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## *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya*

### CITATION

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, 'At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya', in *Odilon Redon and Andries Bonger: 36 works from the Van Gogh Museum collection*, Amsterdam 2022

Cat. 6 Odilon Redon, *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya*, 1878. Various charcoals with fixative application on cream wove paper, 44.9 × 33.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Vincent van Gogh Foundation, d1048V1996

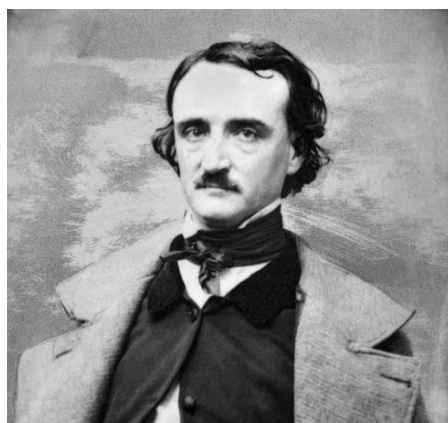


Fig. 3a Edgar Allan Poe

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## *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya*

### Cat. 6

*At the Window* is one of the most unsettling works in the Van Gogh Museum's collection. It is definitely among the 'classic' Redons, in so far as the dark charcoal drawing is firmly in keeping with the Frenchman's reputation as the artist of monsters and nightmares.<sup>1</sup> He made several drawings around 1878 of 'thinkers' wrestling with malign forces, be they interior or exterior,<sup>2</sup> probably under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe. Translations of and allusions to Poe's stories by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and Joris-Karl Huysmans had turned the American horror writer into a cult figure by then. He was a hero of the literary and artistic circles that constituted French Symbolism, to whom his bizarre and grotesque tales represented the unprecedented riches that could be obtained by blending the worlds of reality and fantasy. This drawing seems to refer to the countless stories of aristocrats in their remote country houses who find themselves tormented by the darkest reaches of their subconscious minds. Hallucinations and terrifying effects loom up beyond the window of a darkened interior. A man with wide-spaced eyes holding a skinny finger to his lips stares through the glass. His refined appearance might be a reference to Poe,<sup>3</sup> who shared the hollow gaze, the collar-length hair with a receding hairline, the suit and even the moustache (fig. 3a). The face is not dissimilar to that of Redon either, which lends the drawing the possible dimension of a troubled self-portrait.<sup>4</sup> All sorts of associations are evoked, meanwhile, by the enigmatic silencing gesture. The space itself is likewise open to multiple interpretations: is the sad-eyed figure standing outside looking in, sending a chill down the viewer's spine, or is the pale face the reflection of someone on the inside, confronted by a frightening reflection of himself and his subconscious?

Multiple layers and ambiguity of this kind were precisely what Redon was seeking to achieve in his *noirs*. The dark drawings he produced between around 1870 and 1890 showed him to be a master of suggestion, his clouds of powdered charcoal acting as an imaginative smokescreen. Redon wrote: 'My drawings inspire and do not define themselves. They determine nothing. They place us just as music does in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate.'<sup>5</sup> With a little imagination, a malevolent creature can be made out in the darkness outside the window along with the silhouette of a row of houses (fig. 3b).<sup>6</sup> The lines are ambiguous, but

*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. 353–77, p. 365. Gamboni defined 'potential images' as 'those established – in the realm of the virtual – by the artist but dependent on the beholder for their realization, and their property is to make the beholder aware – either painfully or enjoyably – of the active,

subjective nature of seeing'. Referring specifically to Redon, he wrote: 'Many other drawings confirm that this effect of half-hiding and half-revealing to which Redon's favourite working materials particularly lent themselves, was accepted, exploited and at times actually sought after by him.' Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002, pp. 18, 71.

1 Redon is described in such terms in virtually all contemporary reviews; see, for example, Emile Hennequin, 'Beaux-Arts. Odilon Redon', in *La Revue littéraire et artistique* (4 March 1882); Jan Veth, 'Odilon Redon', *De Nieuwe Gids*, vol. 2 (1886–87), pp. 64–72; Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains*, Paris 1889.

