
Odilon Redon

1840 - 1916

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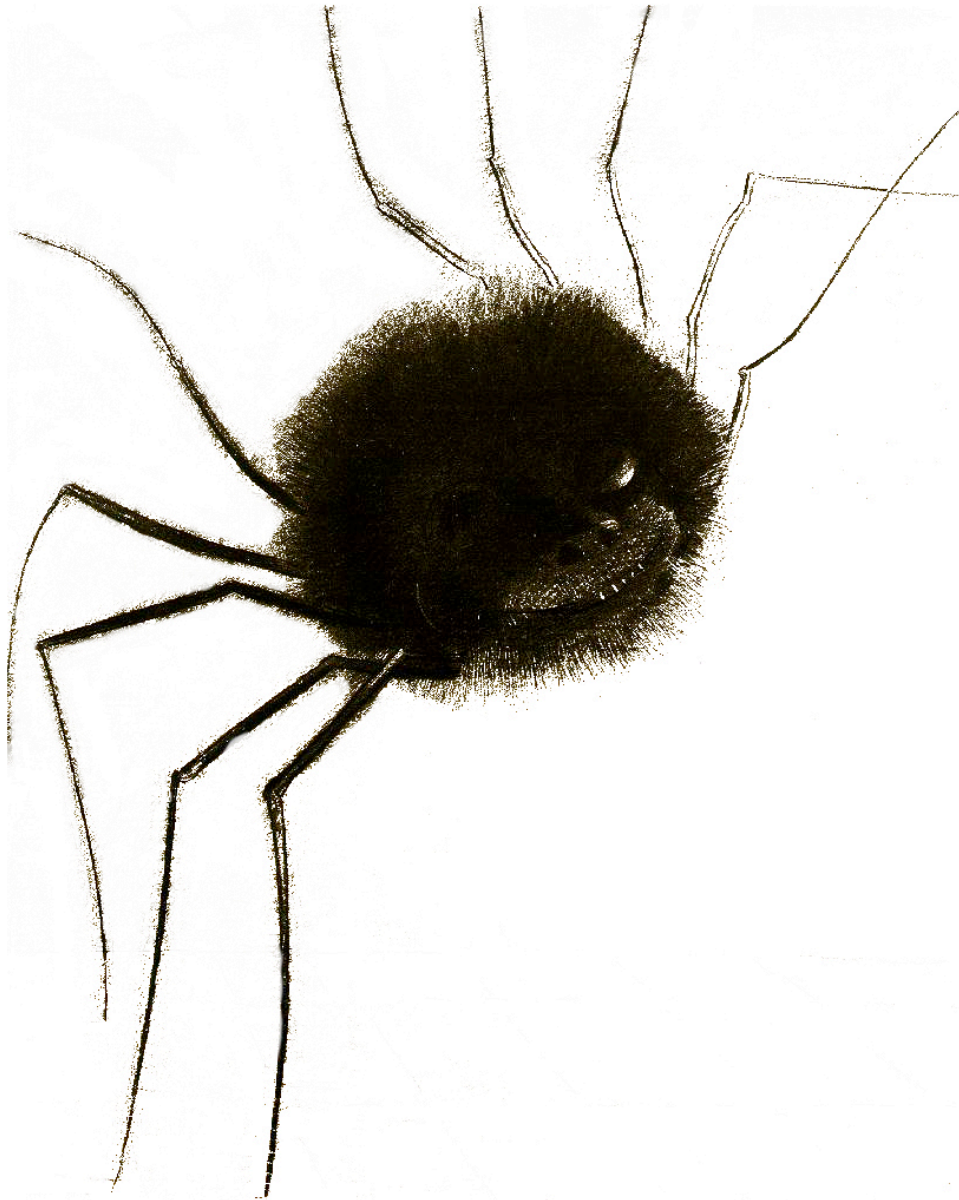
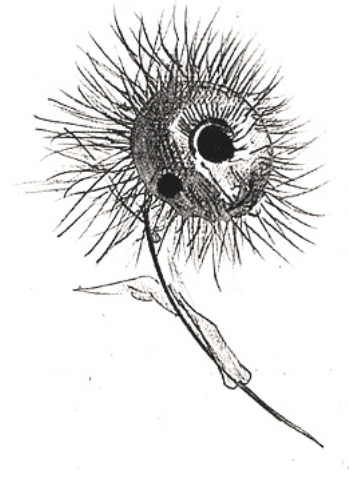


