

Beyond the visible : [brochure] the art of Odilon Redon : the Museum of Modern Art, October 30, 2005-January 25, 2006

Author

Redon, Odilon, 1840-1916

Date

2005

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/92

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.



The Museum of Modern Art

October 30, 2005–January 23, 2006

Beyond the Visible

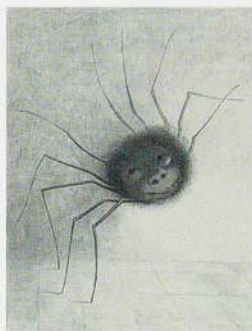
The Art of Odilon Redon

My originality consists in bringing to life, in a human way, improbable beings and making them live according to the laws of probability, by putting—as far as possible—the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible.



DILON REDON (1840–1916) TRANSFORMED THE natural world into dark visions and strange fantasies. Born in the Bordeaux region of France, Redon was associated with Symbolism and Decadence, art and literary movements that emerged in Paris in the late nineteenth century and soon spread throughout Europe. A return to the imaginative mysteries of Romanticism, Symbolism and its more refined and pessimistic counterpart, Decadence, rejected the newly industrialized world and its faith in scientific progress, as well as Realism and Naturalism, in favor of the fantastic, mystical, and occult, the dream, and the workings of the mind. Such a retreat from everyday life was a response, in part, to contemporary despair, in particular the crushing defeat of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and fin-de-siècle anxieties about France's widely perceived decline: from falling birthrates to rampant alcoholism, from escalating crime to the spread of syphilis, from mental illness to suicide.

In this context, Redon established his own pictorial vocabulary, inventing new artistic strategies and introducing unique subject matter. Using a range of mediums—mysterious charcoal drawings, luminous pastels, richly textured paintings, dramatically shaded lithographs—Redon created a universe of strange hybrid creatures, offered his own interpretations of literary, biblical, and mythological subjects, and presented flowers in a singular way: we see grinning disembodied teeth, smiling spiders, melancholy floating faces, winged chariots, unfamiliar plant life. First with velvety blacks and then with colored swirls of atmosphere, Redon created an aesthetic of the imagination, depicting with remarkable vividness what exists only in the mind. Redon's unique aesthetic, however, is generated through a double vision: binding elements of observed reality to strange and wondrous fantasies, Redon demonstrates the possibility—indeed the necessity—of observation *and* imagination, perception *and* dream, scrutiny *and* thought. Vision for Redon is thus a kind of envisioning, a means by which artist and viewer can see beyond nature, beyond reality, beyond the visible.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Eye-Balloon. 1878. Various charcoals, with stumping, erasing, and incising, heightened with traces of white chalk, on yellow-cream wove paper altered to a pale golden tone, 16 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (42.2 \times 33.3 cm). Gift of Larry Aldrich, 1964

Imaginary Figure. c. 1881. Black chalk and various charcoals, with stumping, erasing, and incising, on cream wove paper altered to a light golden tone, 14 \times 13" (35.6 \times 33 cm). Louise Reinhardt Smith Bequest, 1996

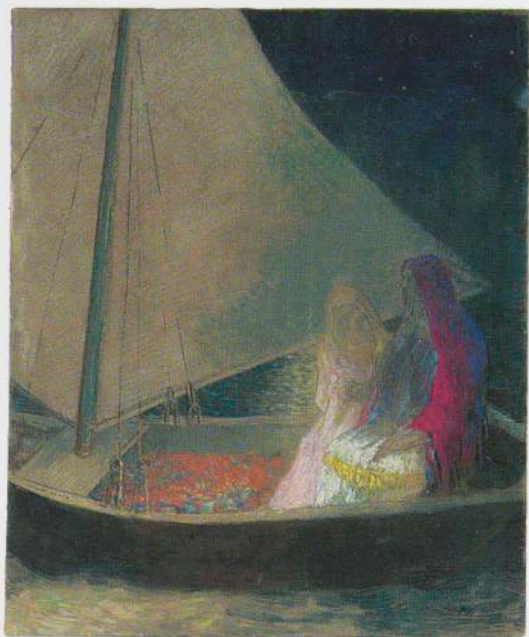
The Teeth. 1883. Various charcoals and black chalk, with stumping, erasing, and incising, on cream wove paper altered to a golden tone, 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (51.1 \times 36.8 cm). Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection, 2000

The Marsh Flower, a Sad Human Head. Plate II from the portfolio *Homage to Goya*. 1885. Lithograph on chine appliqué, comp.: 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 8 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (27.3 \times 20.4 cm). Publisher: probably the artist, Paris (distributed by L. Dumont, Paris). Printer: Lemerrier, Paris. Edition: 50, plus a second edition of 25. Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection, 2000