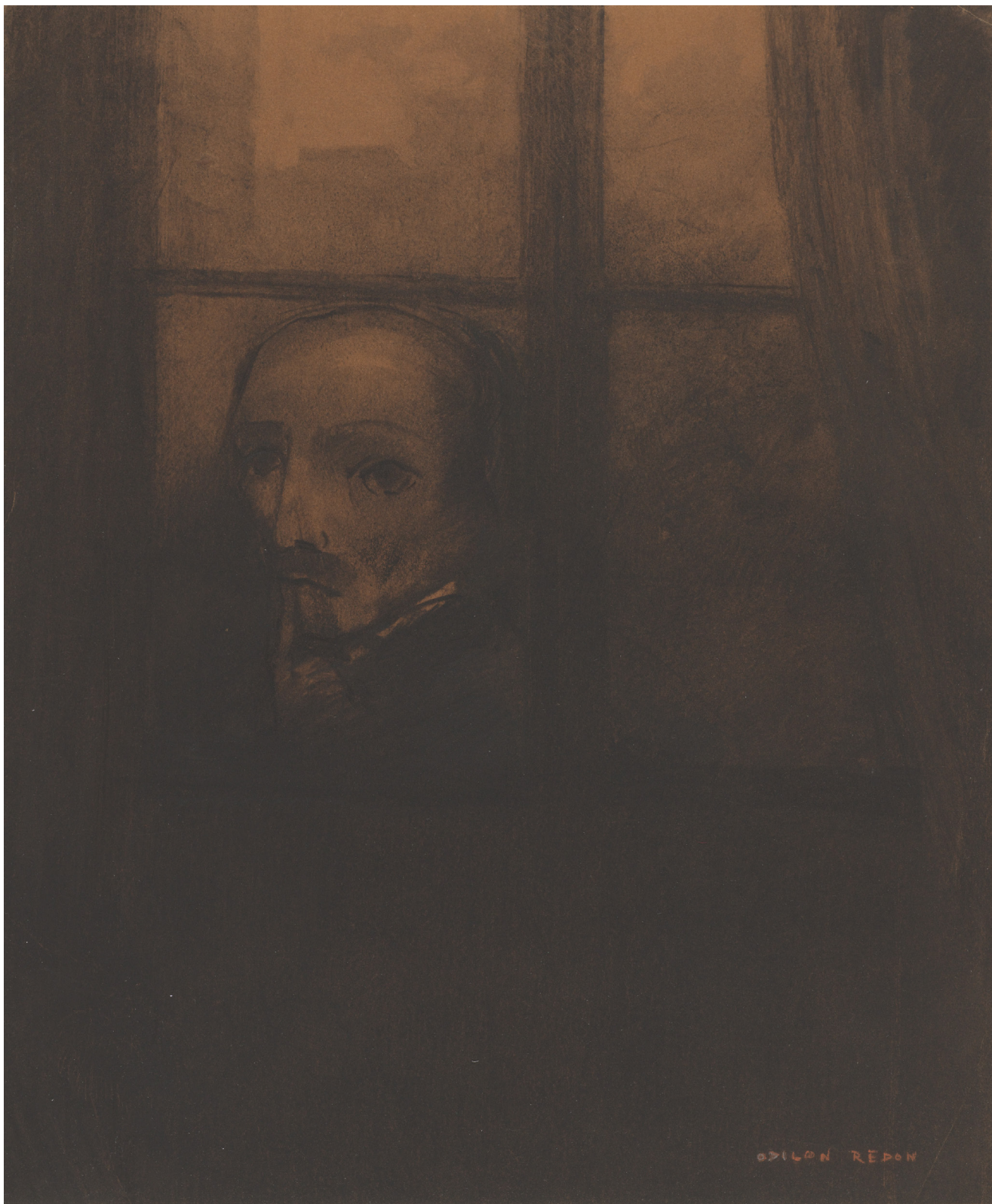
2 See Alec Wildenstein, Agnès Lacau St Guily and Marie-Christine Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, 4 vols., Paris 1992–98, vol. 2 (1994): *Mythes et légendes*, nos. W1064–1069.

3 Fred Leeman, in Rodolphe Rapetti et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, p. 121, no. 20. Redon's interest in Poe, which he shared with his clientele, was pursued in greater depth in the 1882 print series *À Edgar Poe*.

4 Margret Stuffmann, 'Self-Portraits?', *Odilon Redon: As in a Dream*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, p. 191.

5 Redon (1895), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 22. ('Mes dessins inspirent et ne se définissent pas. Ils ne déterminent rien. Ils nous placent, ainsi que la musique, dans le monde ambigu de l'indéterminé.')

