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The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)

CITATION

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15

The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)

Cat. 36

Cat. 36 Odilon Redon, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*, 1862–64. Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands), 50466N1996

‘What are the limits of the literary idea in painting?’ Redon asks himself in his personal notes from 1877–78.¹ In this text he sought to demonstrate, on the basis of Rembrandt’s painting *The Archangel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family* of 1637, that literary ideas can be portrayed in painting only if the portrayal is not literal or even anecdotal, as it is in a descriptive text, but is evoked, rather, ‘by purely pictorial means [...] which words could not reproduce’ (fig. 15b).²

Redon’s text divides Rembrandt’s painting into two: whereas in Redon’s opinion the depiction of the people on the ground is stuck, literally and figuratively, in the narrative and the prosaic, Rembrandt succeeded in letting the image of the angel above rise up by means of ‘the supernatural light illuminating and guiding the divine messenger’. ‘There’, Redon writes, ‘in the pure, simple nature of tone and in the refinement of the chiaroscuro lies the secret of the entire work, a wholly pictorial invention, embodying the idea and giving it, so to speak, flesh and blood’, which is a strikingly corporeal choice of words to describe the intangible element of this work.³

The great meaning that Rembrandt’s archangel held for Redon emerges not only from the above-mentioned reflection but also from the two copies that Redon had made – years before, early in his career – after Rembrandt’s work in the Musée du Louvre, Paris: a canvas of 55 × 46 cm, now in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (cat. 36), and a slightly larger variant of 68 × 49.5 cm, now in the Musée d’Orsay, Paris (fig. 15c). Tellingly, Redon focused in both works entirely on the archangel in the upper right-hand corner and the dramatic chiaroscuro, which contrasts so starkly with the rest of the composition, thereby eliminating all the other narrative elements in Rembrandt’s scene. He thus portrayed, fifteen years before formulating it in his essay, all his admiration for this passage in Rembrandt’s painting.

As befits incipient artists, Redon copied various works by old and modern masters in the Louvre in the 1860s and 1870s. This was a tried-and-tested method used by artists to become acquainted with the great artists of the past and to fathom their secrets, so that they could apply them in their own work.⁴ In addition to Rembrandt, Redon copied Eugène Delacroix and Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) as a means of comprehending the depths of their art.⁵

l’œuvre tout entière, invention toute pittoresque, qui incarne l’idée et lui donne, pour ainsi parler, de la chair et du sang.’

⁴ Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1971, p. 124: ‘the Goal of the copyist was “to wrest from Genius its secret”’.

⁵ 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. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décos*, nos. 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2030–2033, 2038 and 2042. Boime describes copying as ‘a form of magical contact with the mind and talent of the old masters’; ibid., p. 132.

¹ ‘Où est la limite de l’idée littéraire en peinture?’ The passage is dated to 5 August 1879 in *To Myself (A soi-même)*, but according to Dario Gamboni, Redon wrote it as a short essay in 1877–78; see Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists* (1922), New York 1986, pp. 66–69 and Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Chicago/London 2011, pp. 36–38.

² Odilon Redon (1877–78), translated in Gamboni 2011, pp. 36–38: ‘par les tâches purement pittoresques [...] que la parole ne pourra reproduire’.

³ Ibid.: ‘Là, dans la nature pure et simple du ton et dans les délicatesses du clair-obscur, est le secret de



