Ms 42 820, October 1905, no. 634.

20 See 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*, 'Portraits d'Ari', pp. 18–23.

21 See, for example, Wildenstein 1992–98, vol. 1 (1992), nos. 204–09, 250–52 and 258–59 for combinations of profiles and flowers, and nos. 303–29 for profiles placed either immediately next to, or in, a Gothic window. In watercolour drawings, though, such as W750, one sees a more associative combination of figures, profiles and flowers that more closely resembles the creative process seen in this work.

CAT. 32

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 French francs (together with so473N1996), October 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. 33

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, for 200 French francs (together with so472N1996), October 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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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 Bongor 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

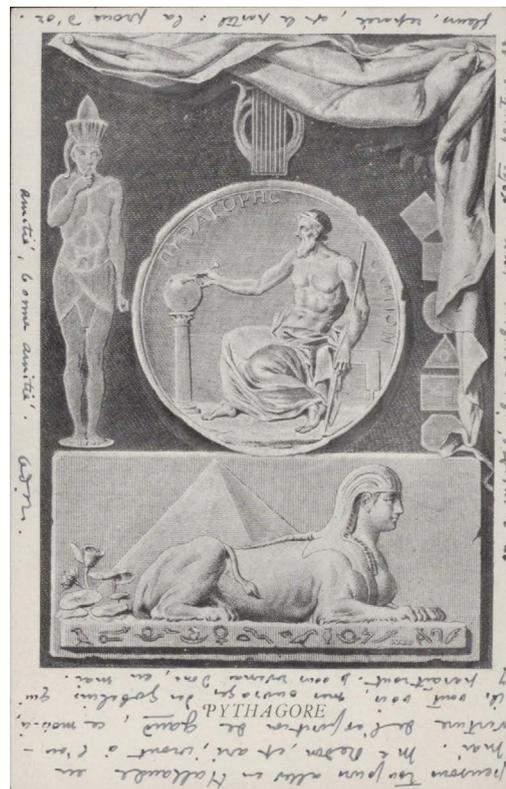
tedious – and checks the wilder reaches of one's fantasy for mixing things up. But once you've got started on big surfaces, you can produce quickly and extensively.' ('Je suis étonné que cette peinture à la colle ne tente pas plus généralement les artistes. Peut-être à cause de son emploi un peu compliqué 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 Stufmann 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, Bongér, 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 Bongér 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 Bongers, Amsterdam for 700 French francs, August 1905; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongers-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



15

The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)

Cat. 36

Cat. 36 Odilon Redon, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*, 1862–64. Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), so466N1996

‘What are the limits of the literary idea in painting?’ Redon asks himself in his personal notes from 1877–78.¹ In this text he sought to demonstrate, on the basis of Rembrandt’s painting *The Archangel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family* of 1637, that literary ideas can be portrayed in painting only if the portrayal is not literal or even anecdotal, as it is in a descriptive text, but is evoked, rather, ‘by purely pictorial means [...] which words could not reproduce’ (fig. 15b).²

Redon’s text divides Rembrandt’s painting into two: whereas in Redon’s opinion the depiction of the people on the ground is stuck, literally and figuratively, in the narrative and the prosaic, Rembrandt succeeded in letting the image of the angel above rise up by means of ‘the supernatural light illuminating and guiding the divine messenger’. ‘There’, Redon writes, ‘in the pure, simple nature of tone and in the refinement of the chiaroscuro lies the secret of the entire work, a wholly pictorial invention, embodying the idea and giving it, so to speak, flesh and blood’, which is a strikingly corporeal choice of words to describe the intangible element of this work.³

The great meaning that Rembrandt’s archangel held for Redon emerges not only from the above-mentioned reflection but also from the two copies that Redon had made – years before, early in his career – after Rembrandt’s work in the Musée du Louvre, Paris: a canvas of 55 × 46 cm, now in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (cat. 36), and a slightly larger variant of 68 × 49.5 cm, now in the Musée d’Orsay, Paris (fig. 15c). Tellingly, Redon focused in both works entirely on the archangel in the upper right-hand corner and the dramatic chiaroscuro, which contrasts so starkly with the rest of the composition, thereby eliminating all the other narrative elements in Rembrandt’s scene. He thus portrayed, fifteen years before formulating it in his essay, all his admiration for this passage in Rembrandt’s painting.