Spider. 1887. Lithograph on chine appliqué, comp.: 11 \times 8 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (28 \times 21.7 cm). Publisher: probably the artist, Paris (distributed by L. Dumont, Paris). Printer: Lemerrier, Paris. Edition: proof outside the edition of 25. Mrs. Bertram Smith Fund, 1956

Beyond the Visible

The Art of Odilon Redon



The Barque. c. 1902. Pastel with charcoal on tan wove paper, 24 × 20" (61 × 50.8 cm). Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection, 2000

Life and Art

The child of a French entrepreneur father and a mother from Louisiana, Redon spent his earliest years on the family estate, Peyrelebadé, in a remote section of France called the Médoc. Cared for by an uncle and unable to attend school because of poor health, the lonely Redon was deeply touched by the barren landscape. His interest in art began as a teenager, though he achieved little success in his official academic pursuits: he failed his architecture exams at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, faced insurmountable difficulties in his study of sculpture, and was unable to survive in the studio of the realist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. It was in the company of more eccentric and singular mentors that Redon would find encouragement

as he developed his unique vision: Stanislas Gorin, a painter who stressed the preeminence of Romantic traditions; Armand Clavaud, a botanist who demonstrated the links between science and the imagination, and introduced Redon to writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire; and Rodolphe Bresdin, maker of visionary lithographs, who emphasized the importance of careful observation to art of the fantastic.

The foundation for Redon's aesthetic of the imagination was thus laid early on, but it was not until his early forties that Redon achieved any degree of success. During this period, he concentrated on charcoal drawings and lithographs, confining himself to a palette of blacks and creating monstrous beings not quite human, not quite animal, not quite plant. His first one-person exhibitions, in 1881 and 1882, led to a small following among Decadent writers, including Emile Hennequin and J.-K. Huysmans, who saw parallels in his dark and mysterious subjects to their own poetry and prose. It was Huysmans's novel *Against Nature* (1884), in fact, that brought Redon notoriety for positioning his work as the emblem of the protagonist's extreme decadence: the drawings provoke, Huysmans writes, "bad dreams and fevered visions," and create "a new type of fantasy, born of sickness and delirium." While Redon's following continued to grow, especially among the literary worlds of Paris and Brussels, it was not until 1894 that he held his first major retrospective, at the Galeries Durand-Ruel, in Paris. It was also at this time, in the last decade and a half of his life, that Redon gave up charcoal and lithography in favor of pastel, oil paint, and, eventually, watercolor. Harnessing the radiant and resplendent color of powdery pastel, and the highlights and textures of oil paint, Redon ended his career blending blues into yellows into greens and so on, creating mysterious and compelling abstract atmospheres.

Noirs

"As a child," Redon reflects in his memoirs, "I sought out the shadows. I remember taking a deep and unusual joy in hiding under the big curtains and in the dark corners of the house." This childhood preference for the dim and murky gloom—when scaring and getting scared offered giddy delights—remained, for Redon, an adult pleasure, and became a way of injecting ambiguity into his work. In focusing on shadow and darkness, Redon, until the 1890s, worked almost exclusively in charcoal, exploiting its fundamental qualities—the evanescent powder, the crystallized shadows—to create monstrous and fantastic subjects. In these *noirs*, a term that Redon adopted to foreground their essential blackness, medium is at the very core of their mystery: in their strange hybridity, these vaguely human, part animal and vegetable, almost repellent creatures are as indeterminate as charcoal's own nebulous surfaces. In *Dream Polyp* (1891), for example, Redon stretches black

further than seems possible, creating astounding variations through the type of charcoal he selects (available in a range of colors and degrees of hardness) and the ways he chose to use it (from bearing down with the stick's point to turning it on its side, from wiping the medium with his hand or a rag to using a stump to pound the crystals down).

Viewers have long debated the nature and origins of these not-quite-human creatures. Recent critics, for example, point out that Redon's knowledge of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), his visits to Paris's Muséum d'histoire naturelle, and his attendance at lectures at the Ecole de médecine prove that polyps, chimeras, floating heads, cyclopes, and genderless figures are meditations on evolution and the beginnings of human life. Though such bodily ambiguity may threaten our sense of self, it also demonstrates nature's very strength. Paul Gauguin, one of Redon's earliest admirers, once explained, "I do not see why it is said that Odilon Redon paints monsters. They are imaginary beings. He is a dreamer, an imaginative spirit.... Of course animals that we are not used to seeing look like monsters, but this is because we tend to recognize as true and normal only what is customary.... Nature has infinite mysteries, and imaginative power. It is continuously varying its offerings."