Cat. 36 Odilon Redon, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*



Fig. 15a Cat. 36 in its original frame by Boyer

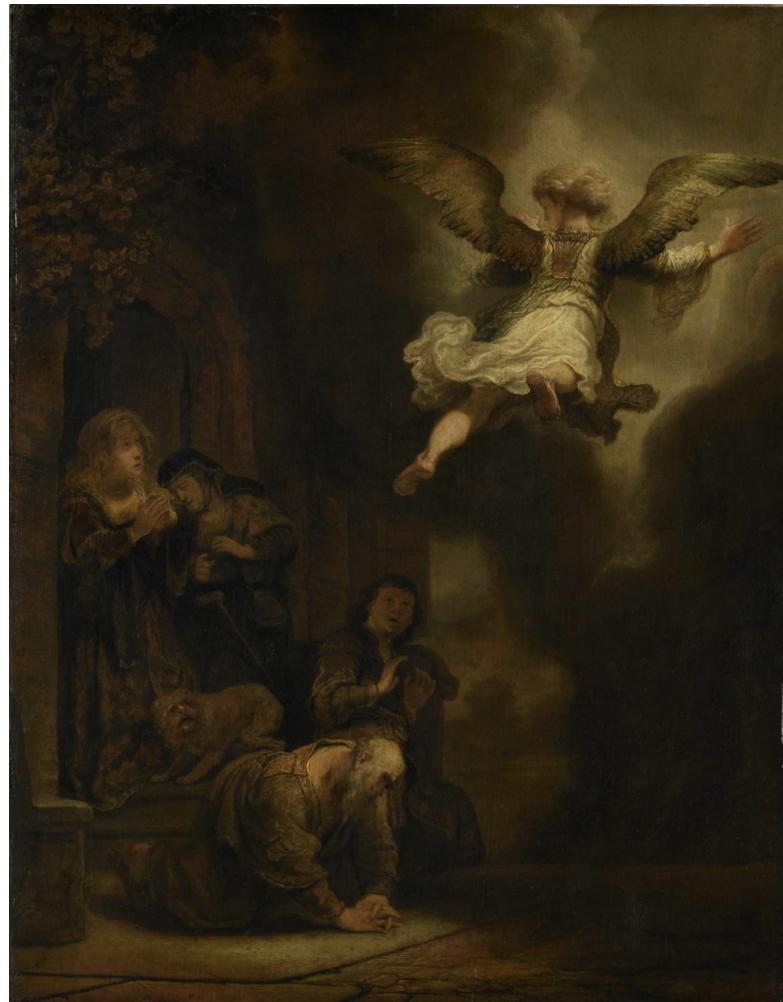


Fig. 15b Rembrandt, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family*, 1637. Oil on panel, 66 x 52 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Redon was a great admirer of Rembrandt. On the second page of his autobiographical notes *To Myself*, he praised the master in a text that dates from the period in which he copied the angel: 'Rembrandt gave me ever new surprises. He is the great human factor in the infinity of our ecstasies. He has given moral life to shadow. He has created chiaroscuro, as Phidias has created the line. And all the mystery that art allows is hereafter possible only for him.'⁶ Redon might have taken his interpretation of the chiaroscuro as the ultimate deepening and surpassing element within Rembrandt's art from Charles Blanc's monograph of 1853 on the Dutch master.⁷ The passage quoted above, in which Redon expressed his admiration of Rembrandt, was followed by a passage about his period of training in Paris, when he was still searching for his place in the (art) world. He described Paris as the 'intellectual springboard upon which all artists must exercise incessantly', and 'the endeavour of hours of study and youth; insomuch as it is good to know what to love and where the spirit takes flight'.⁸ These hours certainly included those Redon must have spent with Rembrandt's painting. This angel can be understood as the

⁶ Redon (15 October 1867), in Redon (1922) 1986, p. 28: 'Rembrandt me donna des surprises d'art toujours nouvelles. Il est le grand facteur humain de l'infini de nos extases. Il a donné la vie morale à l'ombre. Il a créé le clair-obscur comme Phidias la ligne. Et tout le mystère que comporte la plastique n'est désormais possible que par lui'.

⁷ Douglas W. Druick and Peter K. Zegers, 'Under a Cloud 1840–1870', 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. 25–72, p. 49. See also Charles

Blanc, *L'œuvre de Rembrandt reproduit par Photographie*, Paris 1853. As regards general admiration and the influence of Rembrandt on the French avant-garde, see Alison McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt*, Amsterdam 2004.

⁸ Redon (15 October 1867), in Redon (1922) 1986, p. 28. See also Gamponi 2011, chapter 1: 'et surtout

Paris, m'assurant le tremplin intellectuel sur lequel tout artiste doit s'exercer sans cesse; elle me donna surtout la conscience dans la direction de l'effort aux heures d'étude et de jeunesse: autant il est bon de s'abandonner quand on crée, autant encore il est bien de savoir ce qu'il est bien d'aimer et où l'esprit s'envole.'