As befits incipient artists, Redon copied various works by old and modern masters in the Louvre in the 1860s and 1870s. This was a tried-and-tested method used by artists to become acquainted with the great artists of the past and to fathom their secrets, so that they could apply them in their own work.⁴ In addition to Rembrandt, Redon copied Eugène Delacroix and Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) as a means of comprehending the depths of their art.⁵

¹ ‘Où est la limite de l’idée littéraire en peinture?’ The passage is dated to 5 August 1879 in *To Myself (A soi-même)*, but according to Dario Gamboni, Redon wrote it as a short essay in 1877–78; see Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists* (1922), New York 1986, pp. 66–69 and Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Chicago/London 2011, pp. 36–38.

² Odilon Redon (1877–78), translated in Gamboni 2011, pp. 36–38: ‘par les tâches purement pictorales [...] que la parole ne pourra reproduire’.

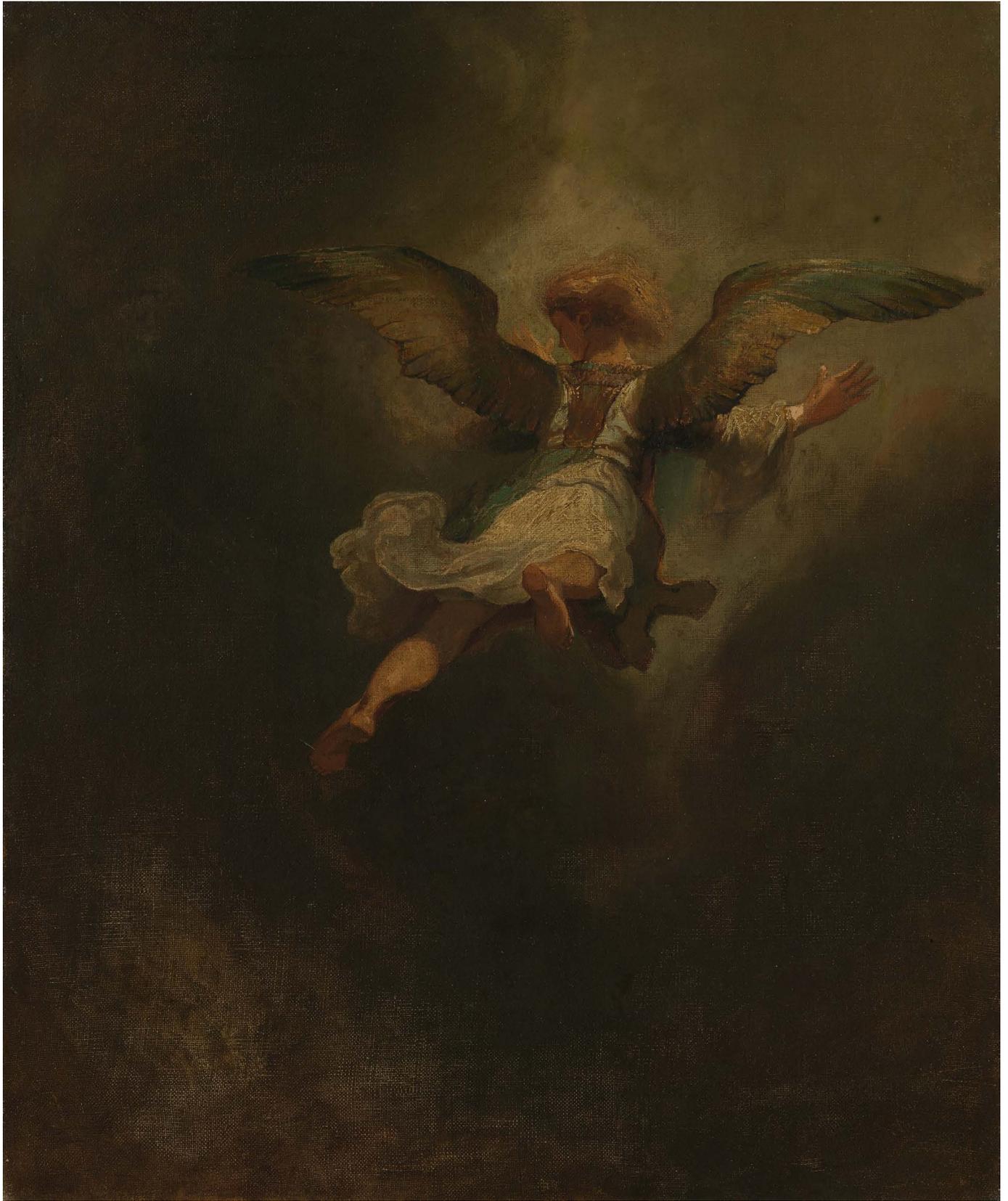
³ Ibid.: ‘Là, dans la nature pure et simple du ton et dans les délicatesses du clair-obscur, est le secret de

