



ODILON REDON and Andries Bonger

*36 works from the
Van Gogh Museum
collection*

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho

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CITATION

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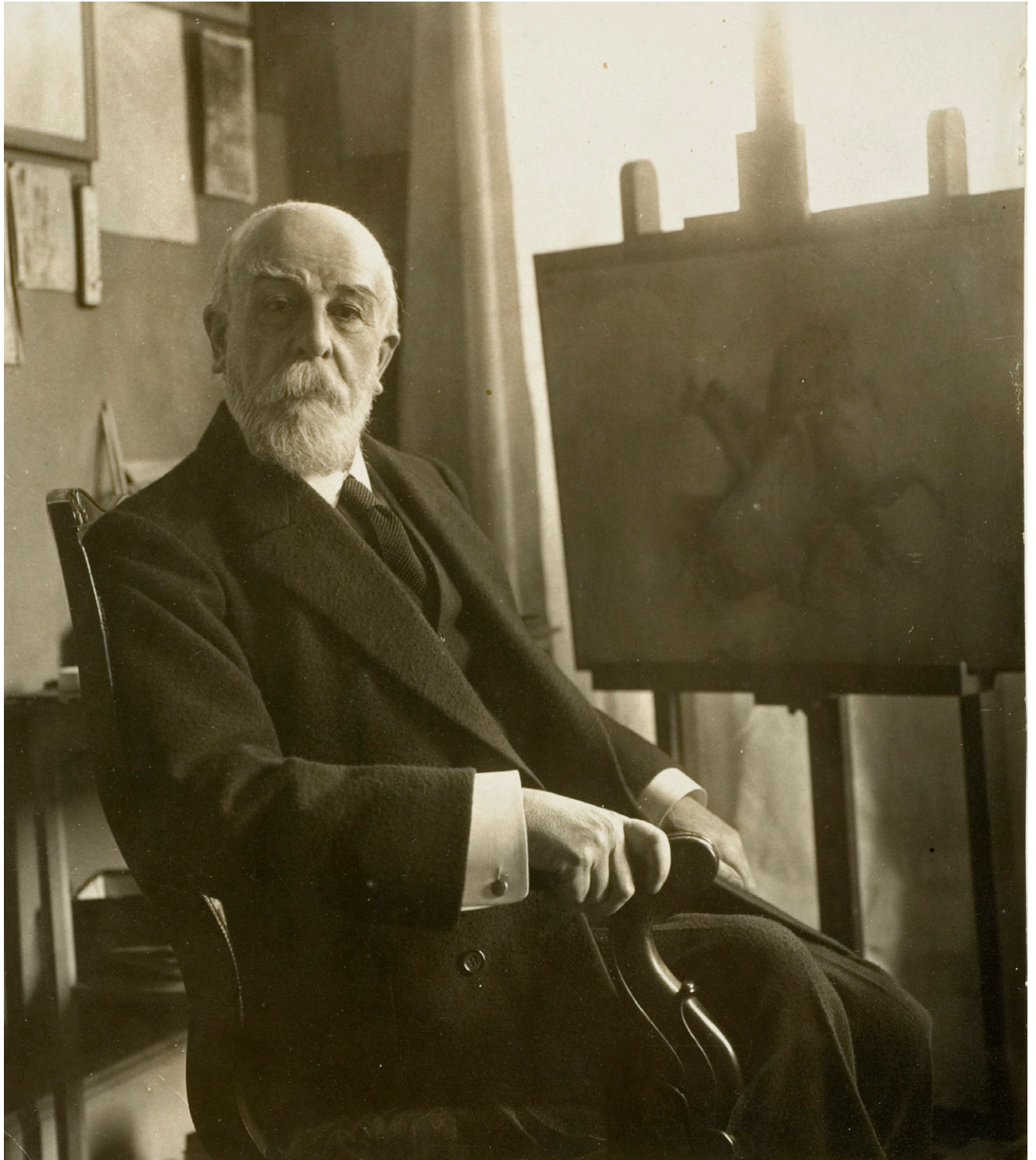