*Black is the most essential color....
It is the agent of the spirit
much more than the splendid color
of the palette or of the prism.*



Dream Polyp. 1891. Various charcoals and black chalk, with erasing, stumping, and incising, on pale pink wove paper altered to a golden tone, 19 × 14" (48.3 × 35.6 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Straus, 1973

Lithography

Printmaking, and particularly lithography, provided Redon with one of the most fertile arenas through which to transmit the mysterious visions that crowded his imagination. Redon was first exposed to printmaking in 1865, but it was not until 1878, when he learned the technique of lithographic transfer, that the artist became a truly committed printmaker. Transfer lithography allowed Redon to draw on a piece of paper (which offered more flexibility, since the artist could make mistakes), which would then transfer the image onto the lithographic stone. Initially, Redon took up lithography as a means of reproducing (and thus widely distributing) his charcoal drawings, but soon he was making prints on their own. Moreover, with improved skill, he began to use the transfer drawing only as a starting point for images that he worked and reworked on the stone, improvising freely with the lithographic crayon: enriching the blacks, bringing forth texture, and using a scraper to uncover passages of luminous white.

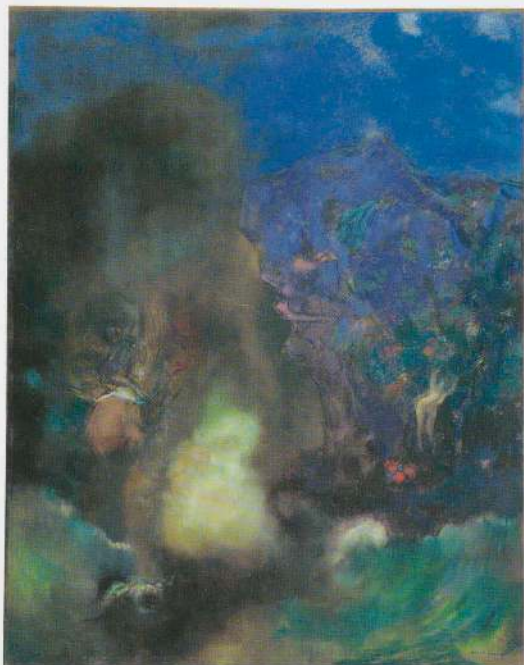
Nearly two-thirds of Redon's lithographs were created for albums or portfolios. And while many of Redon's sources were specific texts or authors (including Edgar Allan Poe, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire), his portfolios do not illustrate nor present a linear narrative but instead offer evocative and multiple ways of reading. The portfolio format suited Redon's creative needs and aspirations: it complemented his literary interests and ideals by providing a serial structure through which to treat various aspects of a single theme, and it allowed him to circulate his prints in groups, like small exhibitions.

Homage to Goya (1885), for example, presents a series of lonely and pensive beings described by titles that form a kind of prose poem. While the subjects range from the fantastical (*The MARSH FLOWER*, *OVERLEAF*) to the naturalistic (*Upon Waking*), each image conveys a sense of existential melancholy in the face of the basic mystery of life. For the three series (1888, 1889, 1896) devoted to Gustave Flaubert's novel *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, Redon draws on a repertoire of familiar motifs: dolorous faces, rocky, barren landscapes and hollow trees, embryonic or amoebic forms, spectral apparitions, hybrid creatures, and placid profiles. By incorporating so many of his own established themes, Redon effectively fused, even usurped, Flaubert's imagination into his own.

All my prints... were nothing but the fruit of curious, attentive, anxious, and passionate analysis; of what power of expression could be contained in a greasy lithograph crayon, with the aid of paper and stone.



Anthony: What Is the Point of All This? The Devil: There Is No Point! Plate XVIII from the portfolio *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. 1896. Lithograph on chine appliqué, comp.: 12 1/4 x 9 7/8" (31.1 x 25.1 cm). Publisher: Ambroise Vollard, Paris. Printer: Blanchard, Paris. Edition: 50. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1940



Roger and Angelica. c. 1910. Pastel, with wiping, stumping, and incising, on paper, mounted on canvas, $36\frac{1}{4} \times 28\frac{3}{4}$ " (92.7 × 73 cm). Lillie P. Bliss Collection, 1934