l’œuvre tout entière, invention toute pittoresque, qui incarne l’idée et lui donne, pour ainsi parler, de la chair et du sang.’

⁴ Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1971, p. 124: ‘the Goal of the copyist was “to wrest from Genius its secret”’.

⁵ 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. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décorations*, nos. 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2030–2033, 2038 and 2042. Boime describes copying as ‘a form of magical contact with the mind and talent of the old masters’; *ibid.*, p. 132.



Cat. 36 Odilon Redon, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*



Fig. 15a Cat. 36 in its original frame by Boyer



Fig. 15b Rembrandt, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family*, 1637. Oil on panel, 66 × 52 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Redon was a great admirer of Rembrandt. On the second page of his autobiographical notes *To Myself*, he praised the master in a text that dates from the period in which he copied the angel: 'Rembrandt gave me ever new surprises. He is the great human factor in the infinity of our ecstasies. He has given moral life to shadow. He has created chiaroscuro, as Phidias has created the line. And all the mystery that art allows is hereafter possible only for him.'⁶ Redon might have taken his interpretation of the chiaroscuro as the ultimate deepening and surpassing element within Rembrandt's art from Charles Blanc's monograph of 1853 on the Dutch master.⁷ The passage quoted above, in which Redon expressed his admiration of Rembrandt, was followed by a passage about his period of training in Paris, when he was still searching for his place in the (art) world. He described Paris as the 'intellectual springboard upon which all artists must exercise incessantly', and 'the endeavour of hours of study and youth; insomuch as it is good to know what to love and where the spirit takes flight'.⁸ These hours certainly included those Redon must have spent with Rembrandt's painting. This angel can be understood as the

⁶ Redon (15 October 1867), in Redon (1922) 1986, p. 28: 'Rembrandt me donna des surprises d'art toujours nouvelles. Il est le grand facteur humain de l'infini de nos extases. Il a donné la vie morale à l'ombre. Il a créé le clair-obscur comme Phidias la ligne. Et tout le mystère que comporte la plastique n'est désormais possible que par lui'.

⁷ Douglas W. Druick and Peter K. Zegers, 'Under a Cloud 1840–1870', 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. 25–72, p. 49. See also Charles

Blanc, *L'œuvre de Rembrandt reproduit par Photographie*, Paris 1853. As regards general admiration and the influence of Rembrandt on the French avant-garde, see Alison McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt*, Amsterdam 2004.

⁸ Redon (15 October 1867), in Redon (1922) 1986, p. 28. See also Gamboni 2011, chapter 1: 'et surtout

Paris, m'assurant le tremplin intellectuel sur lequel tout artiste doit s'exercer sans cesse; elle me donna surtout la conscience dans la direction de l'effort aux heures d'étude et de jeunesse: autant il est bon de s'abandonner quand on crée, autant encore il est bien de savoir ce qu'il est bien d'aimer et où l'esprit s'envole.'



