ODILON REDON: THE COLOR OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

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ABSTRACT

“Odilon Redon: The Color of the Unconscious” is the first modern study of the influential color work of French Symbolist Odilon Redon (1840-1916). Redon established himself in the 1880s with black lithographs and charcoals, yet around 1890 he developed an extensive body of luminous oil paintings and pastels. Their astonishing colors puzzled commentators of his era including J. K. Huysmans, Paul Signac, and Leo Tolstoy. I contend that Redon’s color work signals a shift in form’s relationship to color and color’s relationship to mimesis a generation before art historians often locate the invention of abstraction.

To explore this argument the dissertation first examines Redon’s relationship with Eugène Delacroix, showing that Redon embraced what he characterized as Delacroix’s “moral” color rather than Charles Blanc’s advocacy of line. Chapter Two then looks at Redon’s Yeux Clos paintings, in which his novel uses of color develop. This chapter analyzes Redon’s relationship to neo-Impressionist color as well as his friendship with Paul Gauguin to show that Redon’s color develops alongside new technologies of pigment synthesis and explores identifications with French colonial subjects, resulting in a palette Redon described as “color derived from an Other.” Chapter Three examines Redon’s portraits of women alongside contemporaneous works on the unconscious mind to demonstrate color’s centrality to signal interiority in Redon’s portraits of “la femme nouvelle.” The final chapter and conclusion take up Redon’s relationship to Paul Cézanne,
Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, and Redon’s reception at the American 1913 Armory Show to trace the afterlife of Redon’s color in the development of modern art. Overall, the dissertation demonstrates that color’s capacity to express interiority is a crucial aspect of Redon's legacy.

Drawing on a range of French and Dutch archival materials from the Archives Nationales, the Musée d’Orsay and the Rijksmuseum as well as the André Mellerio archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, this dissertation examines Redon’s late color work as a means to address broader art historical debates about the nature of color in the development of abstraction, the relationship of technology in fin-de-siècle representation, and the role of the spectator in viewing artwork.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


RMA: Unpublished letters between Redon and Andries Bonger in the Rijksmuseum Prentenkabinet, Amsterdam

AMA: André Mellerio Archives, Art Institute of Chicago Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Chicago.
INTRODUCTION

Homer treats of two different kinds of beings and actions, visible and invisible. This distinction cannot be made in painting, where everything is visible, and visible in but one way.¹

—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry

To borrow a term from David Batchelor, Western writers about art and aesthetics have long exhibited a disciplinary “chromophobia.”² Despite color’s centrality to painting, color in Western art has long been treated as a marginal subject of study at best. Plato condemned color as a cosmetic masking form, gendering color feminine and secondary, and form masculine and primary. Renaissance writers maintained a dichotomy between colorire and disegno, color and line, and politicized this divide: northern Venice was accused by Giorgio Vasari, writing from central Italy, of using bright color to hide a regional lack of skill in drawing.³ The seventeenth-century French Académie would see the clash of the Rubénistes and Poussinistes in which color was equated with the external, the feminine, the seductive, and the superficial.⁴ Charles LeBrun declared color an alien and foreign contaminant to true art: “If the merit of something is the greater, the less it depends on another thing foreign to it; it follows that the merit of design (dessin) is infinitely above that of color.”⁵ Kant described color as “accidental”—phenomenon and not noumenon; to John Locke color was a secondary, not primary, quality of an object. The erroneous belief, popularized by eighteenth-century art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, that classical statues were white and unpainted, rather than polychromatic and painted, contributed to the impression that the fine arts were properly concerned
entirely with form.⁶ Although color is a key term for artists in the late nineteenth century, the time which concerns this study, when Félix Bracquemond in his book *Du Dessin et de la couleur* (1885) described color, it was as an object’s most superficial quality—and in his characterization he had the tradition of hundreds of years of Western prejudice behind him.⁷

Thanks to the lithographic series *Dans le rêve* (1879), exhibitions at the magazine office of *La Vie Moderne* (1881) and the newspaper *Le Gaulois* (1882), and to the depiction of his work in Joris Karl Huysmans’ *A Rebours* (1884), Odilon Redon was known to the European, and particularly the Symbolist, avant-garde as an artist of shadowy lithographs and charcoal “noirs” depicting literary, mythological, mystical, musical, and biblical themes. Many of his lithographs were printed as portfolios of book illustrations, and his early reputation was as an illustrator of Stéphane Mallarmé, Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Gustave Flaubert. When he first showed his pastels and oils at the Durand-Ruel gallery in 1894, his unusual, non-local use of colors bewildered his critics.