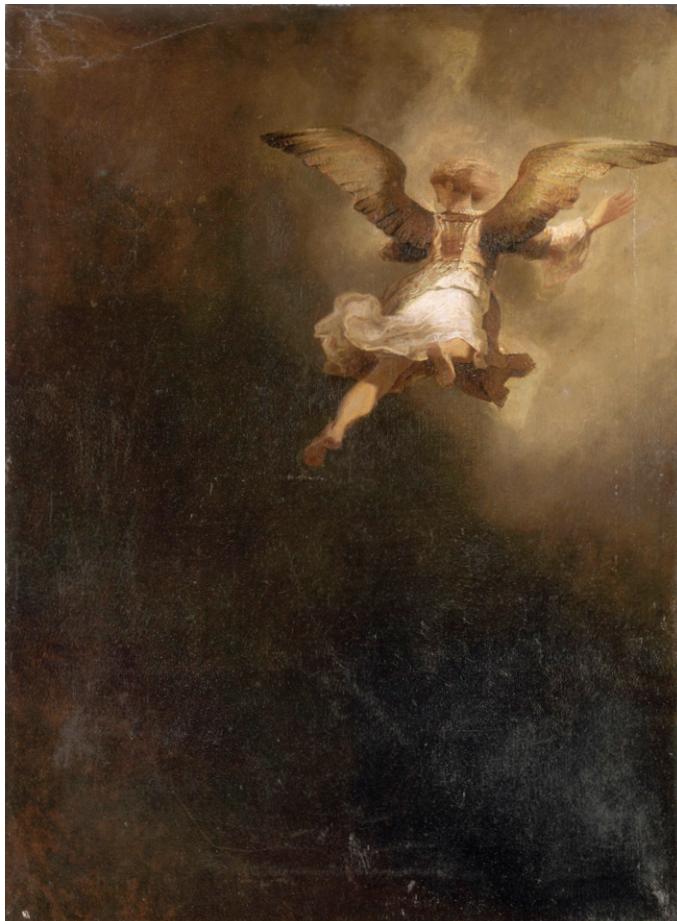


Fig. 15c Odilon Redon, *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*, c. 1862–75. Oil on canvas, 68 × 49.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

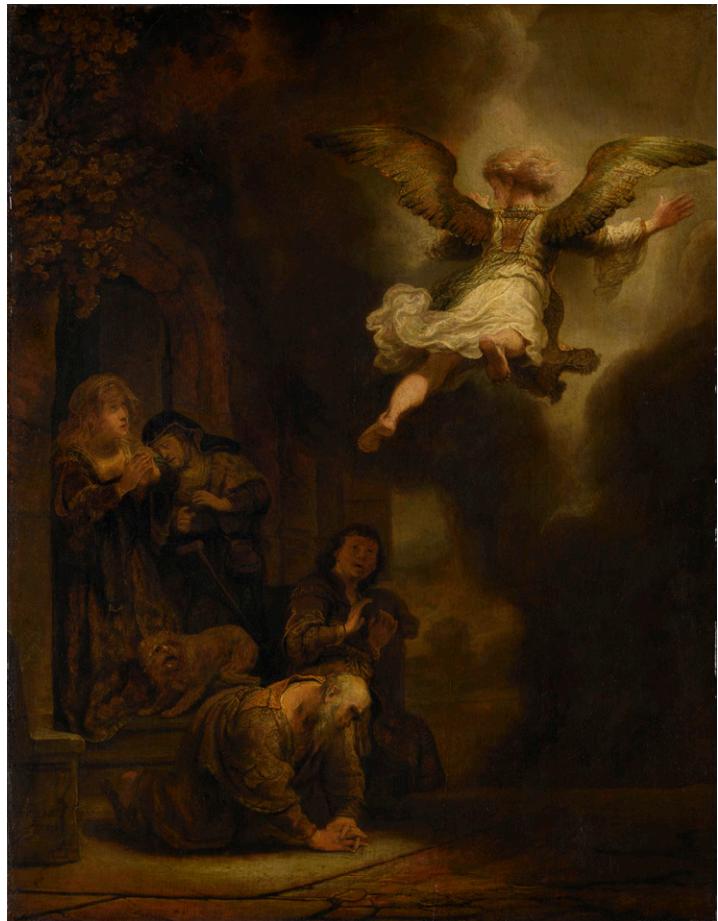


Fig. 15d Attributed to Eugène Delacroix, *The Archangel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family (after Rembrandt)*, c. 1850. Oil on canvas, 36 × 27 cm. Palais des beaux-arts de Lille, Lille

embodiment of the ‘spirit [that] takes flight’ and shows Redon the way to a profound portrayal of the human mystery and thus to true artistry.