Fig. 15c Odilon Redon, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*, c. 1862–75. Oil on canvas, 68 × 49.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 15d Attributed to Eugène Delacroix, *The Archangel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*, c. 1850. Oil on canvas, 36 × 27 cm. Palais des beaux-arts de Lille, Lille

embodiment of the 'spirit [that] takes flight' and shows Redon the way to a profound portrayal of the human mystery and thus to true artistry.

Redon had already distanced himself from naturalism in the 1860s, but he was still searching for a way to let his own imagination and spiritual values take flight in his art.⁹ Isolating and copying in a smaller format specific elements from artworks by other masters not only helped him to fathom their technique and style, but also fuelled his spiritual quest for meaning. His interpretative copies enabled him to give new, personal meanings to time-honoured works.¹⁰

Redon's name can be found in the 1862 and 1864 registers of copyists working in the Louvre.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, most of his copies can be dated to these years of his training. The copy in the Musée d'Orsay must have been made on the spot.¹² Redon worked in practically the same format and copied the build-up of Rembrandt's panel by beginning with a red-brown ground and painting in the dark and light passages, layer by layer, on his canvas. Just as Rembrandt himself had done, Redon created depth and atmosphere by applying a number of thin layers over one

⁹ On this subject, see the articles by Druick and Zegers, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 25–118 and Gamboni 2011, chapter 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* and specifically Druick in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, p. 93.

¹¹ Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décorations*, p. 5.

¹² The copy in the Musée d'Orsay is dated to 1875 in Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décorations*, no. 2015, but the precise basis of this dating is unclear. There has been speculation as to which of the two copies is more faithful to Rembrandt's work (and therefore the early copy of 1861–62) and which should be dated to

1875. See Fred Leeman, *André Bongers, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum). However, both datings pre-date Redon's text on the work, and in both copies Redon reinterprets the work by placing the emphasis on the angel and the chiaroscuro. Perhaps these facts make a clear dating less relevant.

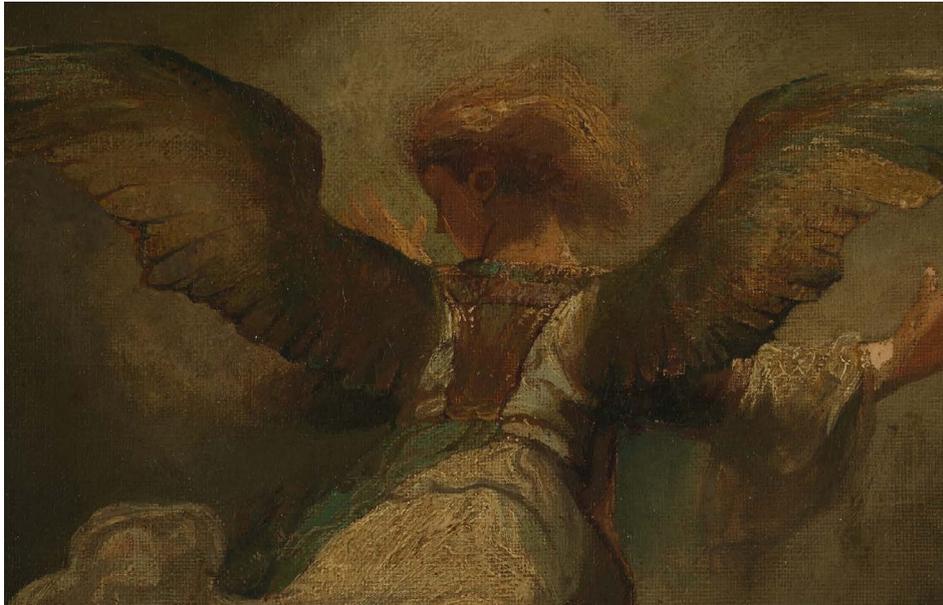


Fig. 15e Detail of cat. 36

another.¹³ He carefully imitated the colour contrast between the greenish highlights and red-brown ground, as well as the extreme foreshortening of the figure. Bit by bit, he copied the wings' delicate details and splendid colouring and the angel's transparent garment, as seen in the collar (fig. 15e). It is interesting to note that Rembrandt, in turn, had borrowed the motif and the pose of the angel from a woodcut by Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574) (fig. 15f).¹⁴

Redon's exact copy of the upper right-hand corner makes his decision to leave out Tobit's entire family and their situation in the landscape and to limit himself to a completely empty corner in dark brown-grey all the more radical. All that remains here is Rembrandt's chiaroscuro reduced to its essence: a dark area, a deep emptiness, contrasting dramatically with the angel's golden light. Below the thin layers of paint, there are no underpaintings to suggest that Redon initially planned to copy the entire work.

