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In Heaven or Closed Eyes

CITATION

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, *'In Heaven or Closed Eyes'*, in *Odilon Redon and Andries Bonger: 36 works from the Van Gogh Museum collection*, Amsterdam 2022

5 *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*

Cat. 13

Cat. 13 Odilon Redon, *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*, 1889. Thinned oil (*peinture à l'essence*) on orange wove paper on cardboard, 45 × 35 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), 50500N1999

1 'Bought a painting [by] Odilon Redon, Woman with Aureole' ('Gekocht een schijf Odilon Redon Femme à l'Oreole'), Theo Van Gogh and Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, *Account Book*, 8 July 1889, p. 7, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum Archives, Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, b2205V1982. Although the frame looks Dutch as far as weight and material are concerned, the label on the backing is clearly that of the frame-maker Cluzel. Theo's account book reveals that he did indeed purchase a frame from Cluzel for the steep price of 40 francs. By way of comparison, Redon generally spent between 5 and 30 francs for a frame made by his regular frame-maker, Boyer, but those frames were less sturdy and of inferior quality; see Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, "'L'intérieur qui est l'image de votre pensée": Odilon Redon chez Andries Bongher', in Dario Gamboni and Merel van Tilberg (eds.), *'Sans adieu'. Andries Bongher – Odilon Redon, correspondance 1894–1916*, 11, Paris 2022, pp. 776–808, pp. 792–96.

2 The purchase of this icon of Symbolism puts into perspective the overly simplistic contrast between Theo as a champion of Naturalism in art and Bongher as a pioneer of Symbolism, a polarity that Bongher did in fact experience as such. See the general essay "'Communion with the chosen": Andries Bongher and Odilon Redon'.

3 In this case Theo used the 678 francs that had been left to Vincent by their father, but which Vincent had stubbornly refused to accept. Their sisters Wil and Lies (Elisabeth; 1859–1936) transferred this amount anyway, to pay for Vincent's upkeep in Arles. By investing it in art intended as stock in trade for the art dealership they dreamt of opening in the future, Theo was acting in his brother's interest as well.

4 René Boitelle, Klaas Jan van den Berg and Eva Goetz, 'A Technical Examination of Odilon Redon's Paintings from the Bongher Collection, Van Gogh

This painted figure with closed eyes and a halo is the first ambitious painting that Odilon Redon exhibited, presumably on the initiative of its new owner, Theo Van Gogh. Theo, who in the autumn of 1889 was working hard with the organizer Octave Maus to get the paintings of his brother Vincent displayed at the group show of Les XX in Brussels, offered to make available to the exhibition his newly acquired Redon, which was given pride of place as number 1 in the catalogue.

Redon's work was exhibited at Les XX at the beginning of 1890 under the title *Au ciel (In Heaven)*. While Redon was mainly known for his drawings and prints in sober black, these first cautious steps in colour alerted them to a new direction in his practice. Theo Van Gogh, who acquired more work by the artist for the art dealer Boussod, Valadon & Cie (formerly Goupil & Cie), had bought the painting for himself in July 1889 under the title *Femme à l'Oreole (Woman with a Halo)* and had it put in a heavy oak frame by the frame-maker to the avant-garde, Pierre Cluzel (fig. 5a).¹ The purchase can be thought of as both a declaration of love and a business investment.² Together with his brother Vincent, Theo dreamed of an existence as an independent art dealer, and he occasionally bought artworks for their private collection that could serve as starting capital.³

The bust of the woman with a halo was put on paper with thinned oil paint, which produced a flat, transparent and draughtsmanlike effect.⁴ The orange wove paper covered with a preparatory layer of cream-coloured paint shines through everywhere, and, together with the wispy lines and strokes, makes it seem as though the figure might vanish into thin air at any moment.⁵ The mysterious woman is, after all, *In Heaven*, as Redon himself called the work, and her halo emphasizes her immateriality. At the same time, there is something solid about her. All the orifices in her head (eyes, nose, mouth and ears) are smoothed over, so that she is hermetically sealed off from us. The purplish red points near both temples, as well as the lines projecting from her halo, might suggest the energy emanating from her inner world. The parapet, which displays an abstract landscape consisting of thin washes and a few spots of pigment, shows us something of the dream landscape in which she finds herself. This dream landscape is quite discoloured, however, as is the