Fig. 1 Odilon Redon in his apartment and studio at the avenue de Wagram, 1913. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris

‘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 oog en 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

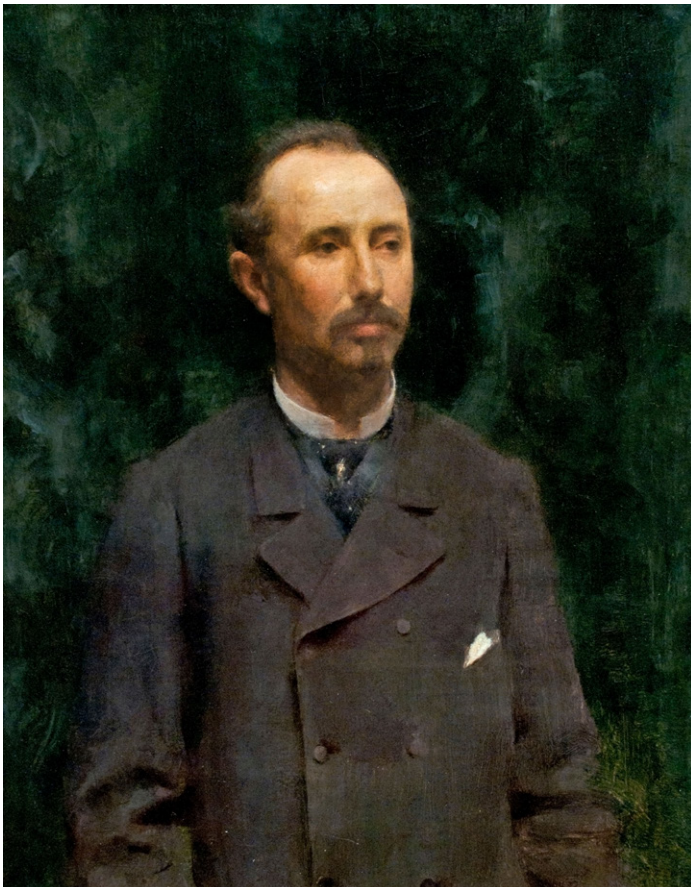


Fig. 8 Portrait of lawyer and critic Edmond Picard (1836–1924) by Fernand Khnopff, 1884. Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 32.5 cm. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels



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-

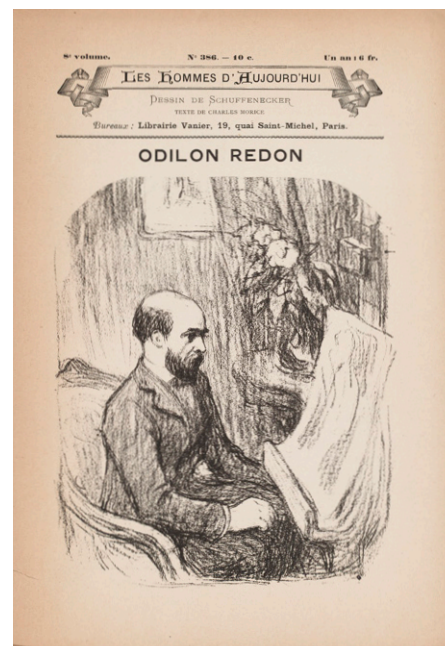


Fig. 15 Cover of *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, no. 386, 1890, with a portrait of Odilon Redon by Emile Schuffenecker. Private collection

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 is⁵⁸ his 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