In the slightly smaller copy in the Van Gogh Museum, Redon also concentrated on the flight of the angel towards the light. Here, however, he deployed a different strategy: he isolated the angel and moved him more towards the middle of the canvas. In this way he foreshortened somewhat the right wing, which Rembrandt truncated. The dark area in the lower left-hand corner also contributes to the contrast, though it opens up a bit more and is considerably reduced in size. Redon produced this copy much quicker. He applied fewer layers of paint, roughly filled in the chiaroscuro, and selectively painted in some details. Thus, the clouds in Redon's copy are more like smudges than round forms.

Redon applied a similar working method – entailing the isolation of a detail – in another copy that he produced in the Louvre. In his imitation of Rubens's densely populated canvas *The Triumph of Truth*, he focused his attention solely on the upward flight of Saturn and Veritas (figs. 15g and 15h). Redon thus copied not obediently but interpretatively. The copy therefore demonstrates – as does his copy after Rembrandt – not only Redon's admiration of the Old Master, but also, in particular, his artistic interpretation, as well as his appropriation and emulation of the accomplishments of his predecessors.

We must not fail to mention that Redon's other great spiritual and artistic example, Eugène Delacroix, also seems to have made a copy after *The Archangel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family* in the Louvre (fig. 15d).¹⁵ Delacroix did,

¹³ J. Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol III: 1635–1642, The Hague 1982, p. 236.

¹⁴ Rembrandt became enthusiastic about this element because it enabled him to portray 'the communicative exchange between the angel and mortals' with psychological depth; see Amy Golahny, 'The Disappearing Angel: Heemskerck's "Departing Raphael" in Rembrandt's studio', *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, vol. 28 (2007), pp. 38–45, p. 41.

¹⁵ The work is attributed, with reservations, to Delacroix, but it comes in any case from his estate, according to the museum in Lille.

Fig. 15f Maarten van Heemskerck (design), *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family*, c. 1548. Woodcut on paper, 24.1 × 18.9 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, from the estate of Dr. J.C.J. Bierens de Haan 1951



Fig. 15g Peter Paul Rubens, *The Triumph of Truth and the Fates Spinning the Life-thread of Maria de' Medici*, 1621–25. Oil on canvas, 50 × 64 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 15h Odilon Redon, *The Triumph of Truth (after Rubens)*, c. 1862–70. Oil on canvas, 44 × 35.7 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

however, copy the entire composition, though somewhat more roughly, using freer brushstrokes than Rembrandt did in the original and paying a great deal of attention to the chiaroscuro. Like Redon, he did this in an effort to grasp ‘the mysterious and supreme genius’ of Rembrandt, as Delacroix wrote in his diaries.¹⁶ In his writings, Delacroix cited precisely this work by Rembrandt to substantiate his claim that if an artist wishes to hold his viewers’ attention, he must speak to them from the depths of his own soul. In Delacroix’s view, this was exactly what Rembrandt did here, through the fantasy and emotional depth expressed in the work and the unaffected portrayal of the figures.¹⁷

Given the exceptional influence of Rembrandt’s work on his development as an artist, it is not at all surprising that Redon kept these copies throughout his life and flatly refused to sell them, even to his most loyal collectors. Andries Bonger therefore acquired the work that is now in the Van Gogh Museum only after Redon’s death, through his widow, Camille Falte. When Bonger had finally taken possession of the work, Camille wrote to him, saying that her husband had made the copy sixty years ago, which is another reason to date the works between 1862 and 1864.¹⁸

