

# »J'ai fait un art selon moi seul«

The Exhibition

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As an artist, Odilon Redon was a fringe figure of central importance. Hence the statement “I have made an art according to myself,” which appears at the beginning of a letter of May 9, 1900, in which Redon sought to explain the principles of his art to his Amsterdam friend and collector Andries Bonger.<sup>1</sup> He had articulated a similar view of his role as an artist much earlier (1894) in a letter to the Brussels author, attorney, and patron of the arts Edmond Picard. As expressions of self-confidence and distance, of rigorous self-reflection, and comprehensive insight, these texts are still among the most important sources for scholars seeking to understand his art.

In view of the abundance and scope of scholarly studies devoted to the phenomenon of Odilon Redon,<sup>2</sup> it seems appropriate to cite only a few important points that are addressed and discussed in this catalogue.

These relate to Redon's complex psychological make-up, on the one hand, and to his individual artistic and intellectual orientation, on the other. Both are unusual for an artist of his time (he was a member of the same generation as such prominent Impressionists as Monet and Renoir), and both had significant consequences. They necessarily lead from traditional art history into interdisciplinary fields of study.

QRedon's origin and childhood marked him as an outsider from the very beginning. A sickly child who suffered from epileptic seizures, he grew up in Peyrelebade, his family's old vineyard estate in the Médoc, far away from his parents and siblings in Bordeaux. A wet nurse and an elderly uncle took care of him, while his mother and father remained distant strangers. His sense of abandonment and loneliness presumably fostered the development of a melancholy, self-immersed personality. The immediate proximity of nature, his experience of the vast, bleak landscape of moors, rock formations, and groves of tall trees, not to mention the nearby Atlantic coast, surely had a formative influence on him. The young boy sensed the constant changes in nature, observing things both large and small. This may well have contributed to the precision with which he viewed his environment but also to the emotional impulses that shaped his imagination. The region was populated by simple country people, an archaic folk with naïve religious views and belief in ancient folk sagas and myths. And thus Redon's youthful imagination may well have been inspired by his astonishment over prehistoric finds.<sup>3</sup> Later in life, Redon took up landscape motifs—certain trees, mountain silhouettes, and rocks—from among the impressions of nature he had gathered as a youth. This explains the anamorphic character of several of his rock formations (cats. 14, 79), for example. Redon later treasured the unique character of the region as a setting for creative development and visited the area often until he was finally forced to give up the property in 1897. The experience of constantly self-renewing memory became an extraordinarily important factor in his life.

1 See Mellerio 1913, pp. 49ff.

2 Worthy of particular note in addition to the four-volume catalogue raisonné by Wildenstein are Chicago, Amsterdam, London 1994, and New York 2005.

3 See Eisenmann 1992, pp. 114ff., and Larson 2005, p. 40.