Camille Mauclair, art critic of the *Mercure de France*, visited the show and commented on *The Golden Cell* (*La Cellule d’Or*) (fig. 0.1): “But I scarcely understand the relationship between the colors and the composition and the subject. Why a blue here and gold there? People will tell me: because the artist liked it. But this explanation, which I would accept with respect to Monet or Renoir, does not satisfy me in this case. There is some pattern and I cannot grasp it.”⁸ Leo Tolstoy similarly found that particular oil painting, with its blue profile enhanced by metallic paint, to be inexplicable and indicative of a maddening trend towards hermeticism and elitism in art. In *What is Art?*,
his 1895 book-length attack on art for art’s sake, he quoted a letter from his daughter, Tatiana Sukhotin-Tolstoy, who had seen the work in Paris:

I was to-day [to the galleries] … I looked at the pictures conscientiously and carefully, but again felt the same stupefaction and ultimate indignation… One of [the artists exhibiting at Durand-Ruel], whose name I could not make out, it was something like Redon, had painted a blue face in profile. On the whole face there is only this blue tone, with white-of-lead.9

Tolstoy responded: “We are bound to conclude that this art [Redon’s] is unintelligible to the great masses only because it is very bad art, or even is not art at all.”10 Tolstoy’s indignation has the same basis as Mauclair’s: what is at work in Redon’s color? Why is a face, normally flesh-toned, represented in blue and white? To the Russian author, the artist’s simultaneously inscrutable, hermetic, and potentially incompetent deployment of color flew in the face of art’s very purpose, which was to be universally legible. Tolstoy longed for a world in which art might be composed of signs readable by all men and women. In contrast, Redon’s curious colors were legible only to the initiated and were therefore not just aesthetically but also politically suspect.

Perhaps most significant was the painter and critic Paul Signac’s dismissal of the use of non-mimetic color in Redon’s second exhibition of color works at Durand-Ruel in 1899. Signac wrote, “[Redon] seeks out what is unusual merely for the effect and to be free to handle color as he pleases.”11 This “free” use of color flew in the face of what Signac, in his now-celebrated essay “D’Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme” (“From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism”), published that same year, would see as the historical trajectory which united Eugène Delacroix’s harnessing of the French
chemist Chevreul’s color theories with Georges Seurat’s “scientific” pointillist technique. Redon’s deployment of color, to Signac, lacks adequate grounding in scientific theory. It presented color “merely for the effect,” but with no apparent logic to tame color’s decorative or exotic qualities. Redon’s name and an account of his “free” handling of color are noticeably absent from Signac’s historic essay on Neo-Impressionist color. Signac’s dismissal of Redon as a colorist indicates the terms by which the legacies of Delacroix and Chevreul were contested by the polemical painter-colorists of the Parisian fin-de-siècle.

Redon appeared the next year as a key figure in Maurice Denis’ painting Homage to Cézanne (1900), where preparatory sketches by Denis indicate that Redon’s use of color was understood as counter to the deployment of color in painting by Paul Cézanne that Signac favored. Three years later, Denis described Redon’s color work as “violently exotic” art that reflected the “caprices of the unconscious.”¹² Émile Bernard, the painter and critic, associated Redon’s color with madness and satanic rituals in a 1904 article in the journal L’Occident.¹³ Mauclair and Signac’s suspicion towards Redon’s use of color and his sudden shift to a high-keyed palette after years of monochrome lithography and charcoal set the tone for subsequent scholarship on the artist. Their characterizations echo longstanding prejudices against color in art, but they also let us see much about the particular status of color in Redon’s moment.

Along with many other artworks, the fate of Redon’s work in color has been subject to the persistent aesthetic biases that deemed color, and colorful work, unworthy of critical consideration.¹⁴ However, these forces alone do not explain how, specifically, Redon’s uses of color troubled his early viewers and why, in subsequent art historical
publications on the artist, his career after the 1890s—dominated as it was by an
outpouring of hundreds of colorful pastels, oils, and decorative panels—receives so little
critical attention. Redon’s color—negatively characterized as anti-natural, anti-optical,
the product of a madman or a hysterical foreign or satanic, or comprehensible only to an
elite—could not be easily boxed into a system. But, as this thesis will demonstrate, it
represented as important a rupture within post-Renaissance Western art as the Cubist
shattering of linear perspective. Redon’s conception of color responded to some of the
same social forces that led to the collapse of the idea that a painting and the viewer were
linked in continuous, real space. Redon’s coloristic innovations signal a collapse of
mimetic approaches to art, and the beginning of an increasing interest in the role of the
spectator, and take place alongside philosophical contributions and cultural shifts that
challenged the longstanding Western understanding of color. Redon’s work would be
central in re-evaluating color’s potentially autonomous function in painting, and in
positioning categories such as the Eastern, the feminine, and the decorative as central in
European painting practice.

When critics do deal with Redon’s color, what do they say? A biographical
explanation has most often been given for his shift to color, with the birth of one child,
the death of another, and his move to Bièvres in 1909 figuring as key factors in this
account. André Mellerio’s 1923 monograph, *Odilon Redon, Painter, Draftsman and
Engraver (Odilon Redon, peintre, dessinateur et graveur)* suggested that the change
brought to Redon’s life by marriage, the birth of a son, and the presence of flowers due to
a move to Bièvres—exposure to “beautiful days” and “rest in the country”—inspired
Redon’s move to showing art in color. Writers, extending Mellerio’s biographical
approach, attributed Redon’s shift from publically exhibiting black and white to exhibiting color work to his emotional recovery from the loss of his first child with the birth of his son, Arï, in 1889. In 1936, Jacques Morland related, “It was around 1896. Someone gave his young son a box of pastels. Redon entertained himself by juxtaposing the tones and making them vibrate in increasingly complicated color harmonies…it was in this way that the artist, who was approaching the age of sixty, experienced an unexpected rejuvenation.”  