Their shared admiration for Rembrandt was part of the bond between the French artist and his Dutch collector, and the subject comes up repeatedly in their correspondence.¹⁹ Bonger often sent Redon postcards of works by Rembrandt, to add to his cherished *musée imaginaire* of reproductions after revered masters.²⁰ In a photograph of Redon in his home, which also served as his studio, we see a reproduction of Rembrandt’s self-portrait stuck in the mirror behind him (fig. 15j). In addition, Bonger reported faithfully to Redon every time he admired one of the master’s works in a Dutch collection. Immediately after their first meeting, Redon and Bonger went together to the Louvre, where they must have discussed this particular painting by Rembrandt. In one of his very first letters, Bonger linked Redon’s description of his family estate of Peyrelebadé to another work by Rembrandt in the Louvre, *The Holy Family*. He wrote: ‘Your description of the delight you take in working there makes me think of the ray of sun in that little canvas by Rembrandt, the Nativity’ (fig. 15i).²¹

Redon’s later trips to the Netherlands were always guided by Rembrandt. Primarily, Redon came to see the works themselves, but he also liked to immerse himself in the northern climate, from which Rembrandt’s spirit, he felt, had been born. Although Redon described himself in various letters as stemming from a southern milieu, he also identified with some aspects of Rembrandt’s northern spirit.²² Bonger wrote to Redon: ‘How often you have told me that there is much of the

such perfect equilibrium. Let us admire him in the morning and keep Rembrandt for the hours of night. Both of them are, moreover, so great that they are, as it were, of our own day. The great man continues to exert his powers beyond his own lifetime. Here are two that the centuries seem to renew.’ (‘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. Outre sa grande émotion devant les humbles, son humanité, sa raison, sa grandeur, au dehors et dedans. Vous rappelez-vous l’eau-forte de l’enfant prodigue, peut-on voir plus profond? Mais je retourne au Vinci, aux jours de délectation ou de

dilettantisme. Il est le plus complet. Et je ne vois pas ailleurs plus parfait équilibre. Admirez-le le matin, et gardons Rembrandt pour les heures nocturnes. Tous les deux sont d’ailleurs, pour ainsi dire, de ce jour, tant ils sont grands. Le grand homme est celui qui exerce encore ses pouvoirs au-delà de sa vie. En voilà deux que les siècles semblent renouveler.’)

²¹ Letter 6: ‘La description que vous faites des douceurs que vous y donne le travail me fait penser à ce rayon de soleil de la petite toile de Rembrandt: la Nativité.’

²² 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 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. 719–53.

¹⁶ Eugène Delacroix (1855), in *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, vol. 1, Paris 1893, p. xxxiv: ‘le génie mystérieux et souverain’. Another motivation was the forging of a personal synthesis between two traditions of painting: the Italian tradition and that of the Northern masters.

¹⁷ Eugène Delacroix (23 January 1857), in *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, vol. 3, Paris 1893, p. 246.

¹⁸ Letter from Camille Redon to Bonger (3 October 1922), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive.

¹⁹ See letters 6 (9 July 1894), Hilversum, 11 (31 December 1894), no location, 12 (14 January 1895), no location, 20 (3 July 1895), Hilversum, 21 (3 August 1895), Hilversum, 22 (7 August 1895), Listrac, 57 (25 October 1898), Paris, 60 (8 November 1898), Paris, 130 (17 January 1905), no location, 201 (30 October 1907), no location, and 227 (16 May 1909), no location.

²⁰ See postcards 98 (5 March 1903), Amsterdam, ‘Titus’, 171 (18 July 1906), no location, ‘The Mill’, 172 (2 August 1906), Amsterdam, ‘Saskia in a Straw Hat’, 223 (21 January 1909), no location, ‘Rembrandt’ and 293 (17 January 1913), Amsterdam, ‘The Vision of Daniel’. In letter 22, Redon writes to Bonger: ‘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. Not to mention the grandeur of his feeling for the humble, his humanity, his reasonableness, his greatness inward and outward. Do you remember the etching of the prodigal son – can any vision be more profound? But on days of delectation and dilettantism, I come back to da Vinci. He is the most complete artist. Nowhere else do I find

