

13

Mystical paintings

CITATION

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

13 Mystical paintings

Cats. 32–33

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 Maryanne Stevens, 'Redon's Artistic and Critical Position', in Douglas W. Druick *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago)/Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum)/London (Royal Academy of Arts), 1994–95, pp. 281–304, p. 287.

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

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

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

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

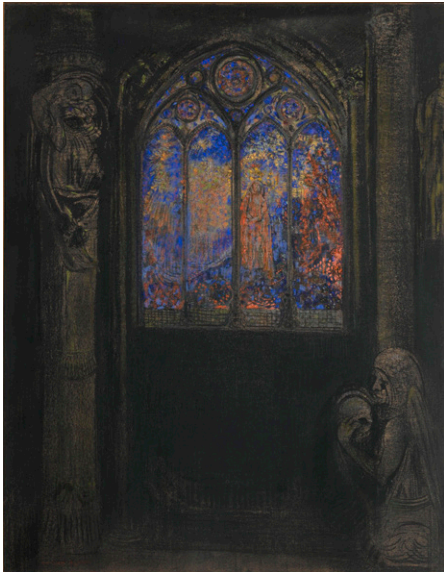


Fig. 13a Odilon Redon, *Temple. Stained-glass Window*, 1904. Charcoal and pastel on cardboard, 87 x 68 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris



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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ Rodolphe Rapetti, 'L'arbre rouge', in Rodolphe Rapetti et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve, 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), 2011 (W608, private collection), p. 344.

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

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

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

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

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

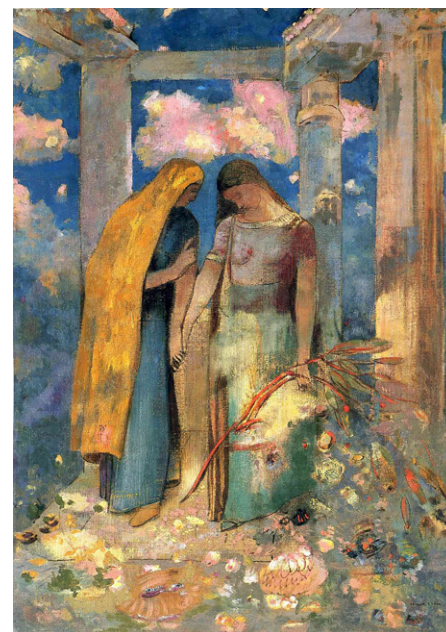


Fig. 13c Odilon Redon, *Mystical Conversation*, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 65 × 46 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Gifu

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

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

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

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

20 See Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98, vol. 1 (1992): *Portraits et figures*, 'Portraits d'Ari', pp. 18–23.

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

CAT. 32

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam for 200 French francs (together with so473N1996), October 1905; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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CAT. 33

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, for 200 French francs (together with so472N1996), October 1905; after his death on 20 January 1936 inherited by his widow, Françoise W.M. Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde, Amsterdam; after her death in 1975 bequeathed to her heirs, the Netherlands; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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