Redon had already distanced himself from naturalism in the 1860s, but he was still searching for a way to let his own imagination and spiritual values take flight in his art.⁹ Isolating and copying in a smaller format specific elements from artworks by other masters not only helped him to fathom their technique and style, but also fuelled his spiritual quest for meaning. His interpretative copies enabled him to give new, personal meanings to time-honoured works.¹⁰

Redon’s name can be found in the 1862 and 1864 registers of copyists working in the Louvre.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, most of his copies can be dated to these years of his training. The copy in the Musée d’Orsay must have been made on the spot.¹² Redon worked in practically the same format and copied the build-up of Rembrandt’s panel by beginning with a red-brown ground and painting in the dark and light passages, layer by layer, on his canvas. Just as Rembrandt himself had done, Redon created depth and atmosphere by applying a number of thin layers over one

⁹ On this subject, see the articles by Druick and Zegers, in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, pp. 25–118 and Gamboni 2011, chapter 1.

¹⁰ Ibid. and specifically Druick in Chicago/Amsterdam/London 1994–95, p. 93.

¹¹ Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décosrations*, p. 5.

¹² The copy in the Musée d’Orsay is dated to 1875 in Wildenstein, Lacau St Guily and Decroocq 1992–98, vol. 4 (1998): *Études et grandes décosrations*, no. 2015, but the precise basis of this dating is unclear. There has been speculation as to which of the two copies is more faithful to Rembrandt’s work (and therefore the early copy of 1861–62) and which should be dated to

1875. See Fred Leeman, André Bonger, *kunstliefhebber en verzamelaar*, unpublished manuscript, June 2007 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum). However, both datings pre-date Redon’s text on the work, and in both copies Redon reinterprets the work by placing the emphasis on the angel and the chiaroscuro. Perhaps these facts make a clear dating less relevant.

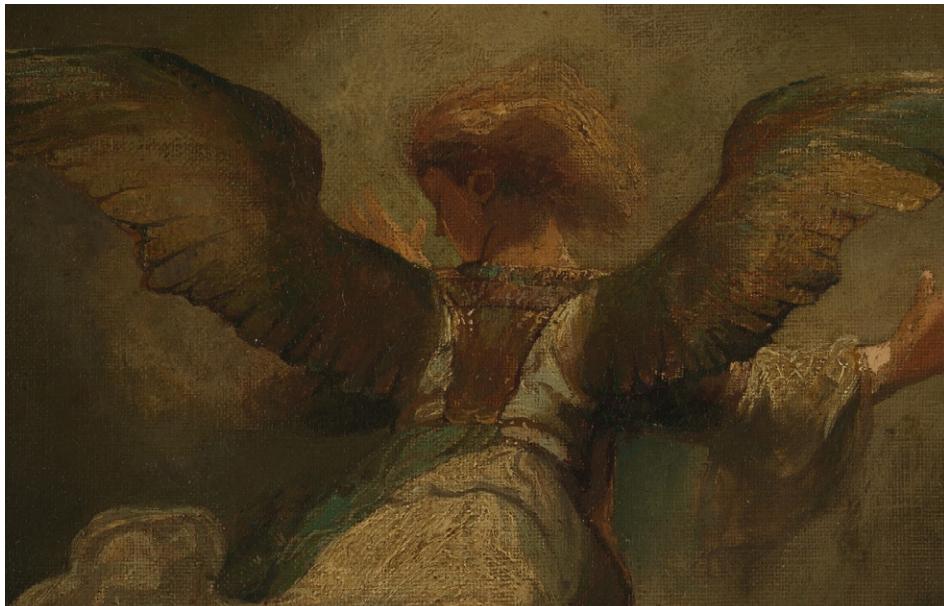


Fig. 15e Detail of cat. 36

another.¹³ He carefully imitated the colour contrast between the greenish highlights and red-brown ground, as well as the extreme foreshortening of the figure. Bit by bit, he copied the wings' delicate details and splendid colouring and the angel's transparent garment, as seen in the collar (fig. 15e). It is interesting to note that Rembrandt, in turn, had borrowed the motif and the pose of the angel from a woodcut by Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574) (fig. 15f).¹⁴

Redon's exact copy of the upper right-hand corner makes his decision to leave out Tobit's entire family and their situation in the landscape and to limit himself to a completely empty corner in dark brown-grey all the more radical. All that remains here is Rembrandt's chiaroscuro reduced to its essence: a dark area, a deep emptiness, contrasting dramatically with the angel's golden light. Below the thin layers of paint, there are no underpaintings to suggest that Redon initially planned to copy the entire work.

