

BEYOND THE VISIBLE SHOWCASES THE MYSTERIOUS AND ATMOSPHERIC WORKS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY ARTIST ODILON REDON

Exhibition Presents the Full Range of Redon's Artistic Achievements and Highlights a Significant Donation of Works from The Ian Woodner Family Collection

Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon

Special Exhibitions Gallery, third floor

October 30, 2005–January 23, 2006

NEW YORK, October 25, 2005— *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* explores the career of Odilon Redon (1840–1916), an artist who emerged in France in the late nineteenth century. Redon, who is perhaps best known for his vibrant flower still lifes made late in his career, also produced a significant body of work that embraced dream and fantasy, creating mysterious atmospheres, fantastic monsters, and hybrid creatures. His career can be roughly divided into work made before and after about 1900. *Beyond the Visible* addresses both halves: in the first, the artist explores the limits of blackness through varieties of black charcoal, black chalk, and black pastel; in the second, he turns to spectacular color, using the bright hues of oil paint, pastel, and watercolor. The exhibition presents more than 130 works that show the full range of the artist's achievements, including *noirs* (as Redon called his charcoal drawings), luminous pastels, richly textured paintings, and dramatically shaded lithographs, all of which feature Redon's unique pictorial vocabulary of monstrous beings and his interpretations of literary, biblical, and mythological subjects. A window onto the beginnings of modernism, *Beyond the Visible* also reveals the hold the artist's vision has had on art of the twentieth century and today. The exhibition, organized by Jodi Hauptman, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art, is on view in the special exhibitions gallery on the third floor of the Museum from October 30, 2005, through January 23, 2006.

Beyond the Visible highlights a gift of more than 100 paintings, pastels, watercolors, drawings, prints, and illustrated books to MoMA that was made in 2000 by The Ian Woodner Family Collection, most of which are on view at MoMA for the first time. The gift increased the Museum's Redon holdings to almost 300 in total, and MoMA now has the most significant body of Redon's work outside France.

In addition to exploring Redon's aesthetic of the imagination—the visualization of subjects that only live in the mind—this exhibition illuminates Redon's role within a broader and extraordinarily productive cultural milieu in and around Paris in the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, focusing on the artist's links to writers and poets, specifically those who identified with Symbolism and Decadence. The interest in the fantastic, the cultivation of the

dream, the exploration of the supernatural, mystical, and occult, and the fascination with the workings of the mind—all rooted in Romanticism—were crucial features of both these movements. Transforming the natural world into dark visions and bizarre fantasies, Redon established his own pictorial vocabulary: smiling spiders, winged floating heads, disembodied eyeballs, and primeval organisms. “Redon’s unique aesthetic binds elements of observed reality to strange and wondrous fantasies,” says Ms. Hauptman. “Redon demonstrates the possibility of observation and imagination, perception and dream, scrutiny and thought. Vision for Redon is a kind of envisioning, a means by which artist and viewer can see beyond nature, beyond reality, beyond the visible.”

Redon was the son of a French entrepreneur and an American mother from Louisiana. As a youth he was unable to attend school because of poor health and he spent his early years alone in the care of an uncle on the family’s estate in France. As a teenager, he achieved little success in his academic pursuits, failing his architecture exams and having difficulty with his studies in painting and sculpture. He began to flourish when he found like-minded teachers: Romantic painter Stanislas Gorin; botanist Armand Clavaud; and lithographer Rodolphe Bresdin.

In the early part of his career in the late 1880s, Redon focused on his *noirs* and lithographs, confining himself to a palette of blacks and depicting monstrous beings that reveal his interest in evolution as well as a variety of scientific disciplines including microbiology, osteology, anthropology, and teratology (the study of monsters and mutants). Related to such explorations, metamorphosis became a recurring theme in Redon’s works. For example, we see polyps on the verge of becoming human (*Dream Polyp*, c. 1885), shape-shifting hybrids (*Then there appeared a singular being having the head of a man and the body of a fish*, 1888), and plants becoming humans (*The Eye Flower*, 1883). Redon blended the real and the fantastic to give his monsters an emotional life, as seen in his smiling cyclops and spiders (*The misshapen polyp floated on these shores, a sort of smiling and hideous cyclops*, 1883, and *Spider*, 1887), pensive part-humans (*Imaginary Figure*, c. 1881, and *The Convict*, 1881), and an anxious egg (*The Egg*, 1885). About his monsters, Redon said, “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.”