Sven Sandström’s 1955 *The Imaginary World of Odilon Redon: An Iconologic Study* (*Le Monde Imaginaire d’Odilon Redon: étude iconologique*), which interprets the symbolism of scientific, mythological, and popular iconography in Redon’s works, includes a short final chapter, “The Sensualities of the Palette” (“Les Sensualités de la Palette”), that deals biographically with Redon’s work after 1890, including the color work. Of Redon’s turn to color Sandström writes that while “in his earliest works, we can discern a strong sexual inhibition visible in the hidden allusions…[t]he birth of his second son, Ari, in 1889, inaugurates a new era in his life,” attributing Redon’s work in color once again to biographical and psychological changes in the artist’s life. The curator Rosalind Bacou, granddaughter of Redon collector Gustave Fayet, wrote her doctoral dissertation and first book on Redon. She had access to the late, color Redon oeuvre through the private collection of the Fayet family, and made pleas in one 1956 essay for what she termed the “unity of his work,” or connecting Redon’s legacy in color more fully to his black-and-white practice. Yet her analysis of the move to color and its significance also strongly relies again on the use of biographical events in the artist’s life. She cites illness, financial difficulty, and the sale of the Redon family estate as reasons for Redon taking up the color palette, and concluded that by
leaving Peyrelebade, Redon “escapes” the world of his noirs.²² In recent years, Jean-François Chevrier’s book *L’Hallucination artistique: de William Blake à Sigmar Polke* included a chapter on Redon that echoes this argument. To Chevrier, color was Redon’s coping mechanism for biographical events such as the loss of his family estate Peyrelebade and the sense of “uprooting” that accompanied its sale.²³ Such arguments do not attempt to analyze or contextualize Redon’s use of color in a way that illuminates the larger context of the crisis of color in fin-de-siècle French art.

Other authors, particularly during the 1950s, use psychoanalytic explanations to illuminate Redon’s move to color. Evaluations that address color in Redon overtly psychoanalyze the artist from a Freudian perspective, diagnosing him, for example, with an inhibitory neurosis in regard to his late use of color²⁴: “We must…suspect that working in black and white rather than color satisfied a special psychological need on the part of Redon,”²⁵ begins art historian Frederick Baekeland’s study; he sees the sale of Redon’s childhood home in 1897 as the event that allowed the artist to overcome a crippling Oedipal complex and start painting in color. These readings, which include Janine Cophignon’s “Couleur et créativité: Quelques réflexions sur l'œuvre d'Odilon Redon,” in the *Revue Française de Psychanalyse* of 1978, fall into a trope of “diagnosing” the artist with a condition which manifests itself in the involuntary use of color, a presupposition which denies the artist agency in relation to his chromatic innovations.

Museum exhibitions would hint that Redon’s color works have been enormously influential to later artists and art movements. Alfred Barr described Redon’s color as the “iridescent amorphous shimmer of color which was to affect Matisse and Kandinsky.”²⁶ Yet in his chart “Cubism and Abstract Art” from 1936 (fig. 0.2), Redon is the only figure
whose influence is represented by a dotted line, indicating uncertainty—and perhaps a
dearth of scholarship—around the artist’s legacy in color and its relationship to
abstraction. André Masson connected Redon’s “free” use of color with automatic
drawing. He writes, “Some people might claim that, because of *Game of Colors* [the
mistitle of a late Redon painting], Redon is not only the precursor of Surrealism but also
of Abstract Expressionism.” In the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition, *Odilon Redon/
Gustave Moreau/ Rodolphe Bresdin*, curators John Rewald and Dore Ashton emphasize
Redon as the precursor of later painting movements. Yet there has been little scholarship
on his relationships with other painters of his own time. Thus, the image of the artist as
colorist is reduced to that of an eccentric, marginal figure possessing an “almost
involuntary singlemindedness,” his concern with non-representational color and
affective color is seen as taking place in isolation from the larger debates about color and
representation in Paris during his time. In the Museum of Modern Art catalog the shift to
color again is linked to biographical causes (“as a symbol of peace and joy, he turned to
color which thus replaced the black shadows of the sorrowful years”). Yet Redon
exhibited with the neo-Impressionists in 1886, and his correspondence and writing show
him in active engagement with the painting exhibitions and debates most central to his
moment, discrediting the characterization of Redon as an isolated or monastic artist with
little connection with the ideas and tendencies of his time.