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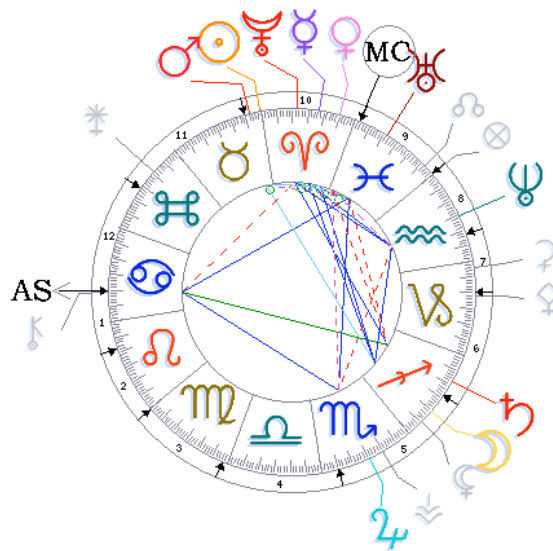
Odilon Redon

The greatest of the French Symbolists¹

BIOGRAPHY

What the stars have to say

A cursory glance at his birth chart will reveal a man being at his foundation persistent, placid, conservative and industrious (Taurus) while emotionally sensitive and rather introverted but imaginative and conscientious (Cancer). Moon in Sagittarius indicates a person who is idealistic, studious and philosophical, and the MC (Medium Coeli, which influences public demeanor, career goals, etc.) in Pisces points to being receptive, supersensitive, impressionable, serious, creative, imaginative, spiritual, a dreamer and reclusive - all things one can easily find when following Odilon's history.



Born on 20 April 1840 at 10 AM in Bordeaux (France) :
²Sun in Taurus - Moon in Sagittarius - AS in Cancer - MC in Pisces

What his timeline lets us know

Following an excerpt & overview of his life, quoted directly from his official, french online biography³ :

1840 : Birth of Bertrand-Jean Redon, known as Odilon, April 20 in Bordeaux, Second Son of Bertrand Redon and Marie Guerin.

1840-1851 : The young Odilon is entrusted to his uncle and passes his childhood in the familial estate of [Peyrelebadé](#), close to Listrac in the Medoc.

1855 : Lessons of drawing with his first Master, Stanislas Gorin.

1857 : Studies of architecture to please his father. He fails the examinations.

1862 : Creation of "[Roland à Roncevaux](#)", one of the very first known work painted by the artist.

1863 : In Bordeaux, Rodolphe Bresdin becomes his friend and initiates him with etching and lithography. Bresdin fascinates Odilon Redon and a relation Master with pupil is born.

1864 : To Paris, he enters the free workshop of Gérome at the Beaux-Arts schools.

1870 : "[Roland à Roncevaux](#)" presented at the 19th Show of Arts. After the war, he settles in Paris. The majority of its charcoals will be conceived this year.

1872 : Odilon Redon patronizes the lounge of literary and musical of Mrs. Rayssac.

1874 : His father dies and leaves his family with no money.

1875 - 1880 : It is the "most distressed period" of his "[Blacks](#)" (Les Noirs).

1879 : First lithographic album of Odilon Redon: "[In the Dream](#)". He is precursory of the psychoanalysis and seeks through the dream, the descent into the unconscious that enables him to drill the source of the inspiration and to describe its "personal atmosphere".

