

9

Family pastels

CITATION

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

9 Family pastels

Cats. 21–22

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

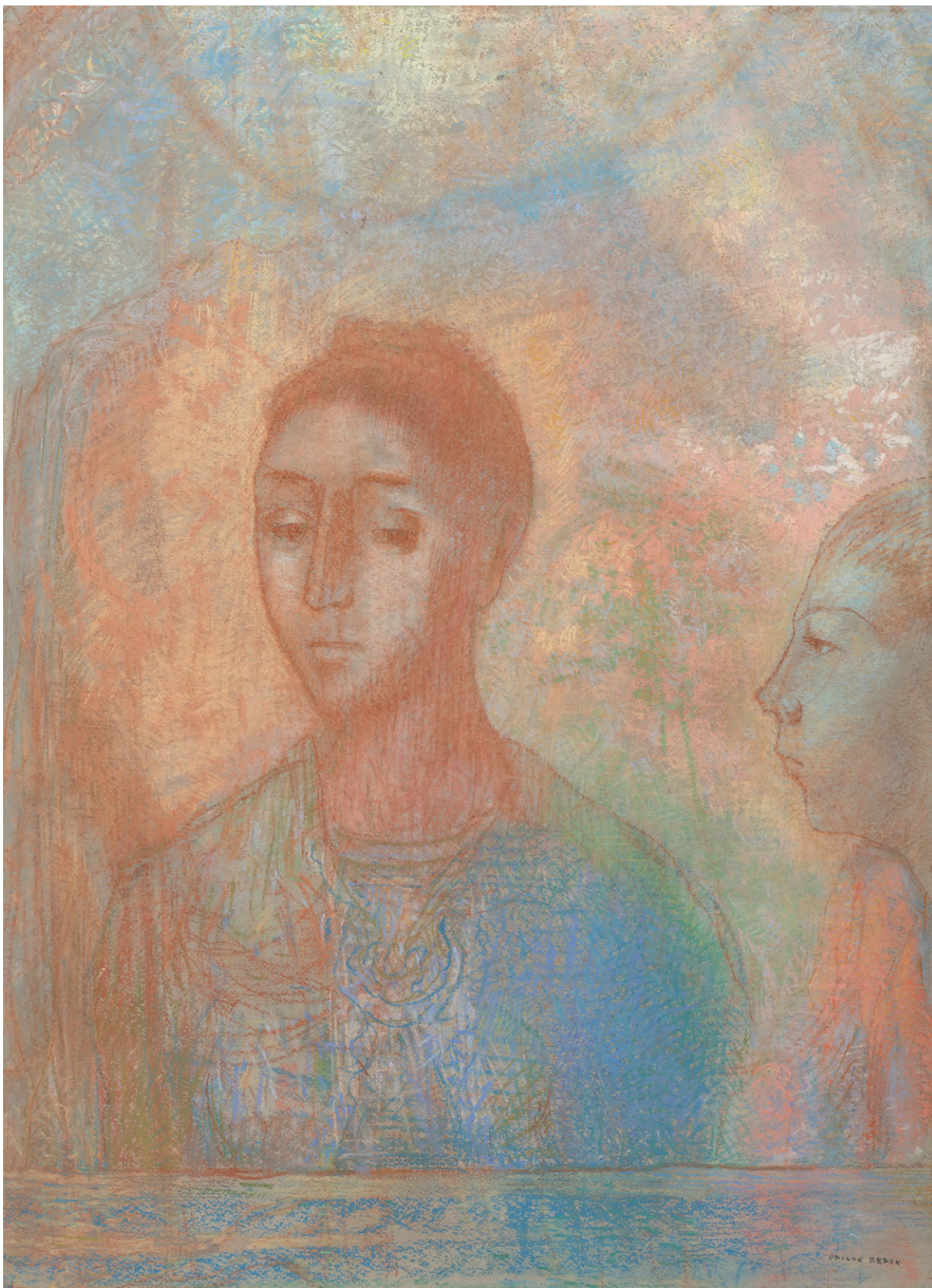
³ Letter 67 (3 January 1900), Paris: 'I take great joy in working on my pastels. And they give pleasure, they're

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

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

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

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



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



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



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



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

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

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

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

⁶ Technical examinations carried out 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Redon bought a sheet with a commercially prepared blue-grey ground for *Woman and Child*; *Childhood* is drawn on a sheet of blue paper. Redon used fixative between the many layers of pastel to avoid smudging. See also Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Douglas W. Druick *et al.* (eds.), exh. cat., *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840–1916* Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal Academy of Arts), 1994–95, pp. 353–77, pp. 368–77.

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

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

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



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

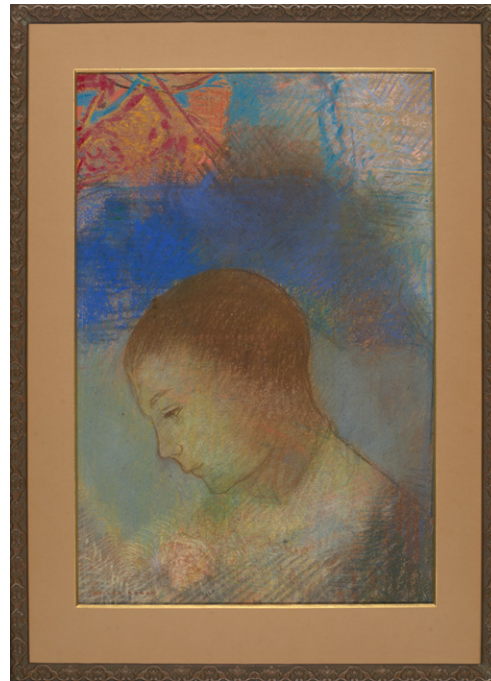


Fig. 9d Cat. 22 in its original matting and frame by Boyer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹² Letter 61 (17 December 1898), Paris.

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

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

¹⁵ This pastel could very well be *L'enfance* (*Childhood*), which is listed under 1895 in the Mellerio Redon Chronology, an attribution that comes from Leeman 2007. On the basis of style and technique, Harriet Stratis would prefer to date the pastel somewhat later, approximately contemporaneous with *Woman and Child*. Technical examinations carried out 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. In 1898 Arī was nine years old, which could accord with his appearance in *Childhood*. Contradicting this, however, is the fact that his profile differs subtly from that in the double portrait of c. 1898, in which his features are slightly more

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



CAT. 21

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger for 600 French francs, Hilversum, November 1898; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, November 1987, since 1 July 1994 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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CAT. 22

PROVENANCE

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

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Fig. 9f Detail of cat. 21