6 Regarding Redon's *pentimenti*, see Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Douglas W. Druick et al. (eds.), *Odilon*



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Fig. 3b Detail of cat. 6

Fig. 3c Odilon Redon, *Le rêve s'achève par la mort*, from the print series *Le Juré*, 1887. Lithograph in black on chine collé on wove paper, 23.8 × 18.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, on loan from the Netherlands Art Property Collection, consisting of works recovered from Germany after World War II and held in trust by the Dutch State, p2751-008N2012



whatever they are meant to be, the artist placed them here deliberately.<sup>7</sup> Redon left it up to the viewer to discover elements like this in his drawings. Whether or not they actually did so depended on their sensitivity 'and the aptitude of his [the viewer's] imagination to make things grow or shrink'.<sup>8</sup>

For his part, Redon suggested an affinity with the prints of Francisco Goya (1746–1828) by identifying the drawing in his account book as 'Dessin à la Goya "À la fenêtre"'.<sup>9</sup> The fascination with nightmares and the ability to blend visible reality with the fantastic in ominous scenes was indeed something that Redon shared with the Spanish artist as well as with Poe (fig. 3d).<sup>10</sup> In his novel of ideas, *A rebours*, Huysmans describes his protagonist Des Esseintes as: 'Overcome by an indefinable malaise at the sight of these drawings, the same sort of malaise he experienced when he looked at certain rather similar *Proverbs* by Goya; or read some of Edgar Allan Poe's stories, whose terrifying or hallucinating effects Odilon Redon seemed to have transposed into a different art'.<sup>11</sup> In a single sentence, the novelist succeeds in capturing the terrifying, hallucinatory visions in Redon's drawings, Goya's prints and Poe's stories. The drawing's first owner, the Belgian lawyer and author Edmond Picard, described the Redons in his collection using the term 'fantastique réel', which he had come across in Baudelaire's discussion of Goya's etchings, copies of which Picard also owned. According to Baudelaire, the works in question balance on the 'line of suture, the point of junction between the real and the fantastic [which] is impossible to grasp'.<sup>12</sup> Picard also forged a synthesis of the

of Goya's prints. See Paul Aron and Cécile Vanderpel-en-Diagre, 'L'Esthète collectionneur: Contenu et fonction de la collection d'Edmond Picard', 2013, <http://hdl.handle.net/2013/ULB-DIPOT:0ai:dipot.ulb.ac.be:2013/146448> (accessed 5 March 2022). See also the verse on Goya in Baudelaire's poem *Les phares* (*Les fleurs du mal*, VI): 'Goya, cauchemar plein de choses inconnu, / De fœtus qu'on fait cuire au milieu

des sabbats, / De vieilles au miroir et d'enfants toutes nues, / Pour tenter les démons ajustant bien leurs bas.' ('Goya, nightmare full of unknown things, / Of foetuses roasted in the midst of witches' sabbaths, / Of old women at the mirror and of nude children, / Tightening their hose to tempt the demons.' Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, William Aggeler (trans.), Fresno (California) 1954).

<sup>7</sup> Technical examinations carried out on 5 November 2018 by Harriet K. Stratis and Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho on the *noirs* and pastels by Odilon Redon in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Stratis describes them here as 'deliberately drawn marks'.

<sup>8</sup> Redon (1895), quoted in Gamboni 2002, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Odilon Redon, *Mellerio Redon Chronology* (MRC), 1878, no. 72, published in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 451.

<sup>10</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote a chapter on Redon's 'monsters', in which he linked the artist with Goya and Poe. See Huysmans 1889.

<sup>11</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A rebours*, Paris 1922, p. 82: 'Pris d'un indéfinissable malaise, devant ces dessins, comme devant certains *Proverbes* de Goya qu'ils rappelaient; comme au sortir aussi d'une lecture d'Edgar Poe dont Odilon Redon semblait avoir transposé, dans un art différent, les mirages d'hallucination et les effets de peur.' English translation: Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (1956), Robert Baldick (trans.), London 2003, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Larson describes how Charles Baudelaire employed this term in his essay on the Spanish artist. See Barbara Larson, 'The Morbid and the Fantastic', in *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon*, University Park (Pennsylvania) 2005, p. 46. Picard also owned several