Fig. 15i Rembrandt, *The Holy Family*, 1640. Oil on panel, 41 × 34 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



northern spirit in you! Undoubtedly you have its depth and its dreams [...].²³ Redon undertook his first ‘pilgrimage’ to Holland in 1878, inspired by the publication *Les maîtres d'autrefois* (1876), in which the painter and writer Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876) gave a sensitive account of a similar journey.²⁴ Until this time Redon had known only the paintings in the collection of the Louvre. But now he wandered through the ‘poor, noble outskirts’ of Amsterdam, where Rembrandt had worked, and there he wrote his reflections, quoted above, on the literary in art. In his article ‘J’ai vu Odilon Redon face à face avec Rembrandt’, Marius-Ary Leblond recounted his trip to the Netherlands in 1913 in the company of Mr and Mrs Redon.²⁵ They quoted the artist, who admired Rembrandt because of his ‘humanity, symbolism, poetry and irony’, and instantly traced these qualities back to the angel in the Louvre. Here the master had, in Redon’s eyes, depicted ‘divine light’, even if perhaps unwittingly.²⁶

Given the role played by Rembrandt’s work in the relationship between artist and collector, it is unsurprising that Bonger seized the opportunity to acquire Redon’s copy after Rembrandt, even though he had declared his collection complete in 1908. When Redon was still alive, Bonger had also made repeated attempts to acquire his copies after Delacroix, but the artist had refused many times to part with these cherished works. He wrote the following to Bonger about his copy of Delacroix’s *Education of Achilles*: ‘I must ask you to let me keep it; I’m very fond of it, I often look

²³ Letter 37 (21 June 1896), Hilversum: ‘Que de fois m’avez-vous dit que beaucoup de l’esprit du Nord habite en vous! Vous en avez certes la profondeur et le rêve [...]’.

²⁴ André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon. Peintre, dessinateur et graveur*, Paris 1923, p. 48: ‘That is how he travelled through Holland [...] out of veneration, as a pilgrimage to the holy sites where Rembrandt lived’ (‘C’est ainsi qu’il parcourut la Hollande [...] par vénération, comme en pèlerinage aux lieux saints où vécut Rembrandt’). See also Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l’Orangerie), 1956–57, pp. xv–xx.

²⁵ Marius-Ary Leblond, ‘J’ai vu Odilon Redon face à face avec Rembrandt’, *Arts: beaux-arts, littérature, spectacles*, no. 590 (24 October 1956), p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: ‘humanité, symbolisme, poésie, raillerie’ and ‘la lumière de Dieu’.