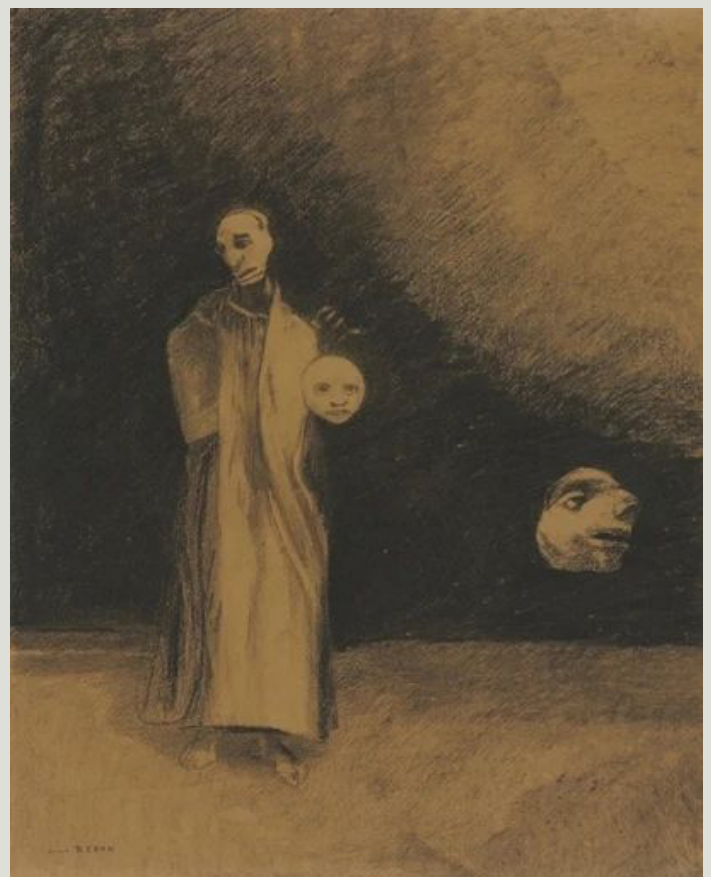


Fig. b Odilon Redon, *Nightmare*, c. 1881. Charcoal and fixative application on paper, 45.9 × 36.4 cm. Private collection

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.