Fig. 3d Francisco Goya, *Disparate General*, no. 9 from the series *Proverbios*, 1815–23. Etching and aquatint on paper, 24.5 x 35.2 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds

tangible and the fantastic in his own work, prompting him to ask Redon in 1887 to illustrate an edition of his play *Le Juré*,<sup>13</sup> in which a jury member is tormented by his conscience after a man is sentenced to death. In 1889 Redon sold to Picard *At the Window* or *Drawing in the Manner of Goya* as a 'preparatory drawing' for the lithographs to illustrate the text. *Le Juré* does not, however, include a related composition and while the drawing does fit the macabre and hallucinatory passages of Picard's text, it dates from an earlier period (fig. 3c).<sup>14</sup>

Picard delivered a lecture surrounded by twelve charcoal drawings from his collection at Redon's first survey exhibition in the Netherlands at the Haagsche Kunstkring in 1894. The novice collector Andries Bongers was among those present. He later told the newspaper the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* how Picard 'could speak about all those strange things in a low voice, there, in that little room in which Redon's art haunted the beholders in the gathering darkness.'<sup>15</sup> Bongers remembered the drawings and bought several of them when Picard's collection came up for auction in Brussels ten years later. *At the Window* was sold under the title 'Le penseur au vitrail'.<sup>16</sup> With little competition from other collectors (Bongers expressed his indignation at the lack of interest in a letter to Redon), he was able to procure five important charcoal drawings to plug a gap in his by then impressive

Edmond Picard, auction catalogue (26 March 1904), no. 94, p. 58. Picard only applied the title 'Penseur' to this specific drawing at a later date. It is listed in the catalogue as: 'Le Penseur au vitrail [Thinker with stained glass]. A questioning face, pensive and enigmatic, appears behind the stained glass of a window in a tragic chiaroscuro. Drawing. Signed on the right: Odilon Redon 39 x 33 cm.' ('Le Penseur au vitrail. Derrière le vitrail d'une fenêtre, dans un clair-obscur tragique, apparaît, songeur et énigmatique, une tête interrogative. Dessin. Signé à droite: Odilon Redon. 39 x 33 cm.'). Remarkably enough, the dimensions do not fit cat. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Edmond Picard, *Le Juré. Monodrame en cinq actes: Sept interprétations originales d'Odilon Redon*, Brussels 1887.

<sup>14</sup> 7 December 1889, 'two preparatory drawings *Le juré*' by Edmond Picard. See Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: Premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 1889, nos. 68–69, 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), 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, introduction to 'Odilon Redon. Autobiographie', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (4 July 1894).

<sup>16</sup> Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères, Brussels, *Catalogue de la collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M.*



17 Other purchases he made at the 'Vente Picard' besides *The Thinker* were *The Girl in the Woods* (W634, entry 2, cat. 5), *Spring* (W239), *The Masque of the Red Death* (W1171) and *The Thinker* (W1068). Bonger was surprised that the other 'amateurs' at the auction all focused on the work of Félicien Rops (1833–1898), while ignoring Redon. In letter 116 (4 April 1904), Amsterdam, he wrote: 'Alerted at the last moment by a local dealer, I was, happily, able to attend the sale of Edmond Picard's collection, which included several important drawings of yours. I was able to acquire: The Masque of the Red Death, Isolde, the two "Penseurs au vitrail" [Thinkers at the Window], Spring and some beautiful lithographic impressions I didn't know about: L'œil fantastique [The Fantastical Eye] (unique impression on white, 2nd plate), Woman with Snake (6th plate), Chimaera (1st state, 4th plate). The elements in the sale were very disparate and, I must say, I simply cannot comprehend the spirit in which they were collected. We're told that Picard was ruined by losing a number of court cases, but if he sold the collection in an attempt to get himself back on his feet, he must have been grievously disappointed. I was delighted to be able to rescue you from this shipwreck; I seriously believe that, if I had not been there, you would not have been sold at all. The taste of the people around me was a complete mystery. Two shabby drawings by Rops attained high prices, surely because they were so platitudinous, as did landscapes by a Belgian painter, Baron, no doubt for reasons of patriotism, while your admirable drawings went unnoticed.' ('Averti au dernier moment par un marchand d'ici, j'ai, heureusement, pu assister à la vente de la collection d'Edmond Picard, où se trouvaient plusieurs dessins importants de vous. J'ai pu acquérir: le Masque de la mort rouge, Yseult, les deux 'penseurs au vitrail', le Printemps et quelques belles épreuves de lithographies que je ne connaissais pas: l'œil fantastique (unique épreuve sur blanc, 2ème planche), la femme au serpent (6ème planche), la chimère (1er état, 4ème planche). Cette vente présentait des éléments bien hétérogènes et j'avoue ne rien comprendre dans quel esprit ils ont été rassemblés. On disait Picard ruiné par la perte de

collection.<sup>17</sup> Early *noirs* were hard to come by on the market, as Redon had shifted to working entirely in colour. Such drawings as were still in his possession he held on to for himself, while the rest had previously gone to collectors and dealers.<sup>18</sup>

