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## *The Girl in the Woods*

### CITATION

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

Cat. 5 Odilon Redon, *The Girl in the Woods*, c. 1870–72. Various charcoals with fixative on cream wove paper, 39.5 × 30.4 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), d1056N1996

## 2

### *The Girl in the Woods*

#### Cat. 5

This early drawing by Odilon Redon shows a woman in a veil and long gown, the train of which she has folded over her forearm, walking towards us out of an atmospheric forest. The landscape is carefully conceived: structured around a mid-tone and then built up from numerous layers of charcoal. The leaves in the undergrowth have been rubbed out with a wad of gum so that they light up in the foreground. The figure of the young woman was largely done in the same way, 'freed' from the charcoal with gum, so that her pale shape contrasts with the dark surroundings. Her gaze is averted. The fact that we cannot see her feet beneath the long gown lends an unearthly touch to her appearance.

In the early decades of his career, Redon worked almost exclusively with black materials, which had a profound meaning for him: his identification of charcoal drawings like *The Girl in the Woods* as *noirs* emphasized how the importance of the black 'should be respected. Nothing prostitutes it. It does not please the eye and does not awaken sensuality. It is the agent of the spirit much more than the splendid colour of the palette or of the prism.'<sup>1</sup>

Despite the rhetorical emphasis Redon's writings place on the benefits of using black over coloured drawing materials, there is still a surprising degree of colour and warmth in this charcoal drawing, which is actually more golden brown than black. While it is true that Redon worked with a wide range of grey tones and black charcoal, he brought colour into his work by choosing tinted paper as a support and applying a self-prepared fixative with a wide brush to the back of the sheet and with an atomizer on the front, so that each layer of charcoal would adhere to the paper. Redon himself played down the *noir* concept somewhat: 'for the charcoal drawings which I made before them and since, were always made on paper tinted with pink or yellow, sometimes blue, thus showing my tendency or premise for colour in which I later found the utmost pleasure and which overwhelmed me with delight.'<sup>2</sup> The sheet that Redon used in this case might have been cream-coloured, but repeat applications of Canada balsam (resin) lent the work a golden-brown tone. He brushed a thick layer of the mixture onto the back of the sheet,<sup>3</sup> which the porosity of the paper allowed to soak through to the front. This not only fixed the loose particles of drawing material to the sheet, but within a few months also imbued the drawing with a dull gold sheen that steadily deepened over time to create an atmospheric patina.<sup>4</sup>

The drawing's matt-gold tone was further heightened by the choice of Redon and his frame-maker Jean-Marie Boyer in 1904 of a wide, light-gold mount and narrow bronzed frame, which must also have originally had a bright golden sheen (fig. 2a). Framed in this way, the drawing of the mysterious girl in a forest would have positively glowed on the wall. We can see it standing on the floor in a photograph of the Redon exhibition at Kunstzaal Reckers in 1907 (fig. 2b). A critic described it at

<sup>1</sup> Odilon Redon (1913), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 103: 'Il faut respecter le noir. Rien ne le prostitue. Il ne plaît pas aux yeux et n'éveille aucune sensualité. Il est agent de l'esprit bien plus que la belle couleur de la palette ou du prisme.'

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 129: 'car les dessins au fusain que je fis avant elles, et depuis, furent toujours exécutés sur des papiers teintés de rose, ou jaune, quelquefois bleu, donnant là ma tendance ou les prémisses de la couleur dans laquelle je devais plus tard me complaire et me laisser envahir de délectation.'

<sup>3</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. See also Harriet K. Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', 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. 353–77, p. 361; Michelle Sullivan and Nancy Yocco, 'Diversity and Complexity of Black Drawing Media: Four Case Studies', in Lee Hendrix (ed.), *Noir: The Romance of Black in 19th-Century French Drawings and Prints*, exh. cat., Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum), 2016, pp. 117–23, pp. 118–20.