In the slightly smaller copy in the Van Gogh Museum, Redon also concentrated on the flight of the angel towards the light. Here, however, he deployed a different strategy: he isolated the angel and moved him more towards the middle of the canvas. In this way he foreshortened somewhat the right wing, which Rembrandt truncated. The dark area in the lower left-hand corner also contributes to the contrast, though it opens up a bit more and is considerably reduced in size. Redon produced this copy much quicker. He applied fewer layers of paint, roughly filled in the chiaroscuro, and selectively painted in some details. Thus, the clouds in Redon's copy are more like smudges than round forms.

Redon applied a similar working method – entailing the isolation of a detail – in another copy that he produced in the Louvre. In his imitation of Rubens's densely populated canvas *The Triumph of Truth*, he focused his attention solely on the upward flight of Saturn and Veritas (figs. 15g and 15h). Redon thus copied not obediently but interpretatively. The copy therefore demonstrates – as does his copy after Rembrandt – not only Redon's admiration of the Old Master, but also, in particular, his artistic interpretation, as well as his appropriation and emulation of the accomplishments of his predecessors.

We must not fail to mention that Redon's other great spiritual and artistic example, Eugène Delacroix, also seems to have made a copy after *The Archangel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family* in the Louvre (fig. 15d).¹⁵ Delacroix did,

13 J. Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, vol III: 1635–1642*, The Hague 1982, p. 236.

14 Rembrandt became enthusiastic about this element because it enabled him to portray 'the communicative exchange between the angel and mortals' with psychological depth; see Amy Golahny, 'The Disappearing Angel: Heemskerck's "Departing Raphael" in Rembrandt's studio', *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, vol. 28 (2007), pp. 38–45.

p. 41.

15 The work is attributed, with reservations, to Delacroix, but it comes in any case from his estate, according to the museum in Lille.

Fig. 15f Maarten van Heemskerck (design), *The Angel Raphael Leaving Tobit and his Family*, c. 1548. Woodcut on paper, 24.1 × 18.9 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, from the estate of Dr. J.C.J. Bierens de Haan 1951



Fig. 15g Peter Paul Rubens, *The Triumph of Truth and the Fates Spinning the Life-thread of Maria de' Medici*, 1621–25. Oil on canvas, 50 × 64 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 15h Odilon Redon, *The Triumph of Truth (after Rubens)*, c. 1862–70. Oil on canvas, 44 × 35.7 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

however, copy the entire composition, though somewhat more roughly, using freer brushstrokes than Rembrandt did in the original and paying a great deal of attention to the chiaroscuro. Like Redon, he did this in an effort to grasp 'the mysterious and supreme genius' of Rembrandt, as Delacroix wrote in his diaries.¹⁶ In his writings, Delacroix cited precisely this work by Rembrandt to substantiate his claim that if an artist wishes to hold his viewers' attention, he must speak to them from the depths of his own soul. In Delacroix's view, this was exactly what Rembrandt did here, through the fantasy and emotional depth expressed in the work and the unaffected portrayal of the figures.¹⁷

Given the exceptional influence of Rembrandt's work on his development as an artist, it is not at all surprising that Redon kept these copies throughout his life and flatly refused to sell them, even to his most loyal collectors. Andries Bonger therefore acquired the work that is now in the Van Gogh Museum only after Redon's death, through his widow, Camille Falte. When Bonger had finally taken possession of the work, Camille wrote to him, saying that her husband had made the copy sixty years ago, which is another reason to date the works between 1862 and 1864.¹⁸

Their shared admiration for Rembrandt was part of the bond between the French artist and his Dutch collector, and the subject comes up repeatedly in their correspondence.¹⁹ Bonger often sent Redon postcards of works by Rembrandt, to add to his cherished *musée imaginaire* of reproductions after revered masters.²⁰ In a photograph of Redon in his home, which also served as his studio, we see a reproduction of Rembrandt's self-portrait stuck in the mirror behind him (fig. 15j). In addition, Bonger reported faithfully to Redon every time he admired one of the master's works in a Dutch collection. Immediately after their first meeting, Redon and Bonger went together to the Louvre, where they must have discussed this particular painting by Rembrandt. In one of his very first letters, Bonger linked Redon's description of his family estate of Peyrelebade to another work by Rembrandt in the Louvre, *The Holy Family*. He wrote: 'Your description of the delight you take in working there makes me think of the ray of sun in that little canvas by Rembrandt, the *Nativity*' (fig. 15j).²¹

