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Vision. Vase of Flowers

CITATION

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, 'Vision. Vase of Flowers', in *Odilon Redon and Andries Bonger: 36 works from the Van Gogh Museum collection*, Amsterdam 2022

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Vision. Vase of Flowers

Cat. 28

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

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

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

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

Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), 2011, cat. 24. See also Gloria Groom, 'The Late Work', in Douglas W. Druick *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal Academy of Arts), 1994–95, pp. 305–52, pp. 321–22. With regard to all of Redon's

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

⁶ René Boitelle, Klaas Jan van den Berg and Eva Goetz, 'A Technical Examination of Odilon Redon's Paintings from the Bongger Collection, Van Gogh Museum', *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art*, vol. 3 (2005) pp. 66–81, p. 74.

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

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

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

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

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



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



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



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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴ Letter 89 (16 December 1902), Amsterdam.

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

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

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

⁹ For the frames, see Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, ‘“L’intérieur qui est l’image de votre pensée”: Odilon Redon chez Andries Bonger’, in Dario Gamboni and Merel van Tilburg (eds.), ‘*Sans adieu*’. *Andries Bonger – Odilon Redon correspondance 1894–1916*, vol. 2, Paris 2022, pp. 776–808, pp. 792–99.



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bongers, Amsterdam, June 1901; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bongers-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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