<sup>4</sup> André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon: Les estampes – The Graphic Work: Catalogue raisonné* (1913), Alan Hyman (ed.), San Francisco 2001, p. xvii: 'Par un fixatif, mixture à lui particulière, il donne à ses dessins un fondu général comme doré sourdement, équivalant à cette patine d'ensemble que prennent en vieillissant les peintures de Rembrandt.'





Cat. 5 Odilon Redon, *The Girl in the Woods*





Fig. 2b Interior of Kunstzaal Reckers, Rotterdam, during the Redon exhibition of 1907. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Andries Bongers Archive, S. Crommelin Bequest

Fig. 2a Cat. 5 in its original matting and frame by Boyer

5 A. v. V., 'Kunsthandel Reckers. Odilon Redon', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (25 May 1907): 'Een geheel ander soort teekening, een der tonige en der meest ons nabij staande is zeker wel het Wandelende meisje in het bosch. [...] Hoe subliem valt het licht op het figuurtje en op de plooiën van het gewaad en hoe teer broos raken deze het gras, hoe uiterst sober is het en hoe geweldig rijk aan stemming en warm van kleur; hoe prachtig afgesloten door den brede gouden band van het karton.'

6 In the end, the work does not seem to have featured in the exhibition. It does not appear under this name in the 1890 catalogue. See Octave Maus, *Les XX, Bruxelles: Catalogue des dix expositions annuelles*, Brussels 1981, p. 208.

7 Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou (eds.), *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren ... à Odilon Redon*, Paris 1960, pp. 161–62: 'Maus and I have already chosen from among my drawings which might go to Les XX. We opted for [...] a young, standing woman, surrounded by foliage, which we have called: *Isolde*.' ('Nous avons déjà, Maus et moi, choisi, parmi mes dessins, ceux qui pourraient aller aux XX. Nous avons pris [...] une jeune femme debout dans les feuillages, que nous nommons: *Isolde*.')

the time as: 'An entirely different kind of drawing, one of the most tonal and most to our taste, is undoubtedly the Girl Wandering in the Forest. [...] How sublimely the light falls on her small figure and on the drapery of her robe, and how delicately these brush the grass, how very sober it is and how immensely rich in atmosphere and warm in colour, how beautifully bounded by the wide golden border of the mount.'<sup>5</sup>

We note that the critic made no attempt at an iconographic interpretation of the drawing, although this had occurred when the work was supposed to have been shown at the 1890 exhibition of Les XX.<sup>6</sup> Edmond Picard, its Belgian owner at the time, renamed the drawing in consultation with the organizer Octave Maus (1856–1919) as *Yseult*, or *Isolde*, after the medieval legend and the tale of Tristan and Isolde's doomed love, which Richard Wagner (1813–1883) had made into an opera in 1865.<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that besides being lawyers, both men were also Symbolist authors and so attached particular importance to a narrative element in Redon's work.<sup>8</sup> While the artist maintained close ties with the literary world, he nevertheless resisted an explicit explanation of this drawing. He might have placed the mysteriously illuminated figure of a young woman in her pale robe and veil in the dark forest to evoke associations with a distant Gaulish past or with medieval legends, but he preferred not to reveal his immediate sources of inspiration.<sup>9</sup> The elasticity of his figures and their interpretation is apparent from the related drawing

8 Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 286–87.

9 In André Bongers, *kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum), Fred Leeman wrote: 'The female type with her long robe and veil is that of the

priestess, the druidess who lived in the forests of ancient Gaul. Redon frequently expressed his interest for his country's semi-mythical past, as in another *noir* from Bongers's collection *Sous-bois avec deux personnages* ['Undergrowth with two figures'], which dates from the same period'.



