

# FONDATION BEYELER

Press Release

## Odilon Redon

2 February to 18 May 2014

The French painter Odilon Redon (born in 1840 in Bordeaux, died in 1916 in Paris), renowned as a sumptuous colourist, is one of the most amazing artists of emerging Modernism. Marking the threshold between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the art of this leading protagonist of French Symbolism shows the interplay between tradition and innovation.

Highly esteemed by contemporaries like Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin, Redon can be described as one of the key founder figures of modern art. "Redon did a great deal for young artists. He showed them the way", noted the sculptor Aristide Maillol in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many artists of the younger generation certainly saw Redon as a model. Pierre Bonnard, for example, admired his interplay of the material and the mysterious, while Henri Matisse was enchanted by his uniquely expressive palette, which later manifested itself in Matisse's own paintings.

The oeuvre of this poet of colour is characterised by caesurae and contrasts, evolving from the deep black of his early charcoal drawings and lithographs to the explosive colourfulness of his later pastels and oil paintings. Redon accomplishes the liberation of colour. Ambivalent and enigmatic, his works alternate between eeriness and serenity: bizarre monsters appear alongside heavenly creatures in a blend of dream and nightmare, nature and imagination.

Redon's work prefigures various movements that left a significant mark on 20<sup>th</sup> century art, for example Fauvism, Cubism and Surrealism as well as abstraction. He is therefore linked to the Beyeler Collection for, while not represented in it, he was a reference point for many of the artists that are, including Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst and even Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

Accordingly, the exhibition develops a different outlook on the development of early 20<sup>th</sup> century art which, as it were, complements the way Ernst and Hildy Beyeler viewed their remarkable collection. Even if the Beyelers did not collect Redon, many of his oil paintings and works on paper passed through the Beyeler Gallery over the decades.

The show presents all Redon's major themes and important ideas and innovations as well as the highly diverse subject matter and techniques found in his art. The wide spectrum of his sources of inspiration ranges from art history, literature and music to western and eastern philosophy and religion by way of the natural sciences. Within a loose chronology, the exhibition is organised on the basis of groups of works that illustrate the main areas Redon was interested in and his links to Modernism.

The works come from eminent private collections and museums inside and outside Switzerland, for example the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. With a total of nine masterpieces, the Musée d'Orsay is lending a particularly large number of works for the exhibition. Conceived as a wide-ranging but highly selective presentation of the quintessence of Redon's art, the show will focus on his avant-garde dimension and hence on his importance as a precursor of Modernism.

Redon's artistic cult of the mysterious and the ambivalent mirrors a principle of Symbolism. In his *Symbolist Manifesto* of 1886, the French poet Jean Moréas said: "*The key characteristic of symbolist art is never to fix an idea conceptually or to express it directly*". Symbolism accordingly rejected the imitation of nature that characterised Realism and Impressionism, seeing the world and its external aspects solely as symbols of a deeper reality, and viewing art as the intermediary between the two levels.

In the context of his early black works, the *Noirs*, Redon's mysterious, eery representations of heads, faces and eyes belong to the key themes of his art. In the early charcoal drawing *Tête de martyr sur une coupe* from 1877 (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), the severed head of a martyr resting in a bowl

evokes the transitory state between death, dream and silent contemplation—key themes in Redon's oeuvre—while at the same time embodying the sublimated suffering that was celebrated by the artist, not least in his view of himself. In the disconcerting charcoal work *Le Cube* from 1880 (private collection) an isolated eye enclosed in a cube hovers like a planet on high. The eye's transformation into a cube can be interpreted as a commentary on the mechanisation of the human gaze through the camera, which simultaneously marks a crisis in the representation of the human body in 19<sup>th</sup> century art.

The *Noirs* also include cosmic apparitions such as the apocalyptic eclipse of the sun in *Le Noyé* of 1884 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) as well as bizarre combinations of plants, human beings and animals that already display an affinity with Surrealism. The monstrous hybrids in *L'Araignée souriante* (Kunsthaus Zürich) and *Fleur de marécage* (Dian Woodner Collection, New York), both from 1881, also attest to Redon's early interest in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

*Dans le Rêve* (Gemeentemuseum Den Haag), the 11-sheet series of lithographs created by Redon in 1879, stands at the beginning of his impressive graphic work, containing many motifs and figures that are characteristic of his art. In this first lithographical album, Redon programmatically defines dream as a locus of artistic fantasy.

Redon's unique blossoming of colour starts with the motif of closed eyes and mystical nocturnal scenes that he created in the 1890s and that can be seen as metaphors for his artistic transition from darkness to light. These nocturnal scenes include the rarely exhibited pastel *La Mort de Bouddha* from around 1899 (Millicent Rogers Collection), which demonstrates Redon's particular ability to imbue his colours with unique intensity, radiance and purity. This approach to colour later manifests itself in the work of Henri Matisse, a great admirer of Redon's art who acquired *La Mort de Bouddha* as early as 1900.