Redon's later trips to the Netherlands were always guided by Rembrandt. Primarily, Redon came to see the works themselves, but he also liked to immerse himself in the northern climate, from which Rembrandt's spirit, he felt, had been born. Although Redon described himself in various letters as stemming from a southern milieu, he also identified with some aspects of Rembrandt's northern spirit.²² Bonger wrote to Redon: 'How often you have told me that there is much of the

¹⁶ Eugène Delacroix (1855), in *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, vol. 1, Paris 1893, p. xxxiv: 'le génie mystérieux et souverain'. Another motivation was the forging of a personal synthesis between two traditions of painting: the Italian tradition and that of the Northern masters.

¹⁷ Eugène Delacroix (23 January 1857), in *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, vol. 3, Paris 1893, p. 246.

¹⁸ Letter from Camille Redon to Bonger (3 October 1922), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Andries Bonger Archive.

¹⁹ See letters 6 (9 July 1894), Hilversum, 11 (31 December 1894), no location, 12 (14 January 1895), no location, 20 (3 July 1895), Hilversum, 21 (3 August 1895), Hilversum, 22 (7 August 1895), Listrac, 57 (25 October 1898), Paris, 60 (8 November 1898), Paris, 130 (17 January 1905), no location, 201 (30 October 1907), no location, and 227 (16 May 1909), no location.

²⁰ See postcards 98 (5 March 1903), Amsterdam, 'Titus', 171 (18 July 1906), no location, 'The Mill', 172 (2 August 1906), Amsterdam, 'Saskia in a Straw Hat', 223 (21 January 1909), no location, 'Rembrandt' and 293 (17 January 1913), Amsterdam, 'The Vision of Daniel'. In letter 22, Redon writes to Bonger: 'Thank you for sending this Rembrandt, a work of old age, no doubt, but still beautiful. It goes to expand my collection, to which you have already contributed. I often look at it. Rembrandt, along with Leonardo, is the greatest. He gave shadow a moral life, as Michelangelo did in statuary. And everything that has come of chiaroscuro since is owing to him. He is one of the very greatest. Not to mention the grandeur of his feeling for the humble, his humanity, his reasonableness, his greatness inward and outward. Do you remember the etching of the prodigal son – can any vision be more profound? But on days of delectation and dilettantism, I come back to da Vinci. He is the most complete artist. Nowhere else do I find

such perfect equilibrium. Let us admire him in the morning and keep Rembrandt for the hours of night. Both of them are, moreover, so great that they are, as it were, of our own day. The great man continues to exert his powers beyond his own lifetime. Here are two that the centuries seem to renew.' ('Merci pour cet envoi du Rembrandt de sa vieillesse, sans doute, mais encore beau. Il grossira la collection où vous avez déjà placé quelque chose. Je la regarde souvent. Ce maître là est le plus grand, avec Léonard. Il a donné la vie morale aux ombres, comme Michel-Ange l'avait fait dans la statuaire. Et tout ce que l'on a tiré du clair-obscur depuis lui, vient de lui. C'est un grandissime. Outre sa grande émotion devant les humbles, son humanité, sa raison, sa grandeur, au dehors et dedans. Vous rappelez-vous l'eau-forte de l'enfant prodigue, peut-on voir plus profond? Mais je retourne au Vinci, aux jours de délectation ou de

dilettantisme. Il est le plus complet. Et je ne vois pas ailleurs plus parfait équilibre. Admirons-le le matin, et gardons Rembrandt pour les heures nocturnes. Tous les deux sont d'ailleurs, pour ainsi dire, de ce jour, tant ils sont grands. Le grand homme est celui qui exerce encore ses pouvoirs au-delà de sa vie. En voilà deux que les siècles semblent renouveler.')

²¹ Letter 6: 'La description que vous faites des douceurs que vous y donne le travail me fait penser à ce rayon de soleil de la petite toile de Rembrandt: la *Nativité*.'

²² See Pierre Pinchon, "Je suis né dans le Midi, avec un brin d'âme du Nord". Théorie des climats et déterminisme chez Redon d'après sa correspondance avec Bonger', in Dario Gamboni and Merel van Tilburg (eds.), 'Sans adieu'. *Andries Bonger – Odilon Redon correspondance 1894–1916*, 2 vols., Paris 2022, vol. 2, pp. 719–53.