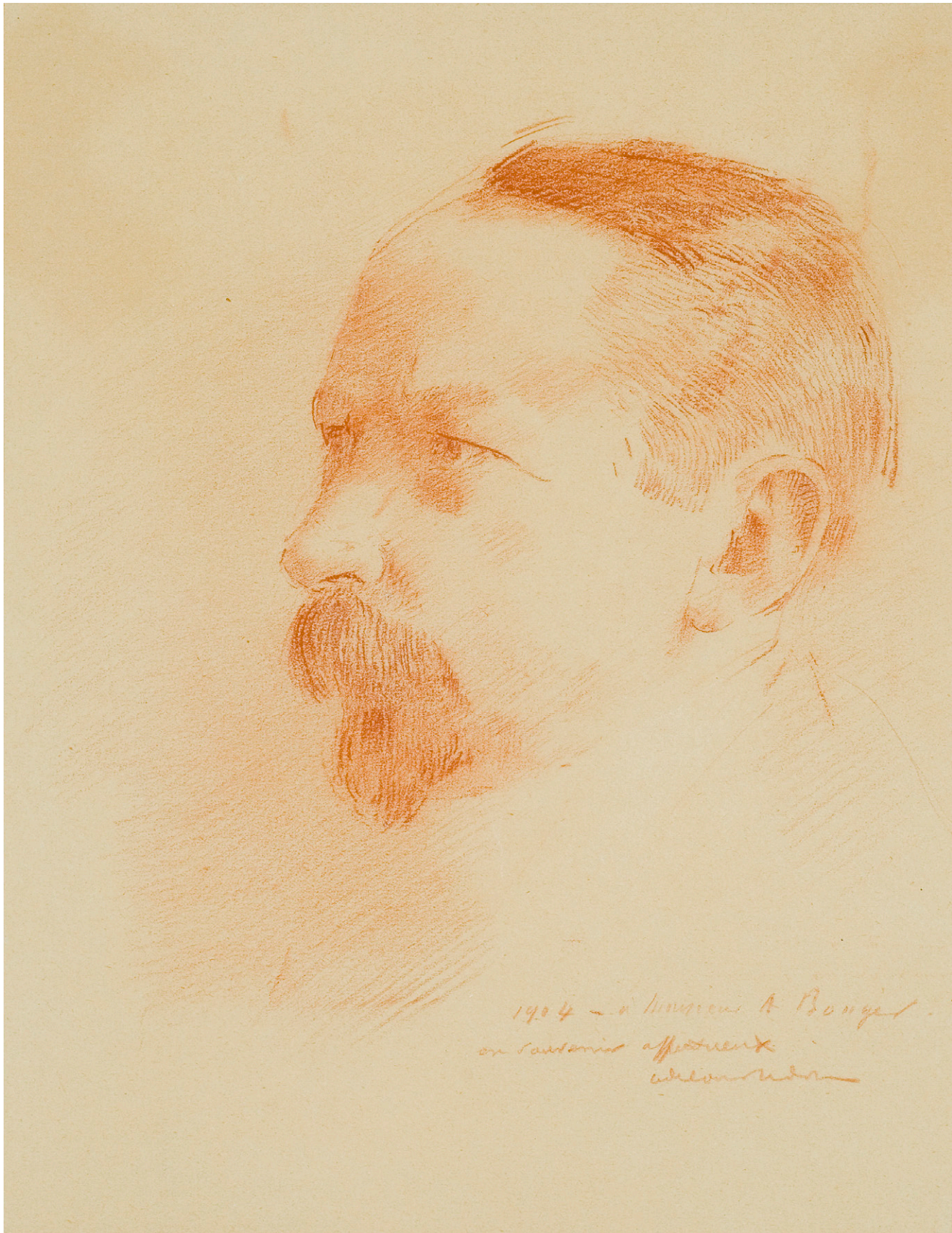


Fig. 18 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of Andries Bonger*, 1904. Sanguine on paper, 24 x 18 cm. Private collection



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

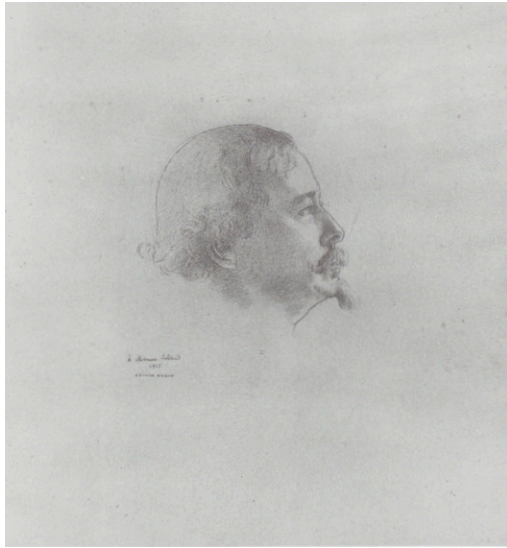


Fig. 20 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of Marius-Ary Leblond*, 1913. Sanguine on paper, 45 × 42 cm. Private collection

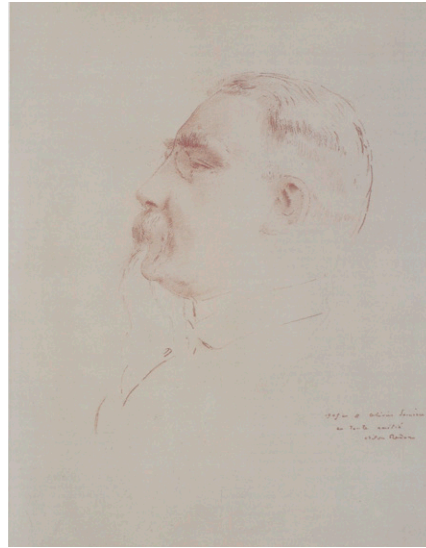


Fig. 21 Odilon Redon, *Portrait of Olivier Sainsère*, 1905. Sanguine on paper, 44.9 × 35.8 cm. The Ian Woodner Family Collection, New York



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'.)