Museum', *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art*, vol. 3 (2005), pp. 66–81, pp. 69 and 73. Additional observations made by René Boitelle, conservator of paintings, on 16 March 2021: 'All the brushstrokes in the painted version have remained, there are no clear traces of wet-in-wet and drips, nor is there any darkening of the ground, caused by an excess of binding medium, in the immediate proximity of brushstrokes. Neither the *frottis*-like

brushstrokes in the figure and background nor the contour lines and hatching became blurred after application, and seem to have dried without lustre soon after being applied. In conclusion, the dearth of analyses and lack of deeper insight into Redon's studio practice justifies the hypothesis that what we see here is *peinture à l'essence*, possibly in combination with other binding media.'

5 Boitelle, Van den Berg and Goetz 2005, p. 69.



Cat. 13 Odilon Redon, *In Heaven or Closed Eyes*



Fig. 5a Cat. 13 in its original frame by Cluzel

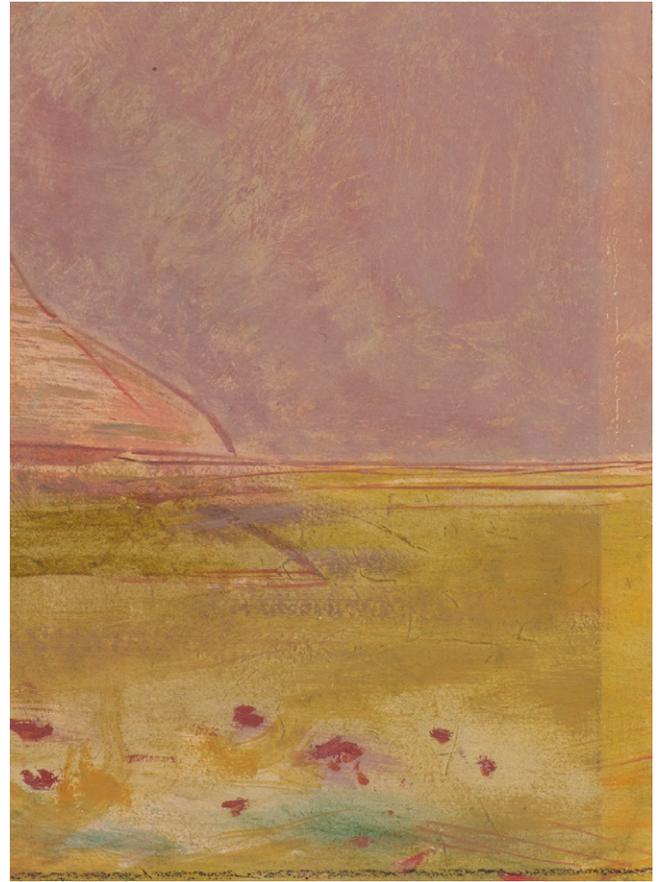


Fig. 5b Detail of cat. 13

6 Observations made by René Boitelle, conservator of paintings, on 16 March 2021: 'Along the edges, which were long covered by a frame and were therefore not exposed to daylight or artificial light, it can be seen that the background was originally light purple-pink, whereas the part that was exposed to light now looks slightly more blue, and that the foreground was brighter yellow where it is now greener. It seems that, with the exception of the edges that were covered by the frame, the work was once covered with a finishing coat that gave the whole surface a somewhat glossier appearance. The extent to which this layer is discoloured, thus contributing to the discoloration observed, is still uncertain.'

7 Letter from Odilon Redon to Octave Maus, December 1889: 'Van Gogh, whom I met, will send a

background. The paint layers that were covered by the frame and therefore less exposed to light reveal that the purplish pink of the background now looks more blue, and the yellow of the foreground more green (fig. 5b).⁶

The paintings that Redon had made before 1889 served as personal studies, which he did not show in public. That the decision to exhibit *In Heaven* was an unexpected move, even in his own eyes, is apparent from the many exclamation marks placed by Redon in his announcement to Maus that Van Gogh would be submitting a painting by him.⁷ The work must have been well received in Brussels, for shortly afterwards the co-organizer and art lover Edmond Picard, writing in the magazine *L'Art moderne*, reminded his readers of the painting and announced the appearance of a lithographic version in an edition of fifty, 'for you Aesthetes, just for you'.⁸ In this lithograph of 1890, the halo has disappeared and the landscape is less ethereal (fig. 5c). These changes possibly explain Redon's new title, *Closed Eyes*. That same year Redon also made a new painted version of the work of approximately the same format as *In Heaven*. In this painting, conceived in cool blue tones, the

painting (!!!)' ('Van Gogh, que j'ai [sic] vu, enverra une peinture (!!!)'), quoted in Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, p. 286. See also Fred Leeman, *André Bongher, kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

