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ODILON REDON

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THE ART OF ODILON REDON

BY

Walter Pach

So much "the stuff that dreams are made of," so much the stuff that life is made of, so well in accord with the work of the masters,—the art of Odilon Redon has a treble reality that makes it one of the classics of our time. It is not too soon to pronounce the word classic, for if, indeed, the work of Redon to-day and in the days to come will be considered his best, yet the preceding career of the artist has been a long one and gives us ample material for judgment. We do not speak the word too soon, the work before us being sufficient; we do not feel our appreciation a tardy one, for it

has necessarily been only in the last decade or so that the full importance of Redon's art has become apparent. For many years there have been men who have unhesitatingly called him a great artist. It is only at this time, when we clearly see that the trend of art is to be more and more toward the expression of the interior life, that we can have the right to say that the work of Redon has the quality of reaching out to the future while preserving its just relation with the past,—and is therefore classic.

Like Corot and like Delacroix, two painters with whom he has very much in common, Redon announced the direction of his talent in his earliest works and if, like theirs, his art developed with a fullness that kept it always abreast of his time, like theirs again it always continued as the faithful exponent of the ideas he seems born to express. And so arts like these are not, eclectically, the meeting-places of the influences of their time but the resumés of single, intense lives. What is reassuring and inspiring about their case, what

makes us feel anew the magnificent fraternity of the minds of men, is that these three artists—so much the developers of themselves, have been amongst the most potent in the development of others. For over half a century our outlook on nature has been influenced by the mind of Corot, "all subsequent painting," to use the phrase of an excellent French critic, "has descended from Delacroix;" and, so silently that only now do we begin to appreciate the extent of the matter, the art of Odilon Redon has entered the movements of the last twenty-five years and helped them to a finer aestheticism, and still more—to a higher ideal of significance.

Born in 1840, a few weeks after his parents' return from a prolonged sojourn in America, Redon passed his youth in the Province of Gironde, the ancestral home of his family. Books and music were the companions of a boyhood to which they contributed the most it knew of enjoyment, and their use and influence have continued throughout

the artist's life. One other strong memory he preserves of this time is that of the beautiful country in which he lived, its great sunny plains and its river and a dark forest of pine-trees. One is easily tempted to speak of Redon's art as pure imagination; what lies beneath and what gives it a great phase of its strength is the importance that nature has always had for him. He will spend days in the closely-studied representation of some simple object,—a stone or a cup and saucer, for example—and then will find himself brimming with the energy and imagination he needs for creating one of those works in which the visible and the invisible have equally their share.

As a young man he went to Paris to become an architect but, despite a deep and continuing interest in his studies of shades and shadows, perspective and descriptive geometry, he failed in his examinations for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Later he entered the atelier of Gérôme, as a painter. The result may be imagined—a total lack of sympathy

with the ideals offered him, on the part of the student; a severe, even bitter antagonism on the part of the teacher. Redon was already producing works which give the note of his career. The splendid etching "Fear" in our exhibition dates from about his twenty-fifth year. Fortunately there were better friends at hand than the people of the atelier. An earlier teacher had given him sound advice,—never to put down in his work a statement that did not come from his experience. It is a principle that Redon holds to to-day. "Our experience is the bread of our art" he says. Corot gave him good advice as to keeping his work well related to Mother Earth; Delacroix drew him onward with the passion of his design and the plenitude and resonance of his color—both under control of the master-artist's sense of fitness.

The excursion into the enslaved country of the school served at least to make certain for Redon the necessity of keeping to his own idea of art and the "magnificent adventure of evolution." He has

done so. Whatever the stimulus—poetry or music or nature—nothing has entered his pictures that has not been assimilated by his own mind. And therefore this art performs the rare service of making us sharers in the vision of that mind. The medium is always beautiful in his hands, whether etching or lithography, pastel or paint, he is a master of quality. But neither this, nor his feeling for line and composition, has ever tempted him away from the mystery of expressing the dream: his life-long preoccupation. And so his works appear in steady sequence before a public of artists and discerning collectors and critics. A love for Rembrandt has always been a factor in the composition of Redon's mind, and Dutch art-lovers were early appreciators of the likeness between the French painter-engraver and their own great dreamer. It has been in his use of color that Redon has most directly influenced his fellow craftsmen. The artists whose first pictures appeared in the early nineties show this clearly, and to-day it is not on the painters alone that we see

the influence, but in the decorative arts as well. As if to round out more fully the completeness of his own work, Redon has of late years given much of his attention to decoration, producing designs for the tapestry looms of the Gobelins. For the many ardent admirers of Odilon Redon the artistic qualities of his painting and engraving have always been incontestable; the flowerings into form and color of the thought—life that has given them their initial impulse. Nevertheless we are glad of the latest addition to the ensemble of the artist's achievement. The works of pure design and color (a design of color) offer no really new phase. They simply afford a new and more conclusive test of the balance among the qualities which make the work of Redon accord with that of the masters.

And withal, it was not the aesthetic side of his art nor even the balance between the aesthetic and the expressive that the present exhibition designed to bring into relief. It was our wish to show the side of this art which makes it unique

in our time; it was our pleasure, then, on asking the master for his support in the undertaking to hear him say—"Yes, on condition that you make it an exhibition of Redon the expressor."

This is the defining purpose of the group of pictures we offer. Without prejudice to the great modern arts where a vision of nature has been the research of their creators, the work of Odilon Redon offers the great latter-day example of the research—direct and uncompromising—of the vision of his own mind. Flowers, figures, the heavens, specters his beloved Pegasus, still-life, portraits, landscape, the light—one and all had their existence only in Redon's brain until he made them ours—documenting himself from externals only to be certain that we receive the fullness of his dream. His dream! how completely we do feel what he tells of it. At moments we are tempted to say that what is most real in his work is the symbol—as in the great picture of "Silence," with its Leonardesque form:—that the pictures of flowers are the

product of imagination. But we return at once from this idea as we notice the study of natural forms and colors under light, and are reminded that this man is of the epoch of the artist-realists of Impressionism.

The "Stuff that dreams are made of" *is* the stuff that life is made of;—and that is what the artist has been proclaiming in all time. The great conception of Plato—the idea more real, more permanent than the object—is the message of every art. It is equally to be discerned in the work of the student of nature, and the follower-out of aesthetic principles. We admire Odilon Redon above all for the directness of his address to the most important problems. And in adding the note of a foreign land to the homage he was recently tendered by great French artists, we mingle with it the aspiration that our own artists may benefit by his example of that devotion to the life which has kept him—as his country—in the first rank of the young.