Douglas Druick’s groundbreaking 1994 monographic exhibition at the Art Institute
of Chicago, *Prince of Dreams*, and accompanying catalogue, was the first major
assessment of the artist to include significant scholarship on Redon’s color. Essays by
Fred Leeman (“Redon et le décor” in *Odilon Redon: Prince du rêve, 1840-1916*) and
Gloria Groom (“The Late Work” in the same volume) examine Redon’s wall paintings made *in situ* for collectors’ homes. Groom examines Redon’s decorative work in color in relation to his awareness of Nabi decorative projects. Her investigation of the patronage of these projects begins to trace and analyze the complex networks of patronage around Redon the painter. Jodi Hauptman’s *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* exhibition in 2005 at the Museum of Modern Art emphasized the 2000 donation of the Ian Woodner collection of some 100 Redon works, including paintings and pastels, to the Museum of Modern Art. Rare public access to more of his late color work—including the murals located in a private collection in the estate of Fontfroide, in Narbonne, on the occasion of the Grand Palais exhibition, curated by Rudolphe Rapetti in 2011—also allowed for greater scrutiny of the color work. A recent (2014) exhibition of Redon’s color work in Basel at the Beyeler Foundation emphasized loans of rarely seen works in color from private collections.

The one book exclusively devoted to Redon and color, Klaus Berger’s monograph *Odilon Redon: Fantasy and Colour* (*Redon: Phantasie und Farbe*, 1965), catalogued some of Redon’s color paintings and pastels for the first time and attempted to note significant influences ranging from Japanese prints to the work of Paul Gauguin. Yet Berger’s text, only about fifty pages long, lacked scholarly footnotes. Berger also continues the tendency to represent Redon as an isolated and almost mystically inspired figure, dismissing his early influences as a colorist, for example, writing that “the copying of Delacroix occurred at an early stage, before he had found himself, and left little mark on his art.” Berger tracks the evolution of the style of Redon’s pastel and oil still lifes, describing Redon’s color as shifting from more observational and mimetic to
more abstract and “flat.” However, new dating of Redon’s color pastels and paintings based on account books, as well as chemical analysis of the works themselves, complicates Berger’s assumptions about the teleology of Redon’s late work in color, rendering his claims about the order in which the color works were created, and therefore his argument about Redon’s color and its progression towards abstraction, incomplete.

Dario Gamboni is the only modern scholar to look closely at how Redon used color. In his 2007 essay, “Why a Blue Here and a Gold There?,” he maps out what he terms a “diffuse semantic field, a network of formal and iconographic associations” around the colors used in a single Redon painting, *The Golden Cell.* Gamboni’s methodology relies on parsing color’s iconographic functions, a method I will call into question in Chapter Two. To Gamboni, Redon’s colors during the 1890s are keyed to specific meanings; they are literally symbolic. For example, he writes of the painting:

> Blue plays a crucial role in Redon’s colored works, not only cobalt blue but also cerulean blue, ultramarine, and other blue pigments, nuances, and mixtures. In nature, blue is associated above all with the sky and the sea, both of which Redon regarded as symbols of the infinite. In Western iconography, blue is used in images of devotion to the Virgin Mary, to whom Redon was dedicated as a six-year-old.

Ultimately, Gamboni’s reading of the colors in a single Redon painting raises more questions than it answers about the uses of color in Redon’s work. Is it useful to explain color in Redon’s work as literally symbolic, so that blue is an evocation of the infinite? Gamboni’s effort to assess Redon’s work in color in the essay suggests the futility of attempting a purely symbolic and iconographic reading of Redon’s use of color (the traditional method for approaching Redon’s *noirs*), and to my mind demonstrates that the
work requires a more historical and contextual method of analysis. We have no notes to indicate that anything quite so codified as a one-to-one iconographic equivalency of colors to emotions or meanings was at work in Redon’s mature painting. In his paintings color is, rather, ambiguous in relation to subject matter in a way that has fascinated and confounded both nineteenth-century and contemporary critics. Though Gamboni later concedes that multiple interpretations might be available for the use of blue in *The Golden Cell*, his reading stops short of accounting for the new strategies for the deployment of color in Redon and the complex reactions these usages engendered. Much work has focused on the use of signs and symbols in Redon’s art, but my hope, by choosing color as an area of study, is to go beyond iconographic interpretation to arrive at new conclusions about the shifting possibilities of the use of color and its complex relationships to representation and affect during the 1890s in France, as well as to bring out Redon’s use of color in relation to the hugely important neo-Impressionist debates about color in art of his moment.

Writers about color in painting have tended to see color as having one of four functions. Color is often seen as symbolic, having a limited number of relatively constant set meanings (as in Gamboni’s analysis). Other uses of color are seen as realistic, or “local”—these colors relate to the observed color of an object represented. Expressive color associates color with emotion or the psychological state of the artist. There are, finally, a number of aesthetic theories about color identifying harmonious color choices as a matter of a codified aesthetic or theoretical precept. My approach will pay most attention to the theories which conceive of color as affective and eliciting a set of
responses from the viewer—and will examine the extent to which such theories reimagine the role of the spectator in relation to the work of art.