1880 : May 1, Odilon Redon marries [Camille Falte](#), A Creole young person from the Bourbon Island, they met in the aristocratic salon of Madame de Rayssac. Odilon Redon makes his first pastels. The young girl charms Redon and he admires "the Dreamer". The couple will be happy and Camille will deal with the merchants and the press.

1881 : First version of his spider with charcoal, this hybrid of insect and human represents the nature handled and proportioned by the human being and his science. "[The Cactus Man](#)", "[The crying spider](#)", "[The smiling spider](#)"

1884 : Odilon Redon presides the meeting where the Company of the Independent Artists is founded. His brother Léo and his sister Marie die within a short period of time.

1886 : Birth of its first son Jean on May 11th, but he dies on November 27th, this painful experiment will leave him a "melancholic person faintness" and will lock up the artist in a mystical crisis which will stay until the birth of its second son.

1888 : Formation of the [Nabis movement](#) inspired by Gauguin and Redon.

1889 : Birth of his son [Ari](#) on April 30th.

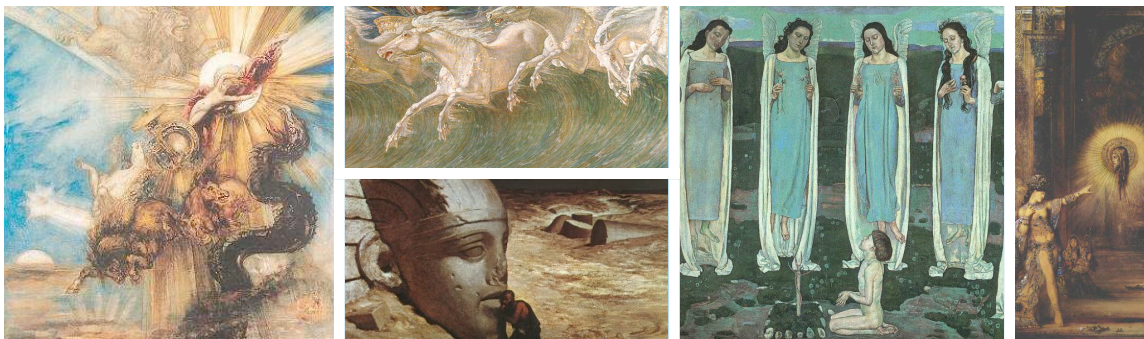
1890 : Closer contacts with Gauguin. He gives up now little by little the "[Blacks](#)" with the charcoal, with the profit of clearness of the pastel and painting.

1914 : Ari is mobilized for the War. Odilon takes violently position against Germany. "[The cyclops](#)".

1916 : Odilon Redon dies on July 6th, in Paris. The "Virgin", an oil on canvas is left unfinished.

Symbolism

DEFINITIONS



Artwork from the following Symbolists : G.Moreau, W.Crane, E.Vedder, F.Hodler, G.Moreau

When I first heard that Odilon Redon was a painter of Symbolism my reaction was astonishment and a slight curling of the nose while I had a first glance at some of his work. Not as much as to have this unfamiliar name connected to symbolism as such but rather that I missed in his art what I myself define as to be symbolism. Obviously I had never heard of the "movement" called Symbolism and to me, symbolism has been always used in art, not only in modern times and artists like e.g. Dali, to name just one, but back to all the religious imagery which is laden heavily with symbols. To understand Odilon Redon and the art movement called Symbolism one obviously needs to understand what this -ism is all about.

Symbol defined

⁴ : *A symbol is a representation of an idea, thing, concept, or quality. A word, for example, is a symbol of language which references its own definition. That is, it "stands for" some idea, thing, concept, or quality, as defined by its given language. Mathematical symbols likewise represent quantities, operations, et cetera. It is human beings' ability to manipulate symbols that allows them to explore the relationships between ideas, things, concepts, and qualities -- far beyond the explorations of which any other species on earth is capable.*

Symbolism defined

⁵ : *"To clothe the idea in perceptible form,"* proposed the poet Jean Moréas in his 1886 Manifesto of Symbolism. It was in France and Belgium, the cradles of literary Symbolism, that Symbolist painting was born. It plunged headlong into the cultural space opened up by the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé and by the operas of Wagner.