Many of Redon’s works are inspired by nineteenth-century literature. *The Teeth* (1883) was prompted by Edgar Allan Poe’s story *Berenice* (1835), in which the narrator becomes obsessed with his fiancée’s teeth. In this *noir*, Redon uses different types of charcoal and black chalk to conjure the dark atmosphere of a library. Rather than referring to a particular moment in the story, Redon instead evokes the mood of the horrifying tale and places the viewer in the position of the tormented narrator.

Redon’s achievements as a printmaker are also highlighted, notably his interest in the portfolio form, examples of which are shown in their entirety, highlighting the artist’s exploration of a new kind of visual/textual story-telling. Nearly two-thirds of Redon’s lithographs were

created for albums or portfolios. Many of his sources were specific texts or authors, like Poe, Gustave Flaubert, and Charles Baudelaire. These portfolios do not generally illustrate a specific linear narrative but present the book or poem's atmosphere as Redon interprets it. Redon devoted three series (1888, 1889, 1896) to Flaubert's novel *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. In these portfolios, the artist draws on his familiar motifs: dolorous faces, barren landscapes, embryonic or amoebic forms, spectral apparitions, and hybrid creatures to visualize the story of Saint Anthony's ordeal. Another portfolio, *Homage to Goya* (1885), is not based on a literary source. It presents a series of lonely and pensive beings ranging from the fantastic (*The Marsh Flower*) to the naturalistic (*Upon Walking*).

By the turn of the century, Redon abandoned *noirs* and lithographs in favor of color. About this radical shift, Ms. Hauptman states, "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." Redon also began to concentrate on medium rather than narrative, using pastel to create otherworldly atmospheres. Taken with the powdery surface of pastel, he strove to create the same effect with oil paint, leeching out the oil and leaving a chalky pastel-like pigment. Maintaining his existing subject matter, Redon concentrated on medium and his work moved toward abstraction. For example, in the monumental pastel *Roger and Angelica* (c. 1910), loosely based on the Renaissance epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, Redon depicts the moment when Roger rescues Angelica from a dragon. Instead of emphasizing the narrative, Redon employs pastel to create an abstract atmosphere of swirling, powdered hues. These atmospheric effects, produced through dazzling melting color, create the work's high drama.

Likewise, in the painting *Underwater Vision* (c. 1910), the figure of Neptune presides over an underwater landscape inhabited by both recognizable and indeterminate creatures. Redon uses subtle shifts in color (blues and browns melting together) to suggest sand and water, and deploys white highlights to indicate the water's transparency as well as sunlight cutting through the depths. He also adds bright touches of color—magenta, orange, periwinkle, green—on each of the sea creatures to make them simultaneously singular and part of the sea from which they will emerge.

Once Redon turned to color, he began to make floral still lifes. As can be seen in *Wildflowers in a Long-Neck Vase* (before 1905), he painted these arrangements with vivid unnatural hues and gave them strange spatial ambiguities. These pictures are based on reality, yet they have otherworldly qualities. Like all of Redon's work, they link observation with imagination.

PUBLICATION:

The accompanying publication presents the scope of Redon's career through three essays: Ms. Hauptman examines on the artist's unique pictorial strategies; Bard College professor Marina van Zuylen explores the multiple meanings of Redon's monsters; and Starr Figura, Assistant Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at MoMA, focuses on his achievements in printmaking, particularly his attention to the portfolio form. Included are over 100 color plates and a full catalog

of every Redon work in the Museum's collection, including provenance, exhibition history, and survey of the literature. The book is published by The Museum of Modern Art and is sold in the MoMA Stores and on www.momastore.org. The book is available to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and through Thames & Hudson internationally. Price: \$55.00.

PROGRAMS:

On December 3, from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., there will be a multimedia program of literature and music from Redon's day. There will also be Brown Bag Lunch Lectures on December 12 and 15. See separate press release for more information.

ACOUSTIGUIDE:

A free Acoustiguide program features exhibition curator Jodi Hauptman and Starr Figura, Assistant Curator in MoMA's Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, discussing Redon's diverse techniques and materials as well as his exploration of nature, music, and literature. This tour, along with all the other MoMA Audio tours, is accessible on one listening device free of charge, courtesy of Bloomberg. See separate press release for more information.

WEB SITE:

The Web site, www.moma.org/redon, designed by Behavior Design, offers an in-depth exploration of three themes found in the artist's oeuvre: Monsters, Metamorphosis, and Tales. Full color images of works in the exhibition are accompanied by related writings by the artist, his contemporaries in the nineteenth century, and scholars from today, providing fascinating contexts for understanding his work.

SPONSORSHIP:

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

No. 102

Press Contact: pressoffice@moma.org