The ascent of colour in Redon's work finds its culmination in mythological subjects like Apollo's chariot. In his artistic treatment of this theme, Redon pays homage to his great hero Eugène Delacroix, who had depicted the same subject matter half a century earlier in a ceiling painting in the Louvre. Redon saw Apollo's chariot as representing "the triumph of light over darkness; it is the joy of daylight as opposed to the sadness of night and shadows, like the joy of a better mood after anguish". *Le Char d'Apollon* (around 1910), which is being loaned, as an exception, by the Musée d'Orsay, shows this apotheosis of light, in which the motif, in a particularly masterly way, gradually dissolves into pure colour.

Spiritual works with Buddhist and Christian themes are just as central a component of Redon's work as are his meditative pictures of boats. The highly subtle pastel *Christ en croix* (around 1895, Stiftung Sammlung E. G. Bührle, Zurich), with its delicate colour transitions from pink to pale blue and to grey, demonstrates Redon's unmistakable influence on Picasso's Pink Period.

The botanist Armand Clavaud, a supporter of Darwin's theory of evolution, influenced Redon's attitude to nature early on, sharpening his "microscopic" gaze. This is expressed particularly effectively in Redon's underwater and aerial visions, in which precise observation of nature and free imagination coincide. At the same time, these works also bear witness to Redon's rejection of Impressionism, which he considered too "superficial".

The belief that life on earth evolved from life in water, which was influenced by Clavaud, is expressed memorably and poetically in Redon's painting *Papillons* of 1910 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York). As if having emerged from the sea or grown from a flower, a swarm of brightly coloured butterflies hovers in the air above a stony coastline, as if it wished to breathe life into the still bare earth. In their splendid colourfulness and diversity of form, Redon's butterflies embody the artistic in nature, while their capacity for metamorphosis evokes the fundamental transformability and evolution of natural forms. In *Papillons*, Redon presents his own vision of the creation and evolution of flora and fauna.

Redon's enchanting floral compositions include representations of idealised women like Ophelia and Beatrice. Shown against a backdrop of flowers, these literary figures have a mysterious relationship to the world of plants. In Redon's delicate *Hommage à Léonard de Vinci* (around 1914; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), which alludes to Leonardo's famous *Saint Anna selbdritt*, the figure of Mary bends tenderly over brightly coloured flowers, thus celebrating the spiritual power of nature. The idea of a symbiosis between human beings and flowers is also expressed in Redon's individual female

portraits, in which his subjects appear to be intertwined with flowery backgrounds and elements that make them seem even more fragile.

With his famous bouquets of flowers, Redon, the poet and visionary of colour, transformed his blossoms' abundant splendour into a veritable homage to pure painting and to art itself. In the work published posthumously as *A soi-même*, Redon writes: "Art is a flower which opens freely outside all rules...". This creative freedom and innovativeness is displayed particularly strikingly in *Fleurs* (around 1903; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen), the wondrously surreal blooms of which already prefigure the "shell-flowers" of Max Ernst's *Fleurs de neige* (1929) from the Beyeler Collection. The powerful pastel *Vase au guerrier japonais* (around 1905; Courtesy Galleri K, Oslo) in turn provides evidence of Redon's enthusiasm for Japanese art, which was providing new impulses for European painting at that time.

The large-format, decorative wall panels painted by Redon in 1900/01 for the Burgundian chateau of his patron, Baron de Domecy, are possibly the most radical compositions he had completed up until then. The remarkable thing about these fragmentary landscapes is that they do not represent a specific place or time. One can identify individual tree trunks, branches with leaves and flower buds that fill the horizon-less space, creating an all-over structure. In these decorative paintings, Redon progresses via ornament to abstraction, which finds one of its earliest expressions in these panels executed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The exhibition has been conceived and is being curated by Raphaël Bouvier, Curator at the Fondation Beyeler.

A lavishly illustrated catalogue in German and English accompanied by an off-print in French are being published by Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, with essays by, among others, Raphaël Bouvier, Jodi Hauptman and Margret Stuffmann. 176 pages, 127 color illustrations, price: 62.50 CHF (ISBN 978-3-906053-12-7, English edition: 978-3-906053-13-4).



**Press images:** available from <http://pressimages.fondationbeyeler.ch>

**Further information:**

Elena DelCarlo, M.A.

Head of PR / Media Relations

Tel. + 41 (0)61 645 97 21, [presse@fondationbeyeler.ch](mailto:presse@fondationbeyeler.ch), [www.fondationbeyeler.ch](http://www.fondationbeyeler.ch)

Fondation Beyeler, Beyeler Museum AG, Baselstrasse 77, CH-4125 Riehen, Switzerland

**Fondation Beyeler opening hours: 10 am - 6 pm daily, Wednesdays until 8 pm**