Color

By the turn of the century, Redon had abandoned his *noirs* and lithographs for the luminous color of pastel and oil paint. Some say this transformation resulted from the achievement of long-awaited success and financial stability, along with a happy family life; others argue that he had simply pushed black as far as it could go. Though in color many of his themes and subject matter remain the same as in his *noirs*—he revisits the serpents of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1896) in *Green Death* (c. 1905) and *The Chariot of Apollo* (c. 1912, COVER), he recreates the black suns of his charcoals in oil paint, he re-presents his centaurs and eyeballs in pastel and watercolor—we also see him move toward abstraction. In *Underwater Vision* (c. 1910), for example, an enigmatic Neptune presides over an ocean landscape inhabited by seahorses, shells, and spiny swimmers. Neptune himself dissolves into the texture of the water; his robe may be the red of coral, but it is immaterial, liquefying before our eyes. Redon uses subtle shifts in color (blues and browns melting together) to suggest the simmering stew of sand and water, deploys white highlights to indicate the water's transparency as well as sunlight cutting through the depths, adds bright touches of color—magenta, orange, periwinkle, green—on each of the creatures to make them simultaneously singular and part of the sea from which they will emerge or into which they will degenerate. Similarly, *Roger and Angelica* (c. 1910) demonstrates Redon's remarkable ability to employ pastel in the creation of abstract atmosphere: swirling, powdered pigment becomes breath, wind, water, mist.

Redon does add a new subject when he turns to color: floral still lifes. As is true of all his work, nature may be the root, but vivid color and spatial ambiguity result in a strangeness as fantastic as any work of the imagination.

With pastel I have recovered the hope of giving my dreams greater plasticity.... Colors contain a joy which relaxes me; besides, they sway me toward something different and new.



Underwater Vision. c. 1910. Oil on canvas, $36\frac{1}{4} \times 29\frac{1}{4}$ " (93.3 × 74.3 cm). Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection, 2000



Vase of Flowers. c. 1912-14. Pastel with graphite on pink (now gray-tan) wove paper, 28 7/8 x 21 1/4" (73 x 53.7 cm). William S. Paley Collection, 1954

MoMAudio SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS

Take a closer look at Odilon Redon's paintings, prints, and drawings. Curators Jodi Hauptman and Starr Figura discuss Redon's diverse techniques and materials as well as his exploration of nature, music, and literature. MoMA Audio is also available for download at www.moma.org/audio.

MoMAudio is offered free of charge, courtesy of Bloomberg.

Bloomberg L.P.

COVER: *The Chariot of Apollo*. c. 1912. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 29 1/2" (99.7 x 74.9 cm). Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection, 2000

BROCHURE © 2005 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Publication

Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon

JODI HAUPTMAN

Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon presents the full range of Redon's achievements through the unparalleled collection of The Museum of Modern Art. With essays on the artist's aesthetic strategies, the meanings of his monsters, and his accomplishments as a printmaker, as well as over 100 color plates and a full catalogue of the Museum's collection of his work, this volume provides a view of the issues at stake in Redon's cultural world, explores the beginnings of modernism, and illuminates the hold the artist's fantastic vision has had on the art of the twentieth century and today.

9.25 x 11"; 256 pages; 142 color and 160 duotone ill.
702. Hardcover \$55.00, members \$49.50

Public Programs

The following programs will be held in conjunction with *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*.

Decadence: Redon and Fin de Siècle Poetry and Music

Saturday, December 3, 2:00–4:00 P.M., Titus Theater 2

In celebration of Odilon Redon and the milieu that inspired his work, poets and performers read Decadent and Symbolist literature by Redon's contemporaries, such as Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, J.-K. Huysmans, and Edgar Allan Poe. Juilliard students perform music from the period by Ernest Chausson and Gabriel Fauré, among others. Readers include **Richard Howard**, poet and Professor of Writing, School of the Arts, Columbia University; **Mary Jo Bang**, poet and Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Program at Washington University, Saint Louis; and **Bill T. Jones**, Artistic Director, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

Tickets are free but required, and can be picked up at the Information Desk in the Main Lobby of the Museum, and at the Film and Media Desk. Tickets are also available online at www.ticketweb.com.

An infrared sound amplification system is available for all programs held in Titus 1 and Titus 2 Theaters.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures

December 12 & 15*, 12:30–1:15 P.M., Education classroom B

Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon

Tricia Paik, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings

On December 15, sign language interpretation is provided. FM headsets and neck loops for sound amplification are available for all lunch lectures.

Tickets are \$5, \$3 for members, students, and seniors, and are available at the Information Desk in the Main Lobby of the Museum, and at the Film and Media Desk. Space is limited.

Web Site

The Web site www.MoMA.org/redon offers an in-depth exploration of selected works from the exhibition, focusing on themes found in the artist's oeuvre: Monsters, Metamorphosis, Tales.

The publication accompanying the exhibition is made possible by The Ian Woodner Family Collection. Additional funding is provided by Forbes.com.