⁵ : Symbolist painters sought not to represent appearances but to express "the Idea," and the imaginary therefore plays an important part in their work. "Dream" was their credo; they execrated, with a fanatical hatred, impressionism, realism, naturalism, and the scientific. The main principle of Symbolism, that of "correspondences," was to attain harmony between all the different arts, or even to realise the total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk) that Wagner had dreamt of creating.

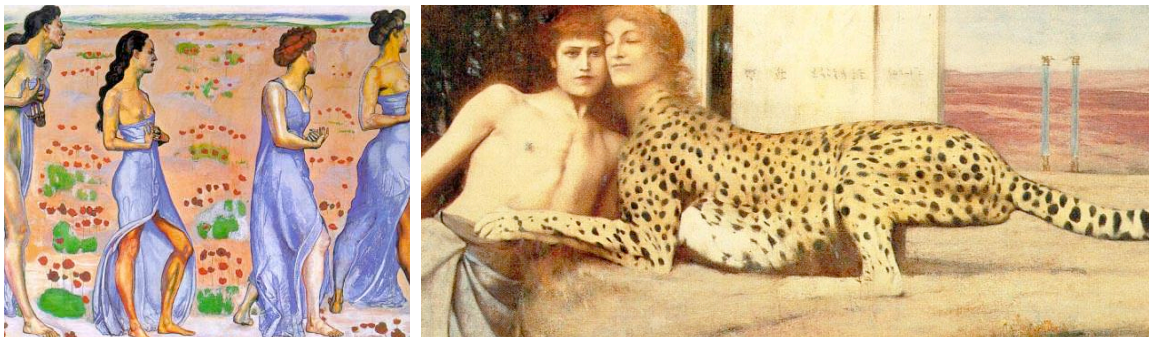
CONCLUSION

After understanding their goals and studying paintings from that era I found it intriguing to discover that I obviously had been drawn since my teens to this approach in art. Not only did I stare for many hours at a true Ferdinand Hodler's pale and skinny woman covering the walls high above in our school auditorium but when I was thirteen I was a huge fan of Art Nouveau and the works of Alphonse Mucha while my mom was into Aubrey Beardsley whom I personally admired only with mixed feelings.

Paintings

When looking at the wide array of art which falls under the heading of Symbolism, it appears to be like an evolution of former religious paintings. What I mean by this is the fact that in the time before this period, mainly religious art dealt with spiritual matters, with things not visibly perceived, ideas and concepts. Next to that it was all about "observing the obvious" and painting reality only as the visibly existing physical environment.

With the adventure into visualizing feelings and thoughts and intellectual concepts the artist knowingly or unknowingly began to impose demands on his viewer to interact with his paintings on a deeper level and the art would begin to open up completely new universes to the viewer on a very broad level. As far as I am aware, this kind of intellectual communication existed before hand only with religious imagery.



Artwork from the following Symbolists : Ferdinand Hodler, Fernand Knopff

Artists

Being an artist and achieve fame seemed to be possible only in the realm of men with only one exception, the mistress and rival of Rodin, Camille Claudel. This according to a selection of 150 painters who lived during 1850-1950 and mentioned in context to Symbolism⁶.

A huge array of famous artists have been touched and influenced by Symbolism: Francisco Goya, Pablo Picasso, William Blake, Gustave Moreau, Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch, Henry Matisse, Giovanni Segantini, Antoni Gaudi, Paul Gauguin, Marcel Duchamp, Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali to name only a few in the halls of fame and another Swiss who joins these ranks was Arnold Böcklin.

To me, it is most interesting to note how much of a foundation Symbolism was to artists and the later movements like Expressionism, Cubism and Dadism, Surrealism and the Abstract and overall seems to have opened the door to Modernism.

