

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST



ODILON REDON

Bordeaux 1840 - 1916 Paris

La Terrible / L'ange déchu

Charcoal and black chalk, with stumping and erasing, on cream laid paper altered to a golden tone; c.1871.
Signed lower right: ODILON REDON.

425 x 335 mm

PROVENANCE: Wolfgang Gurlitt, Linz – Galerie Claude Bernard, Paris – Estate of Mrs Monique Uzielli
– Private collection, Great Britain

LITERATURE: Alec Wildenstein (ed.), *Odilon Redon. Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, Paris 1994, II
(*Mythes et Légendes*), no. 1168, p. 217, repr.

EXHIBITIONS: *Odilon Redon*, Neue Galerie, Linz 1952, no. 64 (?)

*Even if the ideal is precise, art, on the contrary, surely draws all its power from its eloquence, its brilliance, its greatness in those things which leave to the imagination the task of defining them.*¹

Odilon Redon was born in Bordeaux in 1840. A sickly child, he was brought up by an uncle at Peyrelebadé in the Médoc, where his father owned a vineyard. Memories – good and bad – saw him return to the estate on a regular basis in adulthood and provided him with an endless source of creative stimulus.

Redon seriously considered taking up a career as an architect and writer despite his overriding interest in painting. His friendship with Mallarmé and his study of scientific writings deeply influenced his pictorial output. He studied painting under Stanislas Gorin in Bordeaux and briefly, although unsuccessfully, under Jean-Léon Gérôme in Paris. He learned printing techniques from Rodolphe Bresdin. He served in the Franco-Prussian war and after leaving the army decided to concentrate on painting and drawing. He settled in Paris and took an active part in the artistic and intellectual life of the city. He began work on what was to be a large body of highly original charcoal drawings which he called his *Noirs*.² These drawings conjure up a strange world of subjective, melancholic fantasy. Published as lithographs, they reached a wider public and were to see Redon classified as a Symbolist – a label he deprecated.³

¹ Odilon Redon, 'Writings on Bresdin', in *Odilon Redon – Gustave Moreau – Rodolphe Bresdin*, exhib. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 4 December 1961 – 4 February 1962, p. 159 ff

² Redon commented on his discovery of charcoal in a letter to Edmond Picard: 'Around 1875, everything went by itself with pencil and charcoal, that flying, elusive powder that volatilized in the hand. And so I remained true to this material because it was the closest to me. (...) I have to emphasize that charcoal does not create anything cheerful, only serious'; Odilon Redon, 'Confidences d'Artiste', in *L'Art Moderne*, [Paris 1894], reprint 1989.

³ Richard Hobbs, *Odilon Redon*, in Jane Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art*, 1996, XXVI, p. 71 f.

LE CLAIRE

KUNST

SEIT 1982

In the peace of his early life, troubled by impressions rather than by happenings, and dominated by an awesome imagination, Redon developed a profound attraction for violence, movement, even terror. That Redon's work drew much of its strength from ineffaceable childhood impressions is a circumstance on which he was to insist again and again in an effort to explain to others and to himself the strange visions visited upon him.⁴ In his 'Notes' he wrote: 'I owe to my country those sorrowful faces (...) which I have drawn because I have seen them and because my eyes, as a child, preserved them from the intimate echoes of my soul.'⁵

The French writer Théophile Gautier described Redon's *Noirs* with the following words: 'His charcoal drawings employ shadow, and within this shadow the larvae of superstition move in confusion and disarray, the timid spectres of sleeplessness, the nocturnal terrors, shuddering qualms of conscience that turn at the slightest sound, monstrous dreams that are dispelled only when powerlessness overcomes them, dark fantasies that would astound the day, in short, all that is morose, misshapen and in some way terrifying which the soul conceals in the depths of its ultimate and deepest cavern.'⁶

In 1881, Redon exhibited a dozen drawings at the gallery attached to the weekly journal *La Vie Moderne*.⁷ One of the sheets exhibited was *L'Ange déchu* [Fig.1], a charcoal drawing now in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo. The present charcoal and black chalk drawing is a variant of the Kröller-Müller drawing and bears a close resemblance to it. An angel, captive in an iron corset attached to a chain, is pulled down to Earth. Shown behind the angel in the present drawing are the heavenly scales of justice on which man's earthly life is weighed.

In his interpretation Redon would appear to call heavenly justice into question. A powerful luminosity radiates from the heart of his angel and her eyes, indeed her entire facial expression seem sorrowful and dejected. Has she been punished and cast from Heaven unjustly?

⁴ John Rewald, 'Odilon Redon', in exhib. cat., New York 1961-2, op. cit., p. 10 ff.

⁵ Redon, 'Notes' (1910), *A soi-même*, Paris 1922, p. 112

⁶ Théophile Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire*, preface to *Charles Baudelaire, Les fleurs du mal*, posthumous, enlarged edn. in [Charles Asselineau and Théodore de Banville (eds.)], *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, I, Paris 1868 (this Engl. trans. based on the German version of the citation, trans. Heinrich Mattutat. in *Baudelaire über Gautier, Gautier über Baudelaire. Eine Dichterfreundschaft*, Kassel 1983, p. 70 f).

⁷ The French literary and art journal *La Vie moderne* was published from 1879 to 1883. Many leading writers were among its contributors. The editorial offices were attached to an art gallery which staged ground-breaking exhibitions of French Impressionist painting.

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST



Fig. 1: Odilon Redon, *L'Ange déchu*, 1871, charcoal on paper.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo