

By André Masson

Redon: mystique with a method

*A distinguished painter visits the great  
Redon exhibition now in Paris, at the Orangerie,  
and re-evaluates this neglected master*

Odilon Redon. 1840-1916. His works and fate are equally singular. Admired by the best painters, writers, poets of his day, he lived and died in distinguished obscurity.

Scorned, mocked, misunderstood (with a minimal exception) by the critics, he was unknown to the Public (printer: please don't overlook the capital). The misunderstanding persists.

His genius ran against his time. Will it always? Does vulgarization necessarily imply vulgarity? Is the essential interpreter to a broad audience the touch of a heavy hand, the hint of coarseness, the trace of stupidity? Will Redon's solitary work be forever accessible only to a chosen few "devastated by the marvellous, profound meaning ..."? There are as many questions as the lines that follow will not answer.

Or read his very beautiful book, *A soi-même*, in which the painter's lucid, proud self-questioning is untroubled by exaggerations of the abrupt and the distant. He believed in the Inexplicable, and I shall offer no answers to the Redon enigma.

I shall simply (be warned) note the emotions felt in front of 244 works exhibited at the Orangerie this winter, 1956. I may try to right a few ancient wrongs and - more serious - a few recent admirations which would have brought a (Buddha's) smile to the lips of the master of *transfigured color*. And these notes are simply my impressions of this artist who has been catalogued as the first French Surrealist painter. and of his splendid, subterranean expression.

*Beyond Surrealism*

"Odilon Redon, the greatest of the Surrealists"—this is how one of the noisiest of his recent commentators misleads us from the start. But Surrealism—at least in its beginning—was an idealist movement with literary and social ambitions, and it was violently anti-esthetic. Surrealism avoided art in its search for the secret weapons of the psyche. Redon expressed his opposition to such a program in lapidary terms: "The painter must always have with him the meaning [artistic] and clairvoyance of his gifts, even when he surrenders to the approach of the subconscious."

To dare to say that the painter of *Quadriges* is the precursor of so-called Surrealist painting seems to me as summary a statement as calling Bosch the ancestor of Redon. Visionary and fantastic art has as many varied and contradictory paths as Realism. No one seems to mind when Caravaggio is

called the father of such different artists as Rembrandt and Vermeer, or Manet and Degas. Of course the irresistible tendency is to see (or think you see) relationships rather than differentiations. And the word "Surrealism" is as handy today as "Existentialism." Things which should be separate are mixed together, certain influences an artist receives or feels are arbitrarily emphasized - and the natural confusion of the public increases. Everything is dumped in the same basket, dishrags and napkins, with as much arrogance as little judgment.

But with this in mind, it remains indisputably true that Redon was the first painter to be conscious of the forces of the subconscious. He wrote that the subconscious is "the mysterious

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[Neben den Abbildungen:] Mallarmé wrote Redon thanking him for an album of lithographs, *Hommage à Goya*, 1889, which includes this one, *Swamp Flower*: "The head of dreams . . . shines with a brightness which it alone knows and which can never be spoken."

*Redon: Vase of Flowers, 1914*

"He memorized the growth of plants, the way a petal falls . . . even his most reassuring bouquets suddenly will tear through their apparent repose, become astral vertigo, spurt and decline—a mystery."

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agent of art," but hastened to add that it must be "treated with caution" and with "*an imperturbable, omnipresent clairvoyance*" (my italics, for this is the point of his essential difference from the Surrealist theory of the pure, simple and devoted documentation of dreams from hidden sources). Redon was increasingly insistent on clarity. He emphasizes: "It is in the presence of the subconscious that one must keep the greatest lucidity; without this, the art of painting would be like that of lunatics, children and fools."

I condense; but throughout Redon's writing we find the marvellous ferment of the subconscious put to the service of an extremely demanding artistic consciousness: and here we can measure the distance between the operation of grafting and the operation of collage, which is the opposition of Redon vs. Surrealism.

Redon operates with a sort of alchemy of fields, like a magician who is simultaneously mineralogist, botanist and an expert anatomist. His hybrids are viable. The orthodox Surrealists simply examined existing and accepted realities and juxtaposed them incongruously, irritatingly, polemically - there ! The word is said. The orthodox Surrealist writes a legal brief against life, not an *apologia*. His problem is to render things non-viable. And this is why, despite their theoreticians, collage was the Surrealists' chosen instrument—in preference to automatism (which they pushed but never really used).

And Redon believed in the virtues of art; the practicing Surrealists had to despise them (at least in conversation).

Redon was a seer - sensitive and affective. The Surrealist painter (or, rather, the Surrealist making pictures) advertises himself as a cerebral, glacial prophet. Practically. (I hope that I always have been sufficiently heretical to have had the luck of escaping such rigidities.)