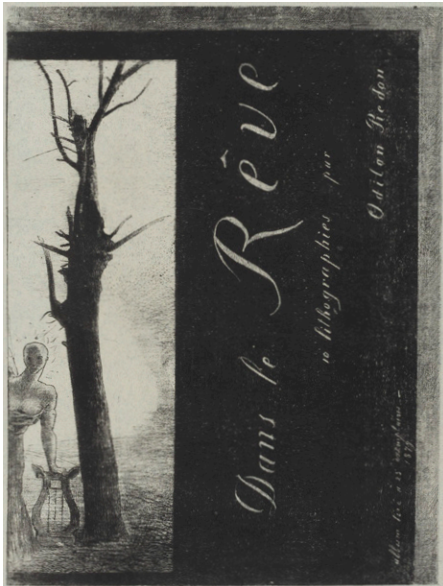


Fig. 24 Odilon Redon, Frontispiece of the series *Dans le rêve*, 1879. Lithograph on China paper, 29.9 × 22.3 cm. Kunstmuseum, The Hague

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.

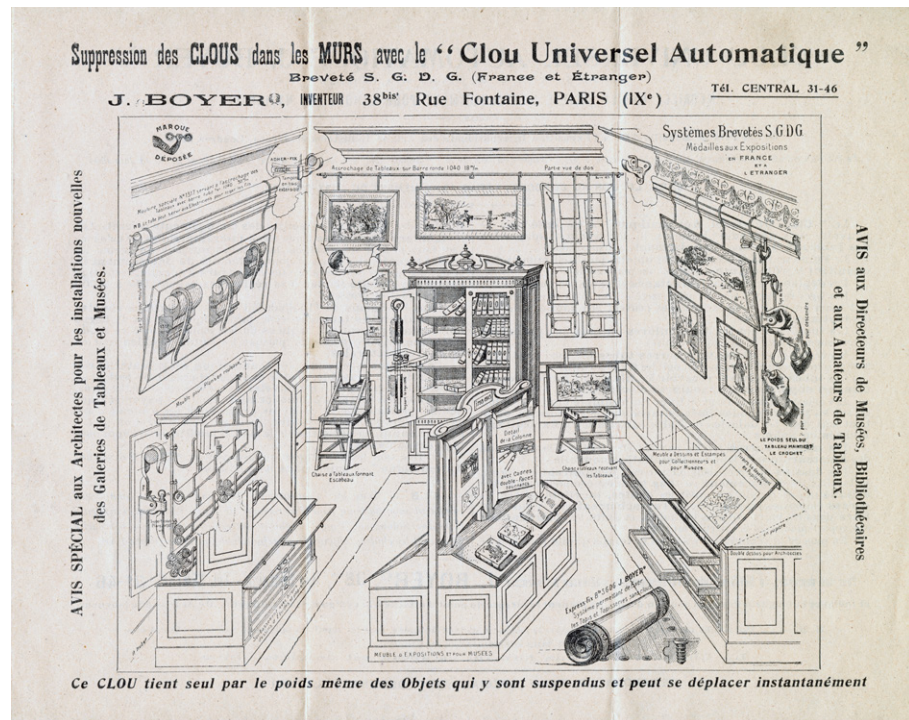
⁸² Letter 93 (1 February 1903), Amsterdam: 'En regardant l'ensemble de ma collection, je suis émerveillé de la variété de votre art. Il offre actuellement le spectacle rare d'une éclosion nouvelle, au moment où tant d'autres se sont figés dans une note uniforme.'

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.

