

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

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### ODILON REDON

Bordeaux 1840 - 1916 Paris

#### *Petit arbre germant* [*Small Tree in Bud*]

Graphite on firm wove paper; executed c. 1868.<sup>1</sup>

Monogrammed at the right in pencil: *Od. R.* Brushed with fixative, the fixative slightly darkened.<sup>2</sup>

326 x 228 mm

PROVENANCE: Hedy Hahnloser-Bühler, Winterthur (acquired from Odilon Redon's widow in 1919) – By descent to the art historian Professor Hans Robert Hahnloser, Bern – Private collection, Switzerland

LITERATURE: Hans Robert Hahnloser, 'Die Sammlung Hahnloser', in *DU*, 11/November 1956, repr. p. 27 – Klaus Berger, *Odilon Redon. Phantasie und Farbe*, Cologne 1964, no. 749. – Rudolf Koella, 'Odilon Redon', in *Nabis und Fauves, Zeichnungen, Aquarelle, Pastelle aus Schweizer Privatbesitz*, Kunsthaus Zurich, Kunsthalle Bremen and Kunsthalle Bielefeld 1982-3, no. 91, p. 99, repr. – Alec Wildenstein (ed.), *Odilon Redon. Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, Paris 1996, III (*Fleurs et Paysages*), no. 1681, p. 202, repr.

EXHIBITIONS: *Werke aus der Sammlung Dr. Arthur Hahnloser*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur 1937, no. 103 (?) – *Odilon Redon 1840-1916*, Kunsthalle Bern 1958, no. 9 (titled *L'arbre desséché*) – *Künstlerfreunde um Arthur und Hedy Hahnloser-Bühler*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur 1973, no. 185 – *Nabis und Fauves, Zeichnungen, Aquarelle, Pastelle aus Schweizer Privatbesitz*, Kunsthaus Zurich, Kunsthalle Bremen and Kunsthalle Bielefeld 1982-3, no. 91, p. 99, repr. – *Odilon Redon*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur and Kunsthalle Bremen 1983-4, p. 51, repr.

Redon was an artist of astonishing originality. Born in the same year as Monet, he did not aspire to the naturalistic goals of Impressionism, but was more interested in mysterious, even visionary themes. Pupil of the enigmatic Rodolphe Bresdin, he acquired a deep respect for the expressive powers of black pigment. Consequently, he worked almost exclusively in black and white from the late 1860s through the 1890s.<sup>3</sup> He also allied himself with the graphic tradition of the nineteenth century. Above all, he chose to remain an independent artist.

In the period before the late 1890s, Redon executed a number of landscapes and studies of trees in pencil, charcoal and graphite. Given his characteristic visionary imagery, these tree studies display a subtle naturalism. In later life, recalling these early years, he wrote (1910): 'Yes, an ancient wall, an

<sup>1</sup> The present sheet was dated by Klaus Berger to 1897 (op. cit., 1984, no. 749). Rudolf Koella (op. cit.), however, has noted that Berger's dating is 'from a stylistic viewpoint, admittedly, not entirely convincing'. We believe that a dating of circa 1868 is more probable.

<sup>2</sup> Three studies of trees showing similar traces of fixative applied with a broad brush, now darkened, are in the collection of the Musée du Louvre. Département des arts graphiques in Paris [inv. RF 40720, RF 40713 and RF 40711]. They are reproduced in A. Wildenstein, op. cit., 1996, nos. 1687, 1698 and 1699.

<sup>3</sup> Redon's drawings in charcoal and black chalk, called quite simply *les noirs*, were reproduced as lithographs in albums such as *La Nuit* (1886).

old tree, a certain horizon can be nourishment and a vital element for an artist – a place where he has his roots.<sup>4</sup> Such sentiments, along with recollections of the work of his teacher and friend Bresdin, are apparent not only in the *noirs*, but also in numerous studies such as the present, highly sensitive sheet. It is likely that Redon made them as exercises, freely executed and serving as an inexhaustible resource for his imagination.<sup>5</sup> They evoke his roots, his family estate Peyrelebadé in the Médoc where he regularly spent the summer months.

This drawing depicts a small tree about to come into flower. It bends under the weight of its young shoots with their spreading, antler-like growth. It is a lone tree, standing isolated among a few scattered stones. The only indication of a landscape setting is the delicately drawn horizon line. Rudolf Koella describes Redon's depictions of trees: 'Later, they often served as detail studies for larger compositions. It is odd that Redon only ever depicted leafless trees sketched with a precision and hardness of line learnt from Ingres, a technique which heightens the austerity of the motif.'<sup>6</sup> No evidence of a later work related to the present sheet has been found.

Redon's early work stands under the influence of Romanticism both formally and in terms of content – Goya and Delacroix, Corot and Bresdin are the artists that he repeatedly evokes. In addition, and unusually for a French artist, Redon's studies of trees bear an astonishing resemblance to the tree studies of Caspar David Friedrich produced some fifty years earlier [Fig. 1]. Redon wanted to place 'the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible',<sup>7</sup> just as Friedrich had.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited after John Rewald, 'Odilon Redon', in exhib. cat., *Redon, Moreau, Bresdin*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York and The Art Institute of Chicago, 1961-2, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Odilon Redon, *À Soi-Même - Journal (1867-1915)*, Paris 1922 (1961), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Koella, 'Odilon Redon', in *Nabis und Fauves*, op. cit., 1982-3, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Redon, *À Soi-Même*, op. cit., p. 30.



Fig. 1: Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *Dead Tree*, dated *den 26. May 1806*, pencil on paper, 279 x 1900 mm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett [inv. C 1927-73]