Fig. 2c Odilon Redon, *Marguerite hantée*, 1872. Charcoal, black chalk, heightened with gouache, 37.3 × 27.9 cm. Location unknown



Fig. 2d Odilon Redon, *Hantise*, 1894. Lithograph in black on chine collé on wove paper, 36.6 × 22.9 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), po875N1996

*Marguerite hantée* of 1872, in which what appears to be the same young woman, now turned sidewise, is assailed by the demonic Faust (fig. 3c).<sup>10</sup> Redon returned to the motif in 1894 in the lithograph *Hantise*, which Bongers also owned and is now in the Van Gogh Museum collection.<sup>11</sup> In this instance, Faust has been replaced with more personal demons springing directly from the artist's imagination. The landscape has also disappeared, leaving behind an empty, bare and dark space (fig. 2d).

It is clear from Redon's reply to Maus that Isolde did not feature in his repertoire, as he states drily that he has no memory of the drawing 'that you refer to as Isolde'.<sup>12</sup> The artist's response did not stop Picard describing the drawing in downright narrative terms in the catalogue for the sale of his collection in 1904: 'Dressed in white robes, concerned and alert, Isolde awaits Tristan in a mystical forest.'<sup>13</sup>

Andries Bongers made the most of this sale, taking the opportunity to supplement his collection at a stroke with several important charcoal drawings by Redon, which were difficult to get hold of by that time.<sup>14</sup> *The Girl in the Woods* had been

vous appelez Isolde, dont je ne me souviens plus [...].')

<sup>13</sup> Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères, Brussels, *Catalogue de la collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard*, auction catalogue (26 March 1904), no. 93, p. 58, Yseult.

<sup>14</sup> His other purchases at the 'Vente Picard' besides *The Girl in the Woods* were *At the Window or Drawing in the Manner of Goya* (W1064, see entry 3, cat. 6), *Spring* (W239), *The Masque of the Red Death* (W1171) and *The Thinker* (W1068).

<sup>10</sup> 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*, no. 947, p. 100; Mellerio (1913) 2001, no. 128.

<sup>11</sup> Leeman 2007.

<sup>12</sup> From Odilon Redon to Octave Maus, 3 January 1890, quoted in Gamboni 1989, pp. 286–87: 'It has been agreed with our friend Picard that we will reserve the drawing that you refer to as Isolde, which I do not recall [...].' ('Il est entendu avec notre ami Picard que nous réservons le dessin que



scratched by a shard of glass in a broken frame,<sup>15</sup> and when Bonger wrote about the damage, Redon agreed to retouch the drawing. The artist told the collector that his sensibility had changed so much in the ‘some thirty years’ that had elapsed since he had made it that his intervention had respected the drawing ‘as if it were by some other being’.<sup>16</sup>

Redon’s reference to ‘some thirty years’ has since prompted a strict dating to 1874.<sup>17</sup> The use of materials and technique are, however, entirely in keeping with those of his early landscapes in the 1860s, which – combined with the related drawing of 1872 – renders a slightly earlier dating between 1870 and 1872 more plausible.<sup>18</sup> This would make it a first translation into charcoal of the women in gowns placed in desolate landscapes that populate his somewhat earlier pencil drawings.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Letter 116 (4 April 1904), Amsterdam: ‘Two of your drawings have unfortunately suffered. Spring and Isolde are both scratched, I would guess from the glass being broken. I hope you will allow me to bring them to you next time I come to Paris, and that this damage can be repaired. And Boyer can make me new frames worthy of it all. I should like to be able to tell you when I am coming but am, alas, overwhelmed with work and find it very difficult to get away. I have a great craving to see your most recent works, those you were recently telling me about. (‘Deux de vos dessins ont malheureusement souffert. Le printemps et Yseult portent une égratignure, on dirait d’une vitre cassée. J’espère que vous voudrez bien me permettre de vous les apporter à ma prochaine venue à Paris et que ces dégâts sont réparables. Et Boyer me fera pour le tout un encadrement digne. Je voudrais pouvoir fixer l’époque de mon voyage, mais, malheureusement, je suis surchargé de travail et m’absente bien difficilement. J’aurais le plus vif désir