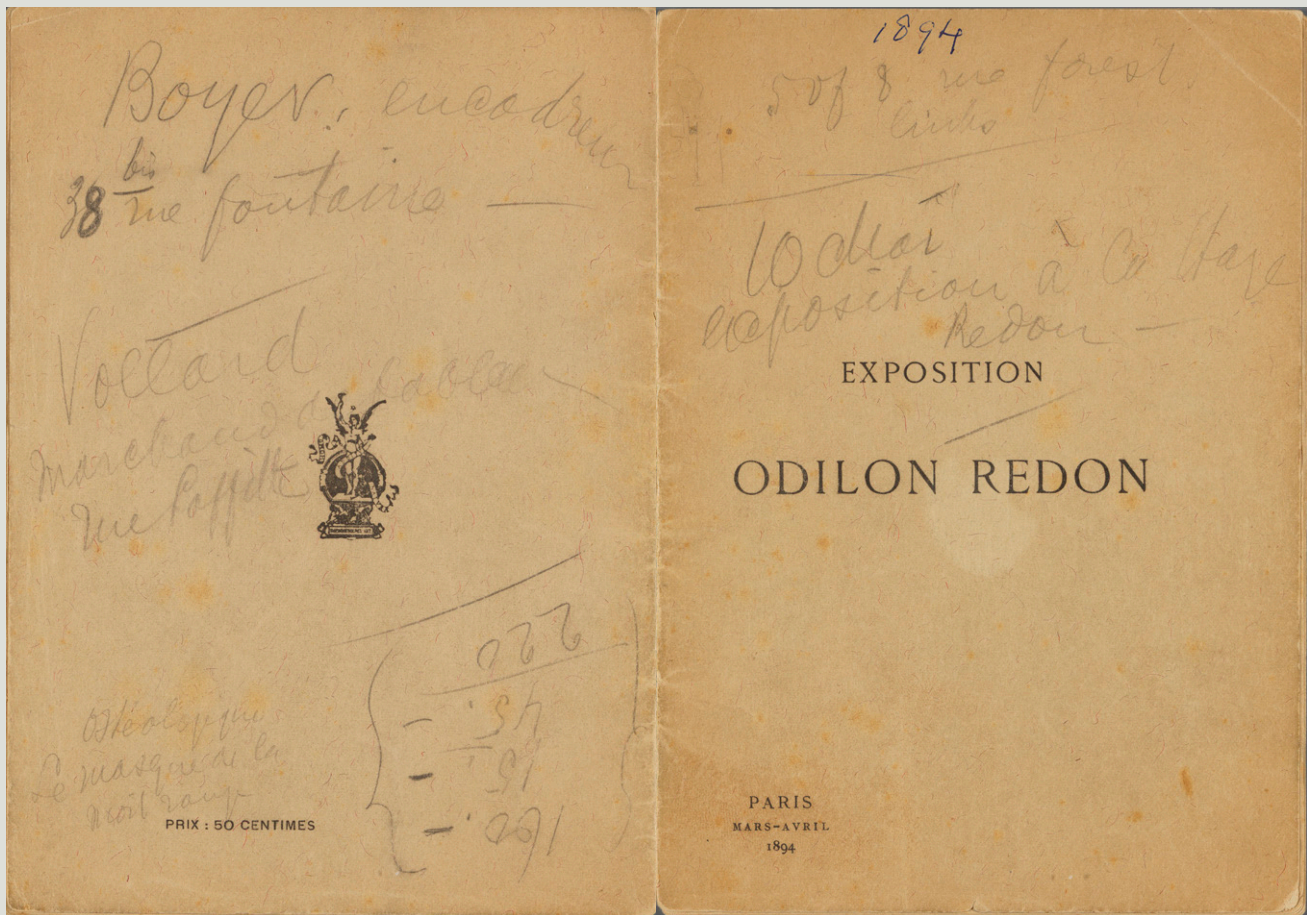
¹⁰⁴ The lecture offers a neat parallel with the one given by the earlier Redon admirer Edmond Picard in 1894 at the Haagsche Kunstkring, when Bonger had just begun to collect, see letter 6 (9 July 1894), Hilversum.