Why didn’t writers address Redon’s color work more often? The development of technologies for color reproduction, from printmaking to photography, delayed the dissemination of the colors of the artworks and made it difficult for critics and art historians to analyze and respond to artists’ palettes in the absence of seeing a painting in person. Additionally, for the first half of the twentieth century a lack of critical familiarity with Redon’s color work was a result of the relative paucity of his pastels and oils in public art collections in Europe; in 1956, on the occasion of a monographic Redon exhibition at the Orangerie organized by Rosalind Bacou, curator of drawings at the Louvre, art historian Klaus Berger pointed out that the Louvre Cabinet des dessins held only three pastels by Redon.40 He noted, “[it is] easily understandable why the writers of the Redon studies from the Paris perspective could have skipped so easily over this whole group of [the color] works.”41 Alfred Werner, in 1960 in Arts Journal, remarked that until 1950 the Louvre owned only one Redon painting.42

A lack of accessible archival information on Redon’s color work further hindered scholarship on this sizable area of his artistic output. In 1913, André Mellerio, printmaking expert and a contemporary of Redon, produced a still-definitive catalogue raisonné of Redon’s black-and-white prints.43 Meanwhile, Redon’s color works remained largely uncataloged until the early 1990s. Until the 1991 acquisition of the André Mellerio papers by the Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, insufficient documentation was available to scholars on Redon’s work. Evidence even indicates that art historian Roseline Bacou excluded other scholars from access to the
materials she had at her disposal as executor of the Redon estate. Studies throughout the twentieth century therefore largely followed Mellerio’s work into an exploration of Redon’s prints, which were widely accessible and catalogued.

Critics have long seen Redon’s color work as commercial and pandering to the public, and writing on Redon’s paintings and pastels, in contrast to his noirs, has suffered since at least 1920 from the handicap of a critical perception of being “popular” and “commercial.” The essays by Fred Leeman and Kevin Sharp on Redon in Douglas Druick’s 1994 *Prince of Dreams* catalogue characterize the artist’s works in color as mere bids at earning money. Such discussions of the color work take up the relative commercial status of painting in relation to the other fine arts, but don’t examine the function of color in the paintings themselves. The recent availability of Redon’s account books makes tracking and dating painting sales one of the more concrete aspects of recent Redon scholarship, and confirms that his colorful paintings did sell relatively well and for higher prices than his prints and noirs. Yet this is no reason to dismiss the pastels and paintings out of hand.

George Roque’s 2009 book, *Art et science de la couleur*, on the influence of chemist and color theorist Eugène Chevreul, has great bearing on Redon scholarship. Although Roque does not address Redon directly, his archival and critical work on Chevreul’s legacy in Post-Impressionist painting opens up new avenues for thought about the uses of color in French painting in the 1880s and 90s, and his consideration of the importance of Charles Blanc as a mediator between young artists and Delacroix is central to the first chapter of this project. Incorporating Roque’s work into an analysis of Redon’s earliest writings on color, I interpret Redon’s propositions about color as in
dialogue with revisions of the role of color undertaken by Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Signac, and Georges Seurat, rather than seeing him, as has been traditional in Redon scholarship, as an isolated artist.

Drawing on Filiz Edna Burhan’s unpublished 1979 dissertation, “Vision and Visionaries—Nineteenth Century Psychological Theory, The Occult Sciences, and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic,” a work that outlines the importance of occult thought for Symbolist painters, I attempt to deepen our understanding of how, as Burhan put it, “psychological theory and esoteric doctrine shaped the Symbolist aesthetic program,” looking specifically at Redon’s color painting in relation to the psychological and occult thought of his time. Burhan scarcely names Redon, Cézanne, or Seurat in her dissertation, focusing instead on van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Nabis. Yet there can be no doubt that Redon’s paintings and pastels borrowed enormously from the spiritualist context he operated within. His parents, his first circles in Paris, and his collectors the Fayets were practicing Theosophists and spiritualists. This context should not be seen as any more deterministic than the spiritual, occult, and mystical beliefs of Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, or Kandinsky. In fact, often Redon exhibits considerable resistance to normative beliefs about the unconscious, or schools of thought characterizing “Wagnerian painting,” the Rosicrucian salon, or the spiritualist milieu that give his art its context, and his work never illustrates in any doctrinaire manner a particular contextualizing culture. While I by no means wish to reduce Redon’s unique and particular visual contributions to a mere programmatic adherence to “context,” I have tried to draw out these connections where they do exist, and suggest ways that Madame Blavatsky’s theosophy, spiritualism, Mesmerism, and other occult practices and esoteric
bodies of knowledge can help us better understand models for Redon’s strategies of non-
mimetic color deployment, particularly as they relate to the reification of thought, the role
of the spectator, and the radiance of color in his portraits of women.\textsuperscript{51} Such an approach
makes clear Redon’s relevance to debates about the relationship between art and vision,
color and materiality, imagination and copying from nature—subjects about which he
wrote and corresponded extensively, and topics that greatly interested Redon and his peers.