8 *Yeux clos* (M107). See Edmond Picard, 'Yeux clos',

L'Art Moderne, vol. 10 (28 December 1890), p. 412: 'a painting at the exhibition of Les XX, [...] here she is in lithography, with this title: CLOSED EYES. In fifty impressions, for you Aesthetes, just for you' ('un tableau à l'exposition des XX, [...] la voici en lithographie, avec cette désignation: YEUX CLOS. En cinquante exemplaires, pour vous Esthètes, pour vous seuls').



Fig. 5c Odilon Redon, *Closed Eyes (Yeux clos)*, 1890. Lithograph on chine collé on wove paper, 56.5 × 40.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), po880N1996

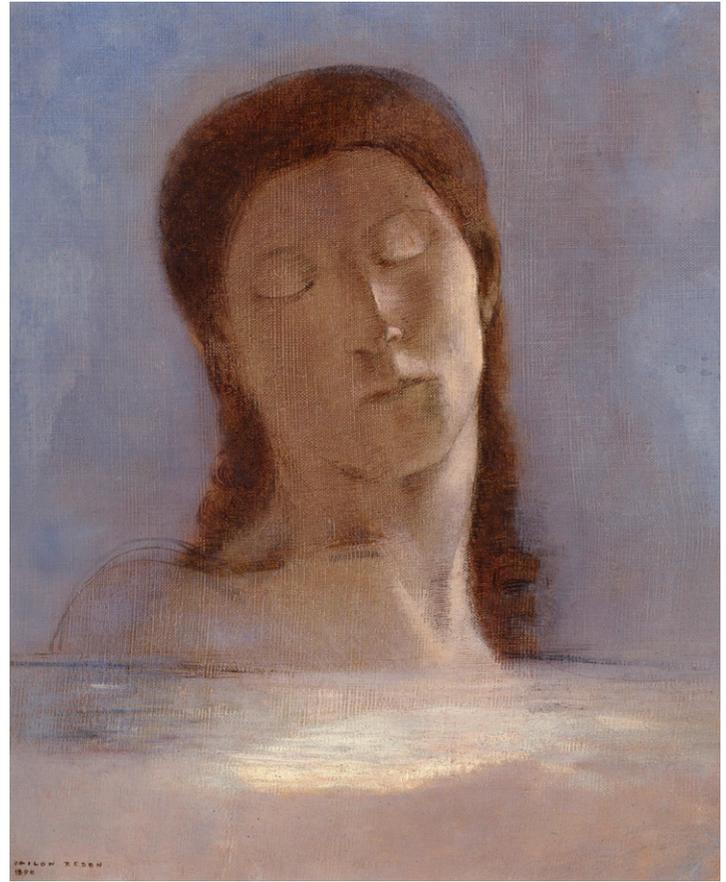


Fig. 5d Odilon Redon, *Closed Eyes*, 1890. Oil on cardboard, 44 × 36 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

figure seems to rise like an island out of the water, in which the light is reflected (fig. 5d).⁹ The lithograph was shown at various exhibitions of contemporary prints, and soon another fifty impressions were pulled to meet the demand from collectors.¹⁰ Léonce Bénédite (1859–1925), himself a connoisseur of prints, was prompted by the iconic lithograph to acquire, in 1904, the painted version of 1890 for the Musée du Luxembourg, and thus Redon joined the official canon of French art.¹¹ The great demand among collectors for this particular motif continued in the following years, as did Redon's personal fascination for the subject, and until 1913 he therefore went on painting new variants of it, producing a total of twelve.¹²

The female figure with closed eyes has been interpreted by critics, then and now, in various ways. The contemporary authors Edmond Picard and Jules Destrée saw the print – and thereby indirectly the painting – as the antithesis of the typology of the woman as a threatening *femme fatale*. Instead of stirring up unhealthy passions with a seductive glance and voluptuous body, this chaste vision aroused noble thoughts and feelings of purity.¹³ The halo in the painting heightens the suggestion

⁹ This work, too, is discoloured. As early as 1904, Redon had written to Bongier that in those twelve years it had aged 'a bit'. Letter 114 (5 February 1904), no location.