#### *Situation of the artist*

Art finds its origin in dissatisfaction with the appearance of life. It is an open or hidden revolt against social conventions and the routines demanded by law and custom as well as against the monotonous aspects of nature.

But such a revolt against natural appearance and everyday banality is also an *apologia* for life in depth and a hymn to the Elemental Forces.

The artist must always remake the universe, or, if you prefer, make his own.

An understanding of this revolt—of this rejection on the one hand, and, on the other the enthusiastic belief in all living things—will help us grasp the art and the ideas of Odilon Redon. As William Blake said, all that lives is holy.

#### *The misunderstanding*

The difficulty in situating Redon in the development of French painting is largely the result of the neglect of which he was - and still is - the victim.

Lacking subtlety, the critics used an axe; he is outside the great Impressionist movement - and so he is just a curiosity.

Instead of looking to see if his works stood up with Cézanne's or Gauguin's (who admired Redon), or Renoir's or Seurat's, standard criticism simply got rid of the pest with this attack: "literary painter" ... then a shrug. That's all. Then the critics could sleep comfortably on their bundle of whips.

And it was easy to dismiss him— just put him in a pigeonhole with Gustave Moreau, which is doubly unfair, for Moreau's symbolist paintings of magical legends have their value. If he was a theatrical describer, if he often over-embellished his art, still, having Rouault and Matisse for pupils means something.

And was it not inevitable that Redon, whose temperament could never swim with the floods of Realism, and later of Impressionism, would turn to two other artists who also worked counter-current: Moreau the mythographer, and Bresdin, the explorer of shadows?

But he was never on their "side." None of his pictures ever were exhibited in their symbolist "Rose + Cross" salons; and not only did the Rosicrucian leader, Joséphin Péladan, never invite him—he hated Redon.

I have before me a catalogue of the sixth exhibition organized by this "Esthetic Geste"; it includes many pupils of Moreau, Rouault (then twenty-seven years old) among them. Péladan, in his usual peremptory preface, an- [Continued on page 60]

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[Neben des Abbildungen:]In such works as *Centaur and Dragon*, ca. 1910. Redon showed the "precursor of what we now call 'texture'".

*Redon: The Eye and the Opium Poppy*

"It is the primacy he gave to painting that makes Redon a 'modern.' If his drawing is sometimes weak, he was one of the 'most astonishing colorists that ever lived: a colorist in black and white ('blacks as royal as the purple'), in his prints and drawings," as well as his oils and pastels.

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nounces the approaching victory of Idealism (the Redeemer) over Naturalism (Caliban), and in his communiqué he also discusses his (and J. K. Huysmans') favorite artist: "A contemporary master, whose students are almost all in this exhibition, the admirable Gustave Moreau. told me one day: 'I think of a painting as an iconostasis; it must feed the dreams and imagination of the spectator. I would like the owner

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of one of my canvases, even if he has no other pictures, to find in it a perpetual, ideal excitement that would let him meditate and escape from life."

Here is a point of cleavage. If Redon might have subscribed to the first part of this declaration, the second part was entirely foreign to him. "Turn your back to life, escape it"; never!

*Color is his kingdom*

Redon thought that the subject of a painting was infinitely less important than the painting itself.

I remember hearing the poet Emile Verhaeren (who was one of the first to admire Redon) say: "In

painting, it's the eye that counts most." This was his answer to my teacher, Montald, who was trying to justify a weakness in a picture the grounds of a so-called necessary spiritual order. I feel sure that Redon, who was still alive at the time, would have applauded his friend's reply.

And it is the primacy he gave to painting that makes Redon a "modern." If his drawing is sometimes weak,

weak, he was one of the most astonishing colorists that ever lived: a colorist in black and white ("blacks as royal as the purple"), in his prints and drawings, and when he worked with pastels, watercolors, tempera or oils. He was perhaps the first really free colorist.

He gave color its independence before Gauguin did, and released it from stylized naturalism. He demonstrated the endless possibilities of lyrical chromatics; he invented *color as metamorphosis*. In a word, contrary to the accepted idea that Redon is passable as a draftsman or post-Romantic illustrator, but an artist without pictorial genius, it is exactly in the pictorial that

he is a major creator. It is here that, along with the late Monet, he announces a new period. The young artists of 1956 - not those of day-before-yesterday - who admire Redon do not make mistakes.

#### *Notes on his art and ideas*

Credo: "My drawings *inspire* and never define. They determine nothing. Like music, they put us in the ambiguous world of the intermediate."