de voir vos derniers travaux, dont vous me parliez récemment.’) The apparent correction Redon made could remarkably enough not be traced by the Van Gogh Museum’s Conservator of works on paper, Nico Lingbeek, in 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 122 (28 November 1904), Paris: ‘I shall [...] take him the drawing of the young girl in the woods. I put in a tiny, discreet retouch, which taught me a lot. Since this drawing dates from some thirty years ago, when I set the pencil-point on it, I felt, even in the slightest line, how much one’s state of sensibility changes and is modified. I had to respect the thing as if it were by some other being. But I don’t think I have spoiled it.’ (‘Je vais [...] lui porter le dessin de la jeune fille sous bois. J’y ai fait une petite retouche discrète,

d’où j’en retire tout enseignement. Ce dessin datant d’une trentaine d’années, j’ai senti, en y appliquant le crayon, même dans un trait le plus menu, combien l’état de la sensibilité se modifie et change. J’ai dû respecter la chose comme si elle était d’un autre être. Mais je ne crois pas l’avoir abîmé.’)

<sup>17</sup> Amsterdam 2009, no. 150, p. 129; Leeman 2007.

<sup>18</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. Redon did not record the drawing either among his sales to Picard or in his list of *noirs*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 59–62, 64, 65, 67, 70, 71; Leeman 2007.

#### PROVENANCE

Sold by the artist, Paris to Edmond Picard, Brussels, before 12 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 93 (*Yseult*), purchased by Andries Bongers, Amsterdam, 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 State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

#### LITERATURE

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- Odilon Redon, letter to Octave Maus, Paris (3 January 1890).
- Galerie J. & A. Le Roy, frères, Brussels, *Catalogue de la collection de tableaux anciens et modernes, aquarelles, dessins, eaux-fortes, lithographies de M. Edmond Picard*, auction catalogue (26 March 1904), no. 93, p. 58. Referred to as 'Yseult. Dans une forêt mystique, Yseult en vêtements blancs, inquiète et attentive, attend Tristan. Dessin. Signé Odilon Redon'.
- Andries Bongers, letter 116 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (4 April 1904).
- Odilon Redon, letter 119 to Andries Bongers, Saint-Georges-de-Didonne (21 August 1904).
- Odilon Redon, letter 122 to Andries Bongers, Paris (28 November 1904).
- Andries Bongers, letter 125 to Odilon Redon, Amsterdam (14 December 1904).
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- Cassandra Bosters, 'Van excentrieke dromer tot respectabel kunstenaar: Odilon Redon in de Nederlandse kunstkritiek, 1887–1916', *Jong Holland*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1994), pp. 40–41.
- Fred Leeman et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bongers Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009, p. 129.

#### EXHIBITIONS

- Rotterdam, Kunstzaal Reckers, *Exposition de peintures, dessins, lithographies par Odilon Redon*, May 1907, no. 34, *Iseult*.
- Amsterdam, Larensche Kunsthandel, *Catalogus der tentoonstelling van werken van Odilon Redon (alles particulier bezit)*, 7–14 May 1909, no. 58, *Iseult*.
- Arnhem, Vereniging voor beeldende kunst, *Tentoonstelling van Odilon Redon: Schilderijen, tekeningen, litho's*, 26 March–4 April 1948, no. 15, *Jeune fille au bois*.
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *André Bongers en zijn kunstenaarsvrienden: Redon, Bernard, Van Gogh*, 6 June–6 August 1972, no. 39, *Staande jonge vrouw in een bos*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De Bongers collectie: Werken van Odilon Redon en Emile Bernard*, 2 July–31 October 2004.
- Holte, Fondation Gl. Holtegaard Breda-Fonden, *Sjaelens malere: Den idealistiske symbolisme i Frankrig*, 5 September–6 November 2004, no. 76, *Ung kvinde i en skov*.
- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Bongers Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 150, *The Girl in the Wood*.