

12

Flower still lifes in pastel

CITATION

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

12

Flower still lifes in pastel

Cats. 29–31

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³ Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Douglas W. Druick *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams 1840–1916*, exh. cat. Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal

Academy of Arts), 1994–95, pp. 353–77 and the technical examinations carried out 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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

⁵ See, for example, the seven versions of geraniums

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

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

⁷ Letter 139 (14 August 1905), Amsterdam.

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



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



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



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



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



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



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

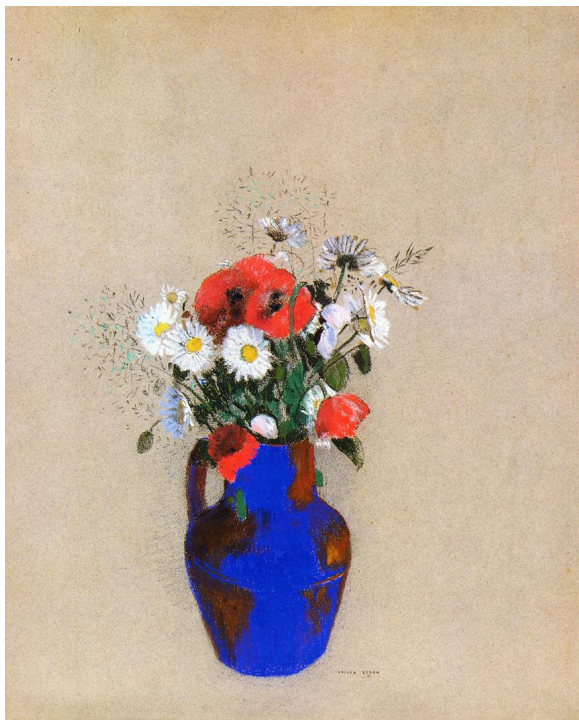


Fig. 12d Odilon Redon, *Poppies and Daisies in a Blue Vase*, c. 1905. Pastel on grey-blue paper, discoloured to grey, 56 × 45.5 cm. Private collection, France



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CAT. 29**PROVENANCE**

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

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CAT. 30**PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 French francs, presumably October 1905; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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CAT. 31

PROVENANCE

Acquired from the artist, Paris by Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 French francs, October 1905; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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Fig. 12f Detail of cat. 31



ODILON REDON