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The Boat

CITATION

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

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The Boat

Cat. 20

Cat. 20 Odilon Redon, *The Boat*, 1898. Pastel on blackish-brown wove paper, 44.2 × 28 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the Rembrandt Association, the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Culture), do809M1986

This enigmatic pastel has led to many far-reaching iconographic interpretations and identifications of the solitary, haloed figure, hidden in shadow, on the prow of a boat gliding through calm water towards a cave in the rocks. By way of comparison with the mysterious menhir – a tall upright stone that served in the Stone Age as a landmark for Druidic rituals and has sometimes been identified with a Gallic goddess – the female figure has been placed in France’s mythic past.¹ In the Christian tradition, too, various readings of the composition have been put forward, one possible motif being Christ in the storm on the Sea of Galilee. But the interpretation that has found the largest following in the literature is Sven Sandström’s explanation of the image as Mary, the ‘vierge nimbée’ (haloed virgin), who as Stella Maris (Star of the Sea) protects seafarers from the doom foreboded by St Elmo’s fire.² Other authors argue for a mystical meaning gleaned from a book written in Odilon Redon’s own time, Edouard Schuré’s *Les grands initiés* of 1889, in which a neophyte thinks he sees the boat of Isis sailing through the atmosphere to the realm of the stars.³ Redon’s composition displays a striking number of similarities to one of the most famous paintings of his own day, Arnold Böcklin’s *Isle of the Dead* (fig. 8a), in which a deceased figure, clad entirely in white, is conveyed at dusk by rowing boat across a placid Styx to the rocky realm of the dead.⁴ Redon’s composition was attributed with a more personal spiritual meaning by Fred Leeman, who interpreted Redon’s boats as ‘a metaphor for negotiating the perils of the unconscious’.⁵

And Redon himself? As usual, he refused to commit himself and simply recorded the pastel in his account book as ‘*La bargue*’.⁶ This evasive strategy was effective: Redon’s sources of inspiration, dreams, ideas and feelings with regard to this work are just as shrouded in mist as the female figure herself, so that the mystery of the work and the artist remain unfathomable and at the same time personally interpretable. Even so, Redon’s diary contains poetical musings about seafaring, with repetitions of the phrase ‘And the rhythm of the waves cradles the spirit like a gentle harmony’.⁷

In this pastel Redon used colour and tone to create a mystical musicality akin to that found in his text. The golden garland, which stands out brightly against the very dark passages, flutters over the sheet like a melody. Clouds of pure pigments of pastel flicker in the gloom. Redon lent the scene depth by choosing a sheet of blackish-brown wove paper as the support. The dark background emphasizes, moreover, the luminosity of the aureole and the golden beams.⁸ In the oeuvre catalogue, the dozens of mysterious marines Redon created are nicely summarized: ‘But in this marine theme, the essential theme in Redon’s oeuvre, the silhouettes are mostly nothing but a pretext for a subtle play of light and colour. The only thing that counts is the melancholic and luminous poetry that accompanies the initiatory

1 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. 3, *Fleurs et paysages* (1996), no. 1948, p. 349; Dominique Jarrassé, *Odilon Redon: Le rêve*, Paris 1996, p. 34.

2 Sven Sandström, *Le monde imaginaire d'Odilon Redon: Étude iconologique*, Lund 1955, pp. 165, 226; 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), 1994–95, pp. 215–36.

3 Edouard Schuré, *Les grands initiés*, Paris 1889, p. 152; Leeman, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 233.

4 Böcklin painted no fewer than five versions of this work between 1880 and 1886, and huge numbers of reproductions were in circulation. With thanks to my colleague Lisa Smit for this suggestion.

5 Leeman, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 233–35.

6 In 1913 he referred to the pastel in letter 295 (7 April 1913), no location, as ‘The golden prow’ (‘La proue d’or’).

7 Odilon Redon (1885), in *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, New York 1986, p. 79: ‘et le souffle de l’air et le rythme du flot bercent l’esprit comme une douce harmonie’.