The condition of the artist, his social responsibility, is defined by Redon: "A work meant to teach will go wrong from the start. A picture teaches nothing. It attracts, surprises, exalts; imperceptibly and by love, it leads to a need for living with the beautiful. It raises and sustains the spirit, that is all."

The artist who is didactic or who follows the changing imperatives of the time will end by hating himself. As Redon's friend Mallarmé said: "Art must not be tied to political convictions, to ethics. On the contrary, art must supply the philosopher, thinker, scholar ... with material for speculation and love." To sum up: for Redon, the best way to be for others was to be ferociously independent, to be first of all for himself.

Redon reproached Impressionism for its petty sensualism, and especially for its ignorance of the limitless. He did not like the word "influence," he preferred "radiation." In this one senses his delicacy and respect for people.

#### *Materials*

Remembering Delacroix, "Nature is a dictionary," he gathered mother-of-pearl from shells. He made a collection of bits of rainbows, dust from stars and suns. He memorized the growth of plants, the way a petal falls, the sleep of the chrysalis. But he used this "botanist's" arsenal to disclose mutations which he discovered in a light of fear and wonderment. Even his most reassuring bouquets suddenly will tear through their apparent repose, become astral vertigo, spurt and decline - a mystery.

One of my friends overheard a very old lady ( she might have been a contemporary of Redon's) say at the opening of the Orangerie exhibition: "Well, I don't like botany." Of course, this is a very modest piece of evidence to support my claim that the hostility towards Redon's art continues. But the dangerous myth is growing - the artist as a fanciful biologist.

Organization and disposition.

Arcane haloes.

System of orbits and nimbus.

All things have their *aura*.

All growing things bloom and fade.

No construction (in the rigid, doctrinaire sense).

An *organic* magic.

Spots of color, spots of change. The isolation of a section of the picture. The idea of absence. The eye and the opium poppy in the empty space of a Mallarmé window.

The possibilities of asymmetry.

Equivocal iconography: The Christ-Serpent.

A new use of color and pigment; without the distraction of imitation.

Precursor (in several canvases and panels) of what we now call "texture" - Redon shares this role with Monticelli, whom he admired.

The happy colorist. Tight-rope hues at the limits of the possible. Shocking tones (rather like Balinese music, or Chinese or Japanese). Unprecedented color relations in shining or mat surfaces.

(Digression: Several of his detractors should have thought twice about an artist whose few admirers included Cézanne and Gauguin, Vuillard and Bonnard, to say nothing of Matisse (who owned several of his pictures) before reducing him to the category of post-Romantic illustrator or Symbolist.)

The mystery in light at the gates of the Unnameable.

"The head of dreams, this 'swampflower' shines with a brightness *which it alone knows and which can never be spoken ...*"

The italics in this phrase from a letter (1889) by Mallarmé to Redon are mine. It is an exemplary definition of a "quality" that was as yet without exegetists. (The poet was writing the painter to thank him for an album of lithographs - *Hommage à Goya.*)

Brightness rather than light, or, better, interior light which is even more astonishing as it sometimes

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seems to catch the morning or evening rays of a *visible* sun - the everyday star.

*Vocabulary*

Palpitation, shudder (today one would say "pulsation").

Folds (to wrap oneself).

That which grows.

That which fades.

Skyrockets of mystery.

The uncertain glow.

Cosmos: air, not Cézannian planes. A surface circumscribed by the orbit of a star.

Orbicular shells.

Orbicular eyelids.

The figuration of the eye in Redon. Obsession. Closed but conscious - forgetfulness and planetary metaphors. Its correspondence - the sphere.

*Subjects*

Avalanches of gold and azure - flowering space - giving birth to homunculi and larvae. A man will be made.

From a steam of roses spangled with silver come sylphs and centaurs.

Cosmological blooms.

Fables of origins.

Fruits of profundity.

Red and black suns at the point of the summit.

Silence and solitude of Ariels, Christs, Buddhas.

Dim figures: sad prisoners.

Decapitated heads in full flight.

After the flood.

The single eye shining with innocence or dark with guilt.

The black poppy.

And the propitious spider.

Incomplete nomenclature - done only for the pleasure of writing. (Redon is never narrative, never tells a story. His plastic or pictorial virtues are sufficient to themselves. And, as if he had wished to prove this, one of his last pastels is titled *Game of Colors*. It "represents" nothing except, perhaps, the birth of *Colored Magic*.)

Postscript. Some people might claim that, because of *Game of Colors*, Redon is not only the precursor of Surrealism but also of Abstract-Expressionism, of non - figurative painting and of what I call "the Lyric Effusion." It is too much to pin on one man. And I am in favor of Redon the solitary, inaccessible, unusual man, with no doubtful descendents and no precise progeniture.

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