¹⁰ The lithograph *Yeux clos (Closed Eyes)* was displayed at the *Peintres-graveurs* exhibition of 1891 (no. 272), the *Exposition generale de la lithographie* of 1891 (no. 967) and the large retrospective exhibition

of the *Centenaire de la lithographie* of 1895, as well as at the monographic overviews of Redon's oeuvre at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in 1894 and at the Salon d'automne of 1904.

¹¹ In 1903 Redon had already been awarded the Legion of Honour. He was happy about this official purchase, but complained to Bongier that in order to ensure the 'necessary zone of isolation' that his work

required, at least two works should have been purchased. Letter 114: 'Pour l'instant il n'y aura que cette pièce, et ce n'est pas assez pour créer, autour d'elle, la zone d'isolement.'

¹² See 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), nos. 467–78. See Kevin Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace after 1900', 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. 258–80, p. 278, with regard to the enormous popularity of the motif and Redon's reaction to this.

¹³ See Picard 1890; Jules Destrée, *L'œuvre lithographique de Odilon Redon: Catalogue descriptif*, Brussels 1891, p. 74. See also Fred Leeman, *Confidenties van een kunstenaar*, Amsterdam 1994, p. 227.

Fig. 5e Odilon Redon, *Closed Eyes* (Camille Redon), 1890. Graphite, black chalk and lithographic chalk on transfer paper, 35.7 × 26.1 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Ian Woodner Family Collection



of a holy virgin. Moreover, Destrée praised this female figure 'of the most highly vaporious ideality' for her inner life full of 'brave and pure thoughts with just a touch of melancholy'.¹⁴ He therefore saw the woman as a mother figure, as a calm and more mature woman.

It is interesting in this respect to note that Picard thought he recognized the woman as a likeness of Redon's wife, Camille, who had just given birth to their son, Arī (1889–1972).¹⁵ And although Redon played down the idea, he admitted that those close to him sometimes turned up in his work, unintentionally, because he hesitated to use professional models. He wrote to Picard: 'An overly laudatory article, surprising me about everything you saw in it and all that I unconsciously put into this androgyne's head. You saw the features of Madame Redon in it! Perhaps rightly so. Hardly ever using live models, it happens that I capture the faces surrounding me; but never for the monsters.'¹⁶ However, Redon's modelling of the woman after his wife seems to have been deliberate in this case. There exists a preparatory study on tracing paper of exactly the same format as the lithograph with her likeness in reverse and lithographic chalk on the back, to transfer the composition to the lithographic stone (fig. 5e).¹⁷ The discovery of this portrait study with the same dimensions as the lithograph suggests the possibility that Redon's print preceded the painting and that this study might therefore have been made before July 1889. This would mean the painted versions were made after the print, a working method that Redon used more often in the years to come.

In any case, all three – the study, the lithograph and the painted version in the Musée d'Orsay – share a number of interesting features with the version in the Van Gogh Museum. The lines of the shoulder and neck correspond, as do the jaw

¹⁴ Destrée 1891, p. 74: 'de vaillantes et chastes pensées y sommeillent, des pensées déjà graves'.

¹⁵ Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers saw this connection with a birth even more strongly in the second version of *Closed Eyes* and go further in their interpretation of the motif; see Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, 'In the Public Eye, 1879–1889', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95*, pp. 120–74, p. 171: 'Depicting a monumental haloed female, her eyes closed, emerging from the sea, Redon transformed the theme of evolution from primal waters into a celebration of fecundity, alluding both to the birth of Venus and to the miracle of the Nativity.'

¹⁶ Letter from Odilon Redon to Edmond Picard, 10 January 1891; see also Fred Leeman, cat. 51 in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, p. 228: 'Article trop élogieux, et me donnant la surprise de tout ce que vous y avez vu et de tout ce que j'y ai mis si inconsciemment dans cette tête d'androgyne. Vous y avez vu les traits de Madame Redon! Peut-être bien. Usant peu du modèle vivant, il m'arrive de refléter les visages que m'entourent; pourtant point pour les monstres.'