8 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.



Cat. 20 Odilon Redon, *The Boat*



Fig. 8a Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*, 1883. Oil on panel, 80 × 150 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

voyage of the helmsman.⁹ That the figure and her story are not necessarily of more importance than the abstract play of colour and light is also apparent from the description that Redon added to the neutral title in his account book: 'Dark brown sky with purple and red clouds, to the left a haloed being on a boat. Garlands of gold at the prow of the boat, and over the water a kind of phosphorescent blue, like a will-o'-the-wisp'.¹⁰

The overpowering intensity of the colours transports viewers almost instantly to supernatural worlds. In this respect, too, the work differs in essence from the *Isle of the Dead*, the mimetic colours of which make it feel more like an extension of the world as we know it. Redon came to his palette intuitively, just as his compositions emanated organically from his dialogue with the materials, while at the same time the colours enhance certain iconographic associations. Blue has traditionally been used for the robes of the Virgin Mary, but this is not necessarily the key to the meaning of the work.¹¹ Critics wrestled with Redon's semantic games. In 1894 Camille Mauclair admitted that he was perplexed by Redon's blue female profile in *The Golden Cell* (fig. 8b): 'But I do not understand the relationship between the colours and the composition and the subject. Why a blue here and a gold there? [...] There is some reason and I do not understand it.'¹²

And then there is another complicating factor: was the pastel originally as intensely blue as it is now? Attentive viewers may well have detected a discrepancy between Redon's description and the cobalt blue and pink hues that the sky and clouds later took on. In fact, the work is severely discoloured, as can be seen on the edge of the pastel that was shielded from the light by the frame (fig. 8c). Although Redon used brightly coloured pastel crayon, some of its aniline pigments discoloured as soon as they were exposed to light.¹³ Even though the artist eventually became aware of this problem, he must have been greatly shocked in 1912, when he saw his pastel again after fourteen years.¹⁴ Its owner, Andries Bonger, had sent the

⁹ Wildenstein Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 3 (1996), p. 326 and nos. 1931–59: 'Mais dans ce thème marin, thème essentiel de l'oeuvre de Redon, les silhouettes ne sont le plus souvent que le prétexte à un subtil jeu de la lumière et de la couleur. Seule compte la poésie mélancolique et lumineuse qui accompagne le voyage initiatique du timonier'.

¹⁰ Odilon Redon, *Le livre de raison d'Odilon Redon: premier cahier*, Ms 42 821, 1898, no. 324: 'Ciel sombre brun avec nuages violet et rouge, à gauche un être auréolé sur une barque. Des gerbes d'or à la proue de la barque, et sur les eaux une sorte de fosforescence bleue, comme un feu-follet'.

¹¹ Dario Gamboni, "'Why a Blue Here and Gold There?'" – The Golden Cell: The Significance and Reception of Color in the Art of Odilon Redon', in Margret Stufmann et al. (eds.), *As in a Dream: Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle), 2007, pp. 123–32.

¹² Mauclair (1894), quoted in *ibid.*

¹³ Harriet Stratis, 'Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials', in Chicago/Amsterdam/London, 1994–95, pp. 354–77, p. 374.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

work to him for repair, but he was extremely hesitant to undertake such invasive treatment. As Redon wrote to Bonger: 'As to the pastel, that's another matter: I consider it respectfully and though it's already out of its frame, here beside me, I still haven't dared touch it. But I'll try hard not to spoil it.'¹⁵