Fig. 15i Rembrandt, *The Holy Family*, 1640. Oil on panel, 41 × 34 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



northern spirit in you! Undoubtedly you have its depth and its dreams [...].²³ Redon undertook his first 'pilgrimage' to Holland in 1878, inspired by the publication *Les maîtres d'autrefois* (1876), in which the painter and writer Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876) gave a sensitive account of a similar journey.²⁴ Until this time Redon had known only the paintings in the collection of the Louvre. But now he wandered through the 'poor, noble outskirts' of Amsterdam, where Rembrandt had worked, and there he wrote his reflections, quoted above, on the literary in art. In his article 'J'ai vu Odilon Redon face à face avec Rembrandt', Marius-Ary Leblond recounted his trip to the Netherlands in 1913 in the company of Mr and Mrs Redon.²⁵ They quoted the artist, who admired Rembrandt because of his 'humanity, symbolism, poetry and irony', and instantly traced these qualities back to the angel in the Louvre. Here the master had, in Redon's eyes, depicted 'divine light', even if perhaps unwittingly.²⁶

Given the role played by Rembrandt's work in the relationship between artist and collector, it is unsurprising that Bonger seized the opportunity to acquire Redon's copy after Rembrandt, even though he had declared his collection complete in 1908. When Redon was still alive, Bonger had also made repeated attempts to acquire his copies after Delacroix, but the artist had refused many times to part with these cherished works. He wrote the following to Bonger about his copy of Delacroix's *Education of Achilles*: 'I must ask you to let me keep it; I'm very fond of it, I often look

²³ Letter 37 (21 June 1896), Hilversum: 'Que de fois m'avez-vous dit que beaucoup de l'esprit du Nord habite en vous! Vous en avez certes la profondeur et le rêve [...].'

²⁴ André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon. Peintre, dessinateur et graveur*, Paris 1923, p. 48: 'That is how he travelled through Holland [...] out of veneration, as a pilgrimage to the holy sites where Rembrandt lived' ('C'est ainsi qu'il parcourut la Hollande [...] par vénération, comme en pèlerinage aux lieux saints où vécut Rembrandt'). See also Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon*, exh. cat., Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie), 1956–57, pp. xv–xx.

²⁵ Marius-Ary Leblond, 'J'ai vu Odilon Redon face à face avec Rembrandt', *Arts: beaux-arts, littérature, spectacles*, no. 590 (24 October 1956), p. 14.

²⁶ Ibid.: 'humanité, symbolisme, poésie, raillerie' and 'la lumière de Dieu'.