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

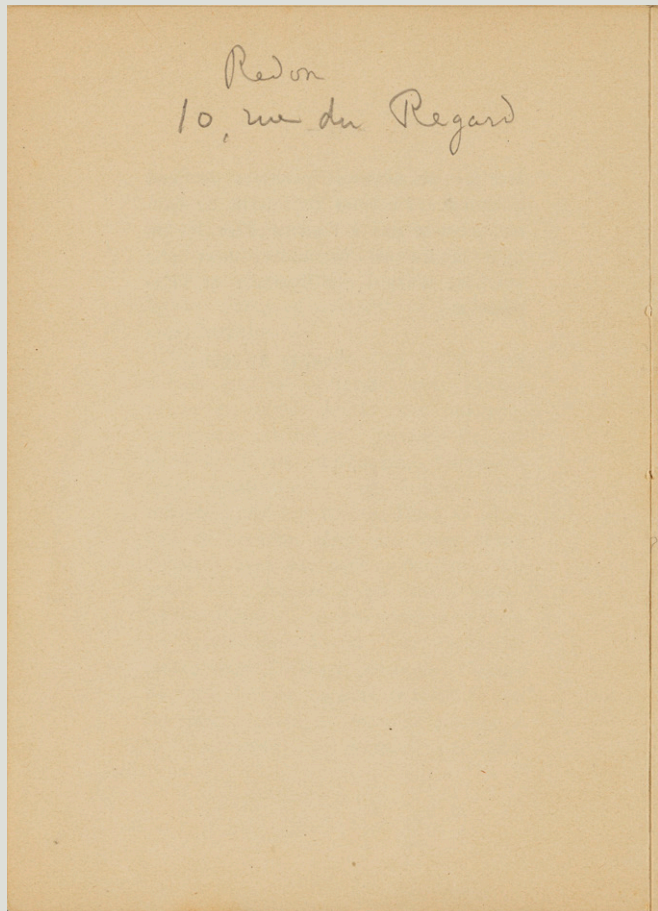


Fig. c Page of the catalogue for the exhibition *Odilon Redon* at Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1894, with notes in graphite by Andries Bonger. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bonger Archive

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.'

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).

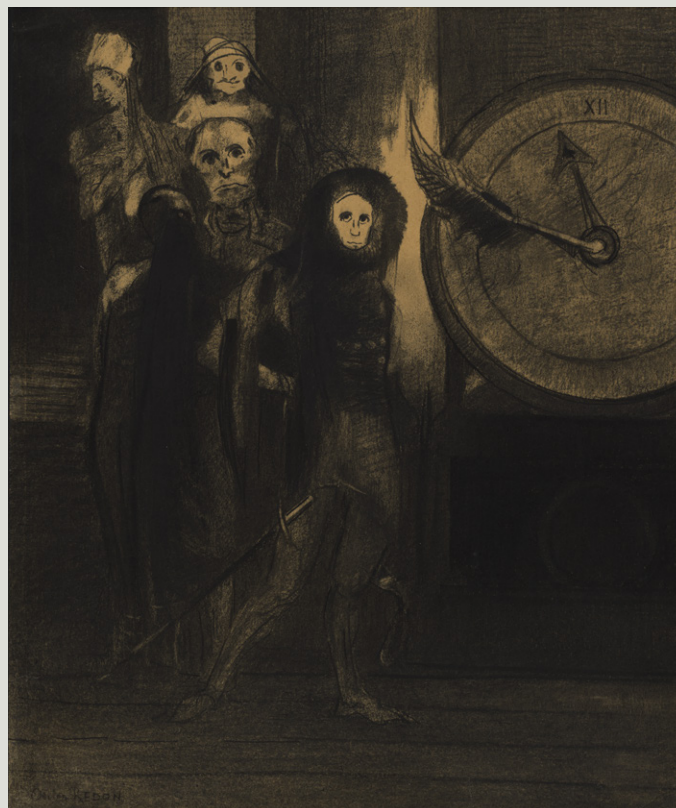


Fig. d Odilon Redon, *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1883. Charcoal and black chalk on paper, 43.7 × 35.8 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, The John S. Newberry Collection



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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