I try to avoid creating one-to-one readings of the “meaning” of colors because it
seems unlikely that Redon’s use of color followed a purely symbolic program in the way
that Gamboni suggests. Equally important, as research by Harriet K. Stratis at the Art
Institute of Chicago done in conjunction with the \textit{Prince of Dreams} exhibition
demonstrated, the colors in Redon’s pastels have altered significantly over the hundred
years since they were made. As no color records of the original pastels exist (except for
Redon’s sales records and some criticism), the analysis of individual tones or works is
treacherous. Redon’s pastels were often made from newly available aniline pigments on
brightly colored, dyed aniline paper, with some tones now faded to dull browns or silvery
greys. We know, for example, that hundreds of new coal-tar colors were invented in the
decades preceding Redon’s oil paintings and pastels, and that economic and technological
factors deeply influence the kinds of commercial pigment available for use. This problem
of fading colors predates Redon’s move to color in the late 1880s; much of his work in
black and white was made on subtly colored paper embedded with red, blue, or multi-
colored fibers, and employed tinted colored gouaches and miniscule touches of pastel
color.\textsuperscript{52} Their effect is now faded to grey or brown and hidden under darkened, oxidized
balsam fixative, but it was visible when they were first exhibited—at least one viewer writes of the subtle “impression of color” when viewing these ostensibly black-and-white works.\(^5^3\) Because pigment tones in these works have shifted significantly over time, and because the question of color’s role in art is much more complex an issue than mere color symbolism, I look beyond iconographic readings of the symbolism of specific colors to focus on strategies of representation and affective spectatorship underpinning Redon’s uses of color.

When Nicolas Bourriaud described a “relational turn” in the art of the 1990s, the artists he briefly cites as precedents follow a lineage that begins with Delacroix, then travels through Redon to Marcel Duchamp.\(^5^4\) Bourriaud argues that an increased concern with the role of the spectator in relation to the work of art links these three artists—"the beholder makes the picture," Bourriaud quotes Duchamp as saying. This assessment of Delacroix's painting is one in which the picture holds an emotion which the viewer activates, and to Bourriaud such interactive and affective qualities in the work of art presage the development of what Bourriaud calls Relational Aesthetics. While this historical trajectory is a mere passing mention in his seminal book, occupying the space of less than a paragraph, Bourriaud's "relational turn" has been a sufficiently effective explanatory move in the description of contemporary art practice of the 1990s and early 2000s that his strategy to ground his theory in nineteenth-century painting seems worth pursuing further. I propose that it is by scrutinizing the shift in French painting around the role of color, rather than line or form, at the turn of the nineteenth century that best helps us deepen our understanding of the notion of relational art as it emerges from the history of painting. Studying color in Symbolist painting—and particularly color in Redon's
paintings and pastels—reveals the development of the use of colors as a strategy to create affective and evocative works of art. Rather than strive to create works that are beautiful or aesthetically accomplished, artists like Redon instead attempt to establish novel relationships or evoke unique experiences in the viewer, a development immensely important for the trajectory of late twentieth-century art. By using color not as a representational quality proper to an object depicted, but rather as a quality that activates certain affective reactions in the viewer, the works may be seen as a critical point of mediation between Delacroix and Baudelaire’s notions of the "moral" role of color and contemporary artistic and critical propositions about the unique role of the viewer in activating, participating in, or even completing the work of art as the defining element of certain tendencies in contemporary art practice.

Pascal Rousseau’s 1999 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou and accompanying catalogue, Robert Delaunay, 1906-1914: de l'impressionisme à l'abstraction, and 2003 exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay Aux origines de l’abstraction 1800-1914 have been important methodological resources for this project. Rousseau’s work examines the relationship between abstraction in the fine arts and the scientific, spiritual, and philosophical theories contemporaneous to its origins. Although they don’t deal explicitly with Redon, Rousseau’s catalogs and that of his colleague George Roque have been crucial to my project for their historical imagination and archival zeal. Most recently, the work of young scholars Allison Morehead, Natasha Eaton, and Joshua Yumibe on color in nineteenth-century England and France and its relationship to the history of science, the politics of empire, and the technologies of cinema in the period around the turn of the last century have been my models for the culturally and historically grounded
examination of color. These scholars have helped me see that to examine the role of color in a rapidly changing culture is to look at the changing status of the categories of the primitive, the childlike, the phantasmagorical, and the feminine with which color is closely aligned.

During the 1990s Alec Wildenstein published a Redon painting and pastel catalogue raisonné. This valuable tome suffers from some trouble in dating the color works, which it groups iconographically. New information from account books of Redon’s sales, made public as a part of the 2011 Redon retrospective at the Grand Palais and accompanying catalogue, *Prince of Dreams (Prince du Rêve)*, edited by Rudolphe Rapetti, allows scholars to more accurately date and confirm the titles of artworks, above all the color paintings. Such precision lets us now clarify arguments and teleological assumptions about the color paintings previously based on conjecture. Reproducing and examining even Redon’s most obscure color works no longer poses the challenges of technological limitations or expense that plagued previous scholarship, while previously unknown short stories by Redon have been published in French (2011). I translated one of these new texts for the first time into English (Appendix 1) and included a letter between Redon and the state in the Archives Nationales in Paris that had not previously been published as Appendix 2; these give us new insights into Redon’s relationship with both French colonialism and the state, and make the case for Redon’s interest in what I term creole identity. Such documents, I will argue, are important artifacts in starting to examine Redon’s radical relationship to color, and the importance of his project vis-à-vis the neo-Impressionist palette.
The first chapter analyses Redon’s relationship with Delacroix, looking closely at the young artist’s writing and his copies of Delacroix’s paintings, especially the *Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python* (*Apollon vainqueur du serpent Python*) at the Louvre. I argue that this copy’s attempt to engage with “moral color” (an overlooked term Redon borrows from critic Charles Blanc to describe Delacroix’s use of color and makes his own) has implications for the use of color throughout Redon’s career, as evinced by Redon’s nearly obsessive repetition of the Apollo theme. To the young Redon “moral color” indicates color’s capacity to “dissolve” form and line and take their place as the primary affective element of a painting for the spectator. This traces a radically different use of Delacroix’s painting and its legacy than the master narrative put forward by Paul Signac in his essay “From Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism.” Redon’s later experiments with Delacroix’s *Apollo*, his writings on Delacroix’s color, and his attempts to copy Delacroix’s works show his remaining indebtedness to Baudelaire’s characterization of Delacroix as a painter of the imagination.