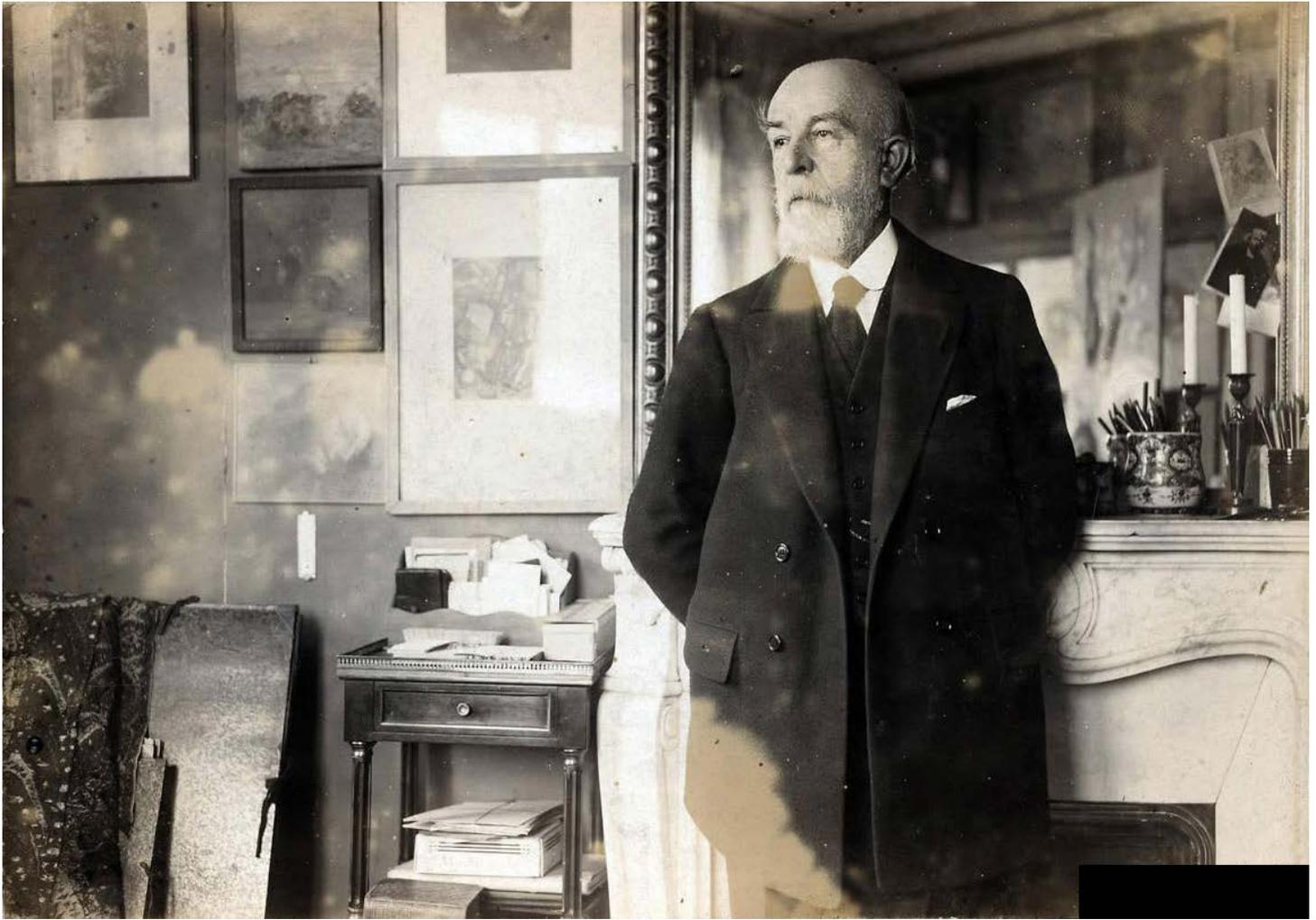


Fig. 15j Odilon Redon in his apartment and studio at the avenue de Wagram, c. 1910. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris

at it, it revives me. It's an essence of Delacroix; I truly believe I will never let it go; I've often been asked for it.²⁷ That all of Redon's copies were equally dear to him is apparent from the fact that none of them passed into other hands until after his death. Most of them were donated by Redon's heirs to the Louvre in 1982.²⁸

Redon was not alone in holding this 'fetishistic view of the copy'.²⁹ Many artists surrounded themselves with copies they had made, and protected them from the outside world. Albert Boime gives the example of Marcellin Desboutin (1823–1902), who filled the walls of his Italian villa with copies, so that their spirit would have an effect on his own works.³⁰ A handbook for young artists published in 1854 states: 'Artists should copy and be surrounded by their copies rather than their own works, and thus gradually acquire principles not to be communicated in any other way, as good manners are acquired by living in the best society.'³¹

Both of Redon's copies after Rembrandt are, therefore, programmatic in their emphasis on the archangel and the divine chiaroscuro. In both canvases, Redon placed his personal stamp on the work of the Old Master by singling out the element that would continue throughout his artistic career to act as his spiritual guide, showing him the way heavenwards.

²⁷ Fred Leeman et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009, no. 149, *The Education of Achilles (after Delacroix)* (W2035, private collection).

²⁸ Rosaline Bacou, *La donation Ari et Suzanne Redon: Musée du Louvre*, Paris 1984.

²⁹ Boime 1971, p. 124.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ C.R. Leslie (1854), quoted in Boime 1971, p. 209 and n. 24.

PROVENANCE

After the death of the artist, Paris on 6 July 1916 inherited by his widow, Camille Redon-Falte, Paris; sold by Camille Redon-Falte to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, 1922; 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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