Although Bonger was more than satisfied with his purchases at the sale, he was less pleased with Picard's choice of frames, going so far as to call them 'hideous', which is understandable given Bonger's preference for Boyer's understated frames.<sup>19</sup> Picard had the frames made specially for his public presentation of *Le Juré* at Les XX in 1887, at which the audience was surrounded by his Redon *noirs* on easels. The dramatic frames were intended to heighten the desired theatrical effect. He asked the 'artiste-encadreur' Lembrée in Brussels to come up with designs that would create the 'harmonie nécessaire' between work and frame.<sup>20</sup> Lembrée's label can be seen on the back of the work (fig. 3f). The frame is roughly decorated with beaten metal that, with a little imagination, suggests chains and window bars. The costly, artisanal surround provides the complex view with an additional window (fig. 3e).

plusieurs procès; mais s'il a vendu sa collection pour se remettre à flot, il a dû avoir une grande désillusion. J'ai été ravi d'avoir pu vous recueillir parmi ce naufrage; je crois bien que sans moi, vous n'auriez pas été vendu du tout. Le goût des gens autour de moi: un mystère; deux méchants dessins de Rops, sans doute à cause de leur platitude, des paysages d'un peintre belge, Baron, par patriotisme sans doute, ont fait des prix élevés, tandis que vos admirables dessins ont passé inaperçus.'). In letter 119 (21 August 1904), Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, Redon complimented Bonger on his purchase and was curious about these works, which had long since passed from his hands: 'I have none of your letters here but I remember the pleasure given me by your last one, when you were telling me you were present for the Picard sale, and that a few drawings from it had entered your gallery. I was very glad of your concern and felt, as a friend, touched that you took the trouble to go to Brussels. But I think you got some fine things there; and now I too know where I can see them again. I seem to remember that the Masque of the Red Death is a good solid charcoal.' ('Je n'ai point vos lettres ici, mais je me souviens du plaisir que me causa la dernière, alors que vous m'y contiez votre présence à la vente Picard, dont quelques dessins allèrent dans votre galerie. Je fus bien heureux de votre souci, amicalement touché de votre empressement à vous trouver à Bruxelles. Mais je crois que vous avez eu quelques bonnes pièces; de sorte que je sais où je les pourrai revoir aussi. Le masque de la mort rouge est, il me semble, un bon et solide fusain.').

18 Kevin Sharp, 'Redon and the Marketplace before 1900', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 237–56, pp. 242–44. Redon was no longer working in charcoal and was thus reluctant to sell his early drawings. He carefully managed any such sales, allowing only a few select collectors to purchase certain items.

19 Letter 116 (4 August 1904), Amsterdam. He announced that he would have his purchases reframed straight away by his regular framer, Boyer. However, this occurred for neither *At the Window* nor *The Masque of the Red Death*, the frame of which is decorated with bones and droplets of blood. See essay, "'Communion with the Chosen': Andries Bonger and Odilon Redon", box text 'Bonger's handwritten notes on Redon', fig. d.

20 Letter from Edmond Picard to Odilon Redon (3 February 1887), published in Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, pp. 150–51: 'I have just consulted an artist-framer to give them the surround they deserve before being shown on the 19th of this month at the exhibition of Les XX, the date on which I will give a public reading of *Le Juré*. I have every reason to believe that the relationship between the drawings and the frames will be achieved with the necessary harmony.' ('Je viens de conférer avec un artiste encadreur pour leur donner l'enveloppe qu'ils méritent afin de paraître le 19 de ce mois à l'exposition des XX, le jour où je lirai le *Juré* en public. Tout me fait croire que le rapport entre les dessins et les cadres sera établi avec l'harmonie nécessaire.')