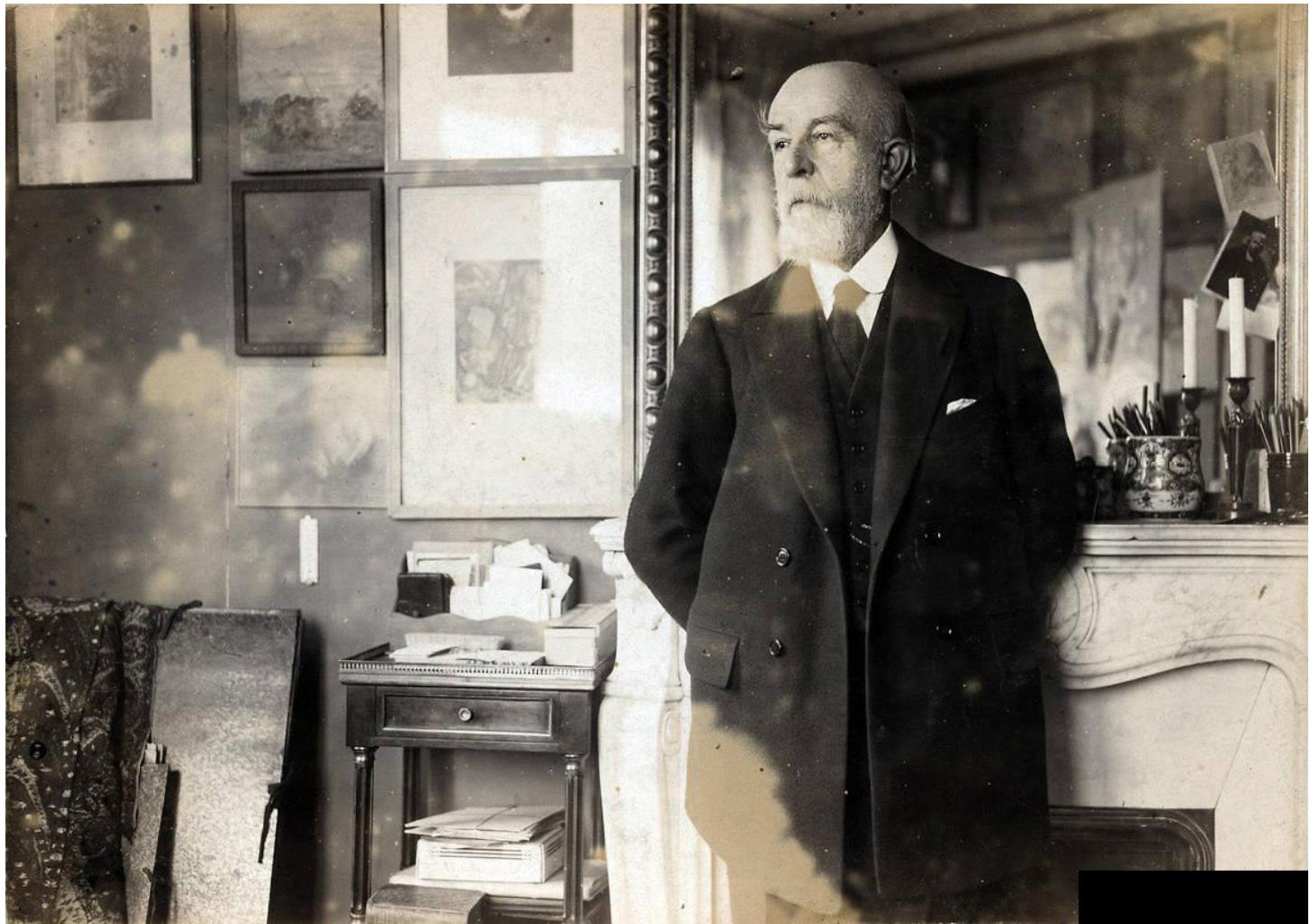


Fig. 15j Odilon Redon in his apartment and studio at the avenue de Wagram, c. 1910. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris

at it, it revives me. It's an essence of Delacroix; I truly believe I will never let it go; I've often been asked for it.²⁷ That all of Redon's copies were equally dear to him is apparent from the fact that none of them passed into other hands until after his death. Most of them were donated by Redon's heirs to the Louvre in 1982.²⁸

Redon was not alone in holding this 'fetishistic view of the copy'.²⁹ Many artists surrounded themselves with copies they had made, and protected them from the outside world. Albert Boime gives the example of Marcellin Desboutin (1823–1902), who filled the walls of his Italian villa with copies, so that their spirit would have an effect on his own works.³⁰ A handbook for young artists published in 1854 states: 'Artists should copy and be surrounded by their copies rather than their own works, and thus gradually acquire principles not to be communicated in any other way, as good manners are acquired by living in the best society'.³¹

Both of Redon's copies after Rembrandt are, therefore, programmatic in their emphasis on the archangel and the divine chiaroscuro. In both canvases, Redon placed his personal stamp on the work of the Old Master by singling out the element that would continue throughout his artistic career to act as his spiritual guide, showing him the way heavenwards.

²⁷ Fred Leeman et al. (eds.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2009, no. 149, *The Education of Achilles (after Delacroix)* (W2035, private collection).

²⁸ Rosaline Bacou, *La donation Ari et Suzanne Redon*: Musée du Louvre, Paris 1984.

²⁹ Boime 1971, p. 124.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ C.R. Leslie (1854), quoted in Boime 1971, p. 209 and n. 24.

PROVENANCE

After the death of the artist, Paris on 6 July 1916 inherited by his widow, Camille Redon-Falte, Paris; sold by Camille Redon-Falte to Andries Bonger, Amsterdam, 1922; 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; sold by these heirs to the State of the Netherlands to be placed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 18 December 1996.

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- Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*, 10 April–20 September 2009, no. 96, *The Archangel Raphael leaving Tobias's family (L'archange Raphaël quittant la famille de Tobie) (naar Rembrandt)*.