¹⁷ *Closed Eyes* (W 467) and Leeman, in Madrid 2012, p. 229.

lines of the face. But all the other contours, such as those of the head and the hairstyle, are different in the Amsterdam version, in which the eyes, nose and mouth are turned more to the right. It is this less frontal view that makes the head in the Van Gogh Museum version look narrower.¹⁸ Thus it is possible that Redon used the preparatory drawing or another, earlier study or sketch of his wife as the basis of both the lithograph and our painting. Unfortunately, the genesis and chronology of the various versions made in different media cannot be determined precisely, but it is clear that Redon worked with a kind of template based on the features of Madame Redon.

To deflect from Picard's identification of the woman as his wife, Redon thus described the image as 'this androgyne's head'.¹⁹ This designation shows that Redon shared the fascination, common in his day, for the androgyne. Symbolist authors saw this third manifestation of the sexes as a spiritual ideal, in which the fragmented qualities of man and woman merged to form the perfect whole.²⁰ In their view, the androgyne could therefore serve to bind reality and the higher realm. Interestingly, a male model for this figure has also been suggested: Roseline Bacou was the first to point out the similarity of the pose of Redon's female figure to that of Michelangelo's (1475–1564) *Dying Slave*, which he could have admired in the Musée du Louvre (fig. 5f).²¹

In his art, Redon always strove for higher ideals, of which this androgynous figure in heaven was one of the most powerful examples, in the eyes of Redon's admirers.²² By closing her eyes to the visible world, the dream figure communes with her soul, thus uniting her earthly nature and the divine ideal.²³ In the oeuvre catalogue, the authors noted: 'There is one lacuna in the oeuvre of Odilon Redon: the gaze.'²⁴ Indeed, almost all of Redon's figures avoid our gaze, and *Closed Eyes* does this most emphatically. The many versions of the work, as well as the numerous publications about Redon that feature it on their cover, indicate that *Closed Eyes* has become the icon of Redon's artistry. The figure's purity and apparently rich inner life also inspired meditative calmness and lofty thoughts in the minds of the collectors of Redon's art. 'Art that makes one think! Art that makes one dream!' exclaimed Picard with great admiration.²⁵

Andries Bonger saw both the lithograph and the painting, which had meanwhile been named *Closed Eyes* after the print, at the Redon exhibition that he had helped to organize at the Haagsche Kunstkring in 1894. The works must have made a deep impression on him, because in the following years he actively hunted for both the print (meanwhile sold out) and a painted version of the composition.²⁶ Redon, who was helping Bonger in his search, alerted him on 18 March 1907 to the existence of a small, greyish version of the motif – admittedly 'inferior to the one in Holland and the one in the Musée du Luxembourg' – that had come onto the market via Jules Destrée.²⁷ Bonger decided not to buy it, but Redon's suggestion had fuelled his desire for the version 'in Holland'. Bonger wrote to the artist, saying that he still had an indelible memory of the work but did not know where it was.²⁸

¹⁸ With thanks to the observations made by René Boitelle, conservator of paintings, and a tracing he made of the lithograph, which was placed on the painting on 16 March 2021.

¹⁹ Letter from Odilon Redon to Edmond Picard, 10 January 1891, quoted in Madrid 2012, p. 198: 'cette tête d'androgyne'; Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, pp. 215–36, p. 228.

²⁰ Madrid 2012, p. 198; see also Joséphin Peladan, *L'Androgyne*, Paris 1891.

²¹ Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie), 1956–57, p. 68.

²² Redon wrote in 1869, quoted in Madrid 2012, p. 198; Leeman, in *Chicago/Amsterdam/London* 1994–95, p. 228: 'The beautiful and the good are in heaven. Science is on earth; it crawls' ('Le beau et bien sont au ciel. La science est sur la terre; elle rampe').

²³ Redon probably took these ideas from the diaries of Maurice de Guérin (1810–1839), whom he greatly admired; see Barbara Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon*



Fig. 5f Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, 1513–15. Marble. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Redon, University Park (Pennsylvania) 2005, p. 140: 'The true knowing eye for Guérin was "the interior eye of the soul". [...] when our eyes are closed we can establish contact between nature and the soul.'

²⁴ Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 1 (1992), p. 173: 'Il y a une absence dans l'oeuvre d'Odilon Redon: le regard.'

²⁵ Picard 1890, p. 412.

²⁶ In 1903, after searching for a long time, Bonger finally acquired the lithograph through Camille Redon for 100 francs. Letter 111 (24 November 1903), Amsterdam.

²⁷ Letter 188 (18 March 1907), no location: 'Elle est bien inférieure (c'est une sorte de réplique variante) à celle qui est en Hollande, et celle du Musée du Luxembourg.'

28 Letter 189 (31 March 1907), Amsterdam.

29 After a period of relative coolness between these friends and brothers-in-law, a period of intensive contact began in 1889; see Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, *Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger* (Cahier Vincent; 7), Leo Jansen, Jan Robert and Han van Krimpen (eds.), Amsterdam/Zwolle 1999. Regarding their personal acquaintanceship, see Fred Leeman *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009 and Fred Leeman, 'Que voyait Andries Bonger en Redon', in Garboni and Van Tilburg 2022, 11, pp. 676–718.

30 Letter 189 (31 March 1907), Amsterdam: 'très-malade'.

31 Letter 197 (2 August 1907), Freiburg-in-Brisgau: 'Madame Bonger, dont nous avons reçu quelque nouvelle: vous avez acquis une sanguine des *Yeux-clos* me dites-vous: c'est une peinture légère (sur papier). Je ne l'ai pas vue depuis longtemps. Vous m'avez toujours dit qu'elle était bien. Vous me serez toujours fidèle.'

PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Theo Van Gogh, Paris for 200 French francs, 8 July 1889; after his death on 25 January 1891 transferred by his widow Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum, to his sister Willemien Van Gogh, Leiden; sold by Willemien Van Gogh, probably through Joan van Houten, to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, between March and August 1907; 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; donated by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1999.

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— Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, January 1890, no. 80, published as CD-ROM in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais)/Montpellier (Musée Fabre), Paris 2011. Referred to as 'Au ciel, peinture 200'.

— Odilon Redon, letter to Octave Maus, whereabouts unknown (December 1889).

— Edmond Picard, 'Yeux clos', *L'Art Moderne*, vol. 10 (28 December 1890), p. 412.

— Edmond Picard, letter to Odilon Redon, Brussels (5 January 1891), published in Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, p. 164.

— Odilon Redon, letter to Edmond Picard, Paris (10 January 1891).

— Odilon Redon, letter 188 to Andries Bonger, Paris (18 March 1907).

— Andries Bonger, letter 189 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (31 March 1907).

— Conrad Kikkert, 'Schilderkunst: Odilon Redon', *De Telegraaf* (17 May 1907).

— Odilon Redon, letter 197 to Andries Bonger, Freiburg im Breisgau (2 August 1907).

It stands to reason that Bonger had seen the work back in 1889 at his friend Theo's in Paris, which was possibly his first introduction to Redon's oeuvre and in any case preceded his making the artist's personal acquaintance on 8 November 1891 through their mutual friend Emile Bernard.²⁹ After Theo's death on 25 January 1891, the work was inherited by his sister Wil (Willemien; 1862–1941), but she had meanwhile been admitted to a psychiatric institution and Mrs Van Gogh, their mother (Anna; 1819–1907), was 'severely ill'.³⁰ Shortly after Redon's above-mentioned communication of March 1907, Bonger must have actively pursued the painting by approaching the family, because in August of that year, Redon wrote that Bonger's wife, Annie, had told him about the recent purchase of 'the sanguine of *Closed Eyes* [...]. It is a light painting (on paper). I haven't seen it for a long time. You always told me that it was good. You have always been so faithful to me.'³¹ Bonger must therefore have acquired the work sometime between March and August 1907 from Wil's possessions. In 1999 Bonger's heirs donated the painting via the Dutch state to the Van Gogh Museum, and thus the work has come full circle. Thanks to Theo Van Gogh's exceptionally early appreciation of Redon and to Andries Bonger's loyalty to the artist, as well as the generous gesture of Bonger's heirs, this key piece in Redon's oeuvre is still part of the Dutch national heritage.

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— Johan Cohen Gosschalk, 'Odilon Redon', *Elseviers geïllustreerd maand-schrift*, vol. 19 (August 1909), pp. 84–85.

— Johan Cohen Gosschalk, 'Odilon Redon', *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, vol. 46 (December 1910), p. 69.

— Odilon Redon, letter 262 to Andries Bonger, Bièvres (15 September 1911).

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— Fred Leeman, 'Redon's Spiritualism and the Rise of Mysticism', 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), Chicago 1994–95, pp. 225–27 and p. 407, n. 44.

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