Bonger subsequently urged Redon to send the pastel back as soon as possible, because the 'empty space' on the wall was becoming too much for him, and he was yearning to see the work again.¹⁶ He had managed to buy it in 1902 at the sale of Sara de Swart's collection, probably after admiring it at her home. In the catalogue it was described as 'Phantasmagoria: a haloed virgin on a blue background', from which it emerges that the pastel must have discoloured from purple to blue within a couple of years.¹⁷ Because of the change in title and colours, Redon could not imagine which pastel this was, even though he had presented it only four years earlier to his friend Sara.¹⁸ The Dutch sculptor was one of the earliest collectors of Redon's work, having bought her first drawing from him in 1892.¹⁹ She also organized the second large retrospective exhibition of Redon's work, in The Hague in 1894, shortly after his first exhibition at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris.²⁰ In 1902, when she was forced by financial difficulties to sell a few drawings from her collection, Bonger seized the opportunity. He bought four works, which he did not want to be 'touched by the hands of an indifferent person'.²¹ These words reveal the high regard in which Bonger held the work of his favourite artist and friend, and he could barely stand to see others handling it disrespectfully. The select group of Redon's devoted collectors shared a pride in their recognition and appreciation of

¹⁵ Letter 289 (19 November 1912), Paris.

¹⁶ Letters 281 (10 May 1912), Amsterdam, and 291 (15 December 1912), Amsterdam.

¹⁷ Letter 81 (8 June 1902), Amsterdam, and Frederik Muller & Cie, Amsterdam, *Tableaux modernes: Aquarelles: atelier – Jacob Maris, collection – J.M. Rodenberg et autres*, auction catalogue (11 March 1902), no. 243, n.p.: 'Phantasmagorie: une vierge nimbée sur fond bleu'.

¹⁸ Letter 80 (30 May 1902), Paris.

¹⁹ Jaap Versteegh, *Fatale kunst: Leven en werk van Sara de Swart (1861–1951)*, exh. cat., Rotterdam (Kunsthal Rotterdam), 2016, p. 82.

²⁰ The Hague, Haagsche Kunstkring, *Odilon Redon*, 20 May–1 July 1894.

²¹ Letter 81, *op. cit.*, note 17.

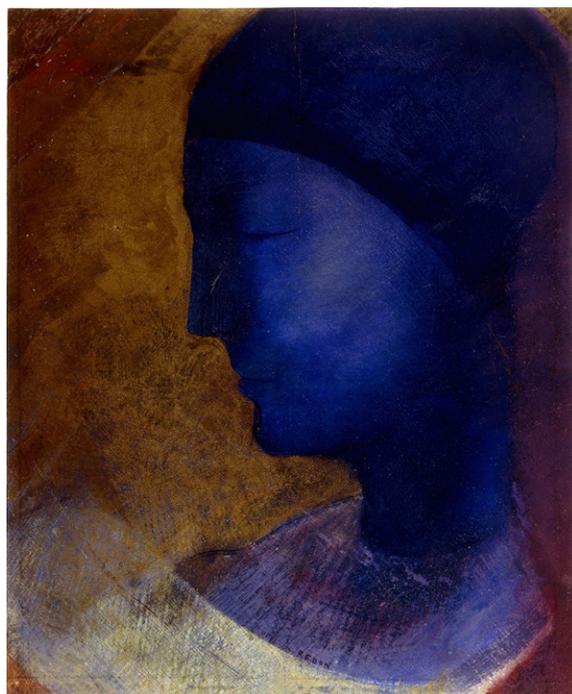


Fig. 8b Odilon Redon, *The Golden Cell*, 1892. Oil and coloured chalk with gold on paper, 30.1 × 24.7 cm. British Museum, London, Campbell Dodgson Bequest