Odilon Redon

OBSERVATIONS



A small selection of art by Odilon Redon

Reading about him and his life in the letter he wrote to A. Bonger⁷ one can feel his comfort in solitude and love for the place he grew up. You can get a glimpse of the dreamer he was and of the boy who for days would watch the clouds as his father already had done, but most intriguing to read how much of a core foundation his first art teacher set in him and how full of appreciation he was for other artists.

His life

If he truly "suffered from childhood epilepsy"⁸ is unclear, in his book he only mentions that he was a quiet kid, "unhealthy and weak, always attended to; it had been recommended that I avoid cerebral fatigue"⁹.

Around 15 he was given a drawing teacher, the study of architecture he did at 17 was only to please his parents - he failed at it and he failed also the oral examination for the School of Fine Art which caused him to form himself, on his own, as best as he could, because "in the education I tried to get I did not find the training I really needed"¹⁰. After the war in 1870 he settle in Paris and at this age of 30 he was still trying to find himself¹¹, his friendship with Armand Clavaud - a botanist and great scholar - was a big influence on Odilon's intellectual interests and Delacroix he mentions often, but mostly, working under Rodolphe Bresdin he begins evolving his personal art.

He doesn't talk much about his mother in the notes to himself, but his admiration for his father clearly shows through and his passing away caused Odilon Redon a lot of pain which transferred into his work during the next few years.

He traveled to different places, quite often to Holland, but did not like Brittany and felt it was cold and wet and miserable, and he returned home often to the estate where he had grown up.

Artists, such as Matisse and Gauguin saw in him a friend and inspiration, but even with success and his involvements into things like the Company of Independent Artists or the Nabis movement, Odilon Redon remained rather secluded throughout his life.

His art

It is surprising to see how big of a change as an artist he went through, from the rather introverted and melancholic blacks and rather nightmarish scenes to these beautiful bright, colorful and dreamlike imagery. Contrary to some papers on the internet¹² which note he began painting in color only "after recovering from a religious crisis and major illness in the 1890s"¹², he began with his first pastels when he married Camille in 1880 and e.g. "[The Winged Man](#)" (1880) and "[Beatrice](#)", painted in 1885, are vivid examples that he had begun exploring the world of color earlier on. He also does not seem to have had a major illness in the 1890s but according to his own notes the tragic loss of his first born son - Jean - in 1886 with whom he had bonded so deeply but who perished when only 6 months old. This left him in a "mystical crisis"¹³ until his second son was born in 1889.

Odilon Redon himself seemed at times surprised as to the reaction of people. "What have I put in my works to suggest to them so many subtleties? I have put in them a little door opening onto a mystery. I have made fictions. It is up to them to go further."¹⁴ he writes in 1888 but nevertheless, his goal with art is "the single goal of producing in the spectator, by sudden attraction, the whole evocation, and the whole enticement of the uncertain within the confines of thought."¹⁵ as he confesses in the letter to A. Bongier.

His own closing words on his notes to himself are: "An honest work of art will appear only at its hour. To be well understood it must have its moment: one master made his work too early, another too late; it is rare that a happy glory rises freely around the genius, especially in our time when every artist is searching for his way alone, with no other initiator of his dream than himself." ¹⁶

Such words indicate to me that even with the success he had during his life time he possibly never fully felt understood but never gave up on his own quest to reach his dreams. Overall his art inspired so many people and artists to come after him that it definitely holds true to call him "The greatest of the French Symbolists."¹

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FURTHER READING

Suggested books:

Michael Gibson "Symbolism" - Köln: Taschen, 2006

Odilon Redon "To Myself" - New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1986

Suggested online reading:

[Symbolism in the Arts](#)

[Odilon Redon : Biography](#)

[Evolution and Degeneration in the Early Work of Odilon Redon](#)

[Wikipedia : Odilon Redon](#)