Chapter Two focuses on Redon’s early experiments with non-mimetic color and painting, from 1889 to 1894, to examine the social and cultural context of his first exhibitions, particularly as his art came up against Neo-Impressionist colorists. Redon’s first color paintings continue to react to and challenge Charles Blanc’s chromatic xenophobia about the relationship of color to the tradition of French art, and create a strong association between non-mimetic color and non-Western art. Analyzing Redon’s depictions of figures with closed eyes, I argue that these depict non-Western people, an overlooked element of these paintings. Redon set his art of “closed eyes” alongside Gauguin’s experiments in primitive color, creating work that identifies chromatically
with those “others” excluded from hegemonic French culture. Redon’s use of aniline pigments further problematizes this association of color with the primitive and the exotic, leading to what I describe as a “creole” use of color.

Redon’s portraits of women use radiant color to suggest the exteriorization of the “spirit.” While these paintings have been described as reactionary depictions of the femme nouvelle, in Chapter Three I suggest that the mystical use of color was consistent with a version of the new woman described by some critics, notably Marius Ary Leblond in his 1901 essay on “Les Peintres de la Femme Nouvelle,” and the critic Jules Bois. Others of Redon’s critics frequently alleged that his art, especially in its use of arbitrary coloration, exhibited the symptoms of mental illness in relation to medical theories of the unconscious developed in the 1890s by J.-M. Charcot and his students in Paris; I show how Redon fights this pejorative characterization with his own conception of color as an emission of the healthy “natural unconscious,” a theory of the unconscious mind that aligns with Alfred Binet’s experimental physiology.

Chapter Four looks at Redon’s colorful still lifes in conversation with paintings by Maurice Denis and Paul Cézanne. Redon’s notion of “mental ebullience” can be seen in direct dialogue here with other, competing notions of the relationship between color, painting, and the representation of visual experience. Denis’ painting Homage to Cézanne suggests that far from being, as critics persist in stating, an isolated figure, Redon’s role in debates at the time around color and representation was active, and can even be characterized as central and polemical. I examine his still lifes to generate an understanding of how his process of painting from nature models the link between internal mental activity and external stimulus, and draw from Denis the term “plastic
equivalent,” which describes the role of color as a material element to carry emotion to the spectator of a work of art.

In the conclusion I consider how two important exhibitions of Redon’s color work, the 1904 Salon d’Automne and the 1913 Armory Show, reified and diffused his reputation as a colorist among new generations of artists in France and the United States. These shows demonstrate the heritage of Redon’s attack on local and mimetic color, especially to Fauve painters. Matisse’s much-discussed radical and often “primitive” uses of color in the period 1904-05 owe much to Redon’s color. American artists saw Redon’s chromatically fantastical floral still life paintings as the direct inheritors of Delacroix’s colorist painting; Marcel Duchamp advocated for Redon and the visionary strain in his work, creating paintings of “eidetic fluids” and colorful mental emanations after Redon.

Redon’s paintings ultimately generate new ways to understand the role of color in twentieth-century art, and posit new propositions about the centrality of perceptual subjectivity in visual representation. Redon’s work in color overturns the traditional relationship of color to line and form. His identification with the position of cultural “outsider” in French art—attacking the historical dichotomies in academic painting from a non-French perspective—proposes a resistant politics for the use of non-local color in painting at the end of the nineteenth century. Preceding the often-discussed impact of the collapse of mimetic perspectival space in painting with Cubism, we can see Redon’s violation of the mimetic use of color as anticipating those shifts and locating them in a surprisingly obscure area in the history of art.


10 Ibid., 105.


15 The book largely focuses on the artist’s achromatic work. Of its 170 pages, a consideration of the color work starts on page 136; this proportion of the consideration of color as the final coda to Redon’s life is typical of monographic studies of the artist.


17 Ibid., 71-73.


Baekeland, “Depressive Themes,” 186.

There are over a dozen references to Redon in Barr’s book on Matisse. Yet the initial importance of the work is dialed down as drafts of the charts progress. See Alfred Barr, *Matisse: His Art and his Public* (1951, reprint; New York: Arno Press, 1966).


André Masson’s article “Mystic with a Method,” *Art News* 55, no. 9 (January 1957): 61.

Ibid., 62.


“Ibid., 127.


Ibid.


See Gamboni, revised introduction to *The Brush and the Pen*, 2011, xiv.

Two chapters of this catalogue written by Kevin Sharp and dealing with the color phases of his career are entitled “Redon and the Marketplace Before 1900,” and “Redon and the Marketplace After 1900,” with subheadings such as “Food on the Table” and “The Late Auction Market” Druick, *Prince of Dreams*, 236-256, 258-280.