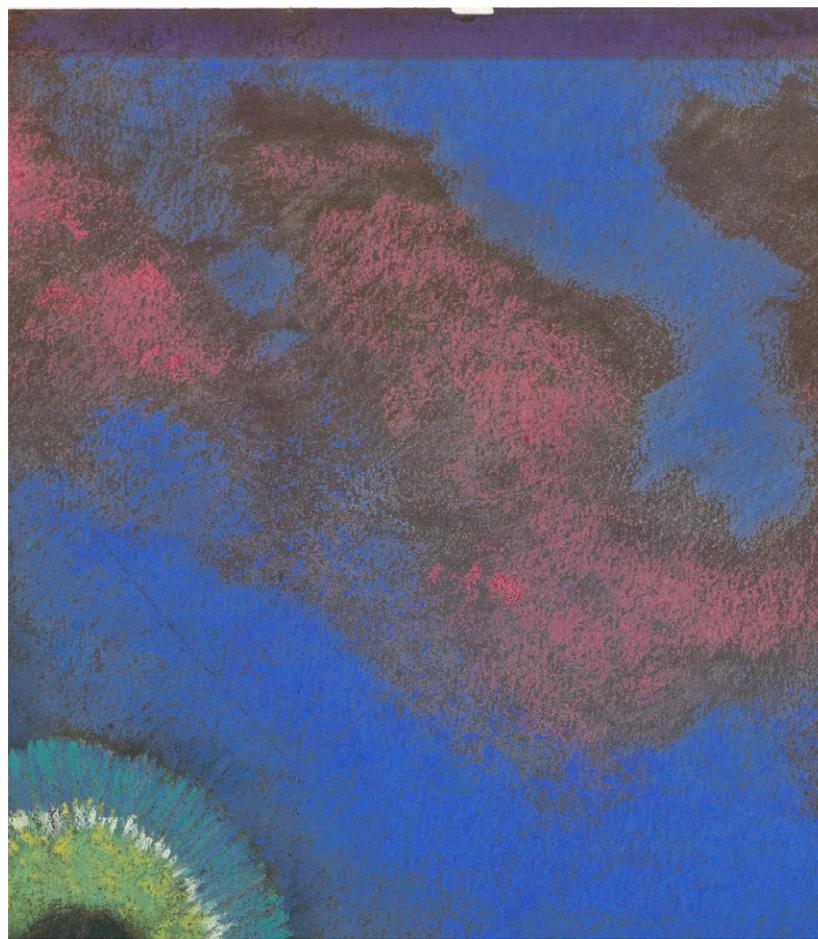


Fig. 8c Detail of cat. 20

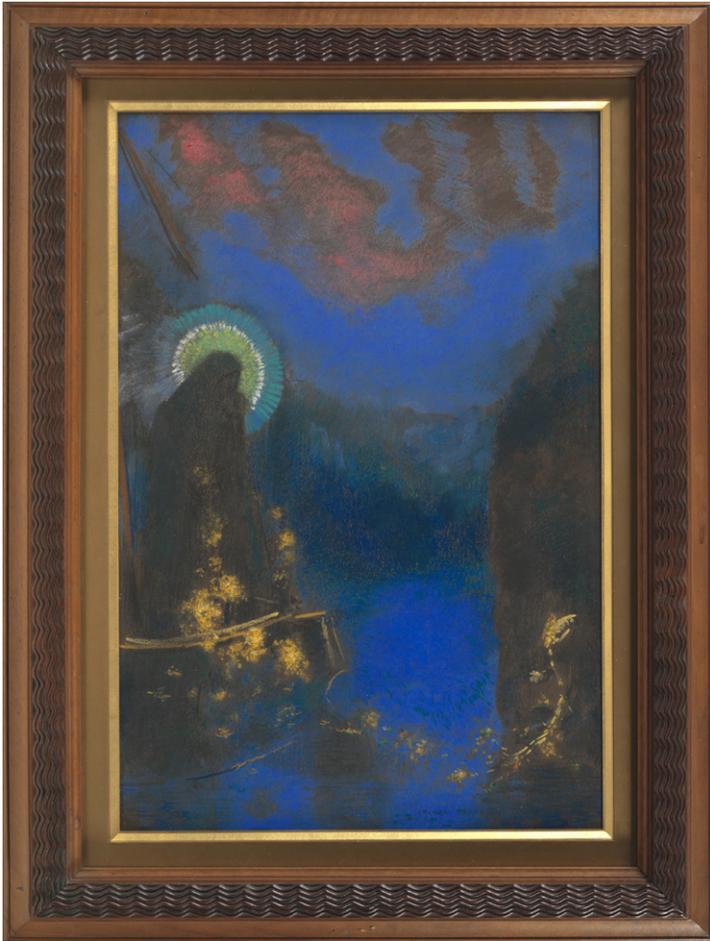


Fig. 8d Cat. 20 in its original frame by Dosbourg or Boyer

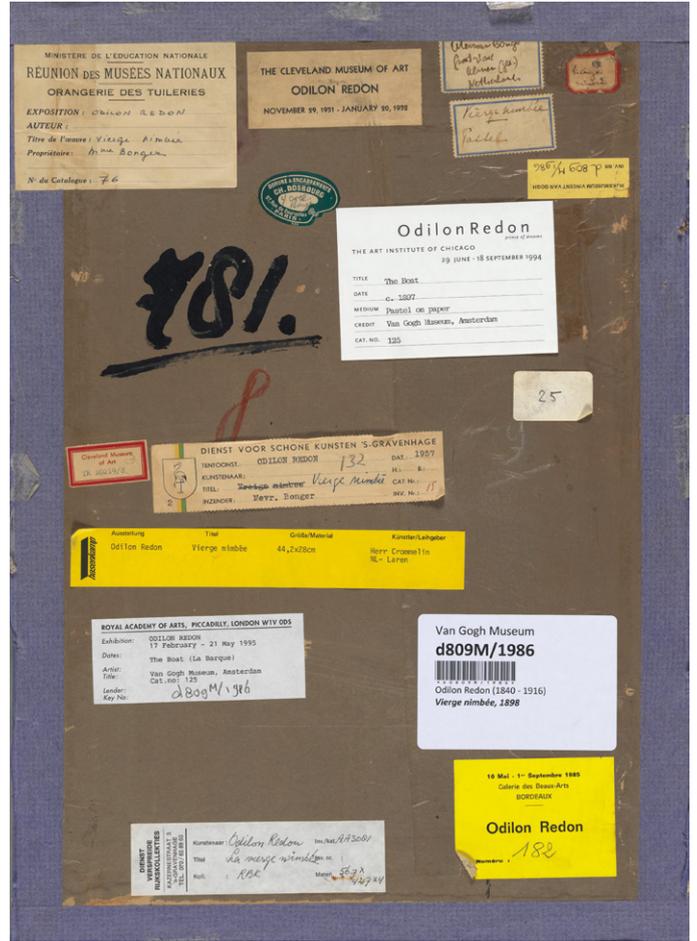


Fig. 8e Reverse of cat. 20 with a label by Dosbourg

22 Letter 91 (31 December 1902), Amsterdam. The question, however, is whether the frame had actually been made by Boyer or whether Redon or De Swart had already chosen it earlier. Both aesthetically and in terms of craftsmanship, the frame is not of the same quality as other Boyer frames; moreover, the label on the back bears the name of the frame-maker Ch. Dosbourg, 97 rue de Courcelles, Paris.

something that was puzzling to most people. As one of the few ‘initiates’ to the oeuvre of Redon, Bonger felt called upon to act as protector of the works that appeared at public auction and to save them from ‘indifferent’ hands and eyes.

A large box from Paris containing numerous works purchased from Redon arrived at the Bonger residence, like a belated Christmas present, on 31 December 1902. Bonger enjoyed unpacking his latest acquisitions and, in a letter to Redon, praised the frame that the frame-maker Boyer had made for ‘the boat’, which was now ‘worthily presented’.²² The walnut frame surrounding the pastel is indeed remarkably elegant and sculptural (figs. 8d and 8e). The undulating profile contrasts well with the glassy smooth water and adds to the vibrations of the figure’s halo, whoever she may be.

PROVENANCE

Given by the artist, Paris to Sara de Swart, December 1898; consigned by Sara de Swart to auction Amsterdam, Frederik Muller & Cie (*Tableaux modernes: aquarelles: atelier – Jacob Maris, collection – J.M. Rodenberg et autres*), lot 243 ('Fantasmagorie'), purchased by Andries Bongers, Amsterdam, for 39 Dutch guilders, 11 March 1902; 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 Rijksmuseum, Vincent van Gogh, 28 May 1986, since 1 July 1994 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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