Fig. 3e Cat. 6 in its original frame by Lembrée

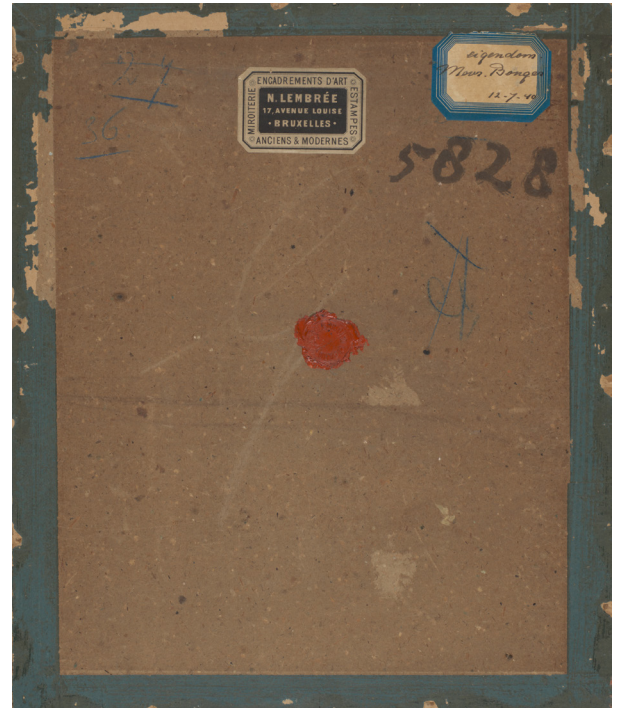


Fig. 3f Backboard of the frame for cat. 6



Fig. 3g Odilon Redon, *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1883. Charcoal and black chalk on paper, 43.7 × 35.8 cm (with original matting and frame). Museum of Modern Art, New York, The John S. Newberry Collection



Fig. 3h Theo Van Rysselberghe, Poster for the gallery and framer N. Lembrée, 1897. Colour lithograph on wove paper, 69.5 × 51 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds



## PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Edmond Picard, Brussels, 7 December 1889; consigned by Edmond Picard to auction Brussels, Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères (Collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard), lot 94 (*Le Penseur au vitrail*), purchased by Andries Bongers, Amsterdam for 115 French francs, 26 March 1904; 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 Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 1996; since then on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

## LITERATURE

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- Edmond Picard, letter to Odilon Redon, Brussels (3 February 1887), published in Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, pp. 150–51.
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- Klaus Berger, *Odilon Redon: Phantasie und Farbe*, Cologne 1964, no. 588, p. 226.
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- Sjraar van Heugten *et al.* (eds.), *Vincent Van Gogh Drawing Exhibition: Van Gogh and his Time, from the Van Gogh Museum and the H.W. Mesdag Museum*, exh. cat., Tokyo (Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art), 2000, pp. 154–55, 193.
- Margret Stufmann, ‘Self-Portraits?’, in *Odilon Redon: As in a Dream*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 191–99.
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- Christopher Lloyd, *Impressionism: Pastels, Watercolors, Drawings*, exh. cat., Milwaukee (Milwaukee Art Museum)/Vienna (Albertina), 2011–12, p. 134.
- Fred Leeman, in Rodolphe Rapetti *et al.* (eds.), *Odilon Redon: 1840–1916*, exh. cat., Madrid (Fundación Mapfre), 2012, pp. 62–63, 120–21, no. 20.

## EXHIBITIONS

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- Amsterdam, Larensche Kunsthandel, *Catalogus der tentoonstelling van werken van Odilon Redon (alles particulier bezit)*, 7–14 May 1909, no. 47 or 49, *Penseur à la fenêtre*.
- Brussels, Galerie Georges Giroux, *Rétrospective Odilon Redon*, 18 December 1920–8 January 1921, nos. 81–87, *Dessins pour illustrer Le juré*.
- Paris, Musée des arts décoratifs, *Odilon Redon: Exposition rétrospective de son œuvre*, March 1926, no. 180, *Penseur à la fenêtre*.
- Arnhem, Vereniging voor beeldende kunst, *Tentoonstelling van Odilon Redon: Schilderijen, tekeningen, litho’s*, 26 March–4 April 1948, no. 7, *Homme à la fenêtre*.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bongers en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 40, *Man achter een venster*.
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- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon en Emile Bernard: Meesterwerken uit de collectie van Andries Bongers*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 153, *De denker bij het raam, tekening in de trant van Goya*.
- Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum, 14 October 2011–8 January 2012/Vienna, Albertina, 10 February–13 March 2012, *Impressionism: Pastels, Watercolors, Drawings, Thinker at the Window*.
- Madrid, Fundación Mapfre, *Odilon Redon*, 11 February–29 April 2012, no. 20, *Dibujo a la manera de Goya/En la ventana*.

Fig. 3i Detail of cat. 6