See the CD-ROM accompanying the exhibition catalog *Prince of Dreams (Prince du Rêve)*, edited by Rudolphe Rapetti in 2011.


Burhan doesn’t specifically consider Redon’s painting due to, as she puts it in her introduction, “the paucity of [his] literary legacy.” (“Although artists such as Odilon Redon, Cézanne and Seurat had doubtless participated in the collective mentality of Symbolism, the paucity of their literary legacy to the twentieth century has effectively prohibited them from playing a large role in this study. Conversely, the wealth of the documentary heritage left by van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Nabis has allowed these artists to assume a central position in this investigation of Symbolism.”) (Ibid., 4).

Unfortunately, Suzy Lévy’s publication of occultist pianist Ricardo Viñes’ letters (*Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes : Odilon Redon et le milieu occultiste*. Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1987) only emerged in 1987, and the André Mellerio archives were only purchased by the Art Institute of Chicago and made open to the public for research in the 1990s. Had more material been available to Burham regarding the work of Redon in 1979, I believe she would have found it of great interest.


CHAPTER ONE

“Moral Color”: Odilon Redon’s Copies of Eugène Delacroix’s
Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python

The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors.¹

—Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence

Odilon Redon and Eugène Delacroix’s “Moral Color”

To understand how Odilon Redon’s experiments in color began, we need to look at his relationship with Eugène Delacroix, the great nineteenth-century colorist. Redon—the Symbolist painter who famously showed first black-and-white lithography and charcoals, and then influential non-mimetic color paintings and pastels—would copy Delacroix’s paintings, particularly his Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python, 1850, on the ceiling of the Louvre Gallery of Apollo, almost obsessively throughout his career; Redon also modeled his public persona on Delacroix’s self-presentation in his Journals.² The origins of Redon’s use of color and the mystery of his public transition from monochrome lithographer to a painter of chromatically innovative canvases begins not with the Durand-Ruel exhibition of 1894, where color paintings like The Golden Cell were displayed alongside achromatic work, but with his relationship with an artist forty-two years his senior. According to the critic Walter Pach (and to Redon in his journal, To Myself³), Delacroix and Redon only came into contact once, at a ball in Paris. Nevertheless, Redon’s copious copies of Delacroix’s paintings, the content and form of his writings about the artist, and the archival records documenting his repeated attempts
to engage in an official capacity with Delacroix’s work,⁴ establish the enormous and lasting influence on Redon of Delacroix’s use of color.

Such material indicates that Redon’s reception of Delacroix’s use of color challenges the notion of the latter’s scientific influence on color in painting, popularized by Paul Signac in his influential essay, “From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism.”⁵ Art historians have largely adopted what Signac saw as Delacroix’s influence on the formal techniques of the French painting of the 1880s. Divisionism, attention to optical mixture, and what Signac described as Delacroix’s “methodical and scientific technique” were canonized as Delacroix’s heritage.⁶ Signac famously linked the formal attributes of Delacroix’s painting style, which paired tâches of complementary colors to achieve optical vibrancy, to the techniques of the neo-Impressionist painters, including his own pointillism. From the moment of the publication of Signac’s essay, in which Delacroix was christened the father of the divided brushstroke, until such contemporary analyses such as Jack J. Spector's work on Delacroix, critics have maintained this formal reading of Delacroix's influence on the painting of the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷ His contribution to the divided brushstroke, the comma-like application of paint, and inspirations from the scientific color theory of Michel Eugène Chevreul has been canonized in the history of French art as leading to the pointillism of Georges Seurat, Camille Pissarro, and Signac, as well as to the earliest forms of twentieth-century painterly abstraction.

Redon, in his unpublished 1878 essay “Delacroix,” takes up a relatively little-known discussion of what he called Delacroix’s “moral color,” a term borrowed from the critic Charles Blanc.⁸ This notion of “moral color” suggests a different interpretation of
Delacroix’s influence, one that establishes an alternative lineage leading to what are often seen as the eccentric Symbolist uses of color. Redon’s original reading of Delacroix’s painting as exhibiting “moral color” and Delacroix’s profound influence on Symbolist painting initiate in nineteenth-century art a compelling counter-narrative to the painter’s legacy as a colorist running parallel to the so-called “scientific” and primarily optical focus of neo-Impressionist color theory and technique. While Paul Cézanne’s copies of Delacroix have received scholarly attention, and Chevreul’s enormous influence on painters of the nineteenth century has been the subject of a recent study, there has not been an examination of Redon’s profoundly emulative relationship to Delacroix.

Redon’s Early Years

During the two decades between 1820 and 1840, while Delacroix was a young, revolutionary painter in Paris, Bertrand Redon, Odilon Redon’s father, “the first-born in a family of means that had fallen on hard times,” was making a small fortune in lumber and in the slave trade in New Orleans, Louisiana. The same year that Bertrand sailed for New Orleans, Redon’s mother, Louisiana-born Marie “Odile” Guérin, was being baptized in the city’s Saint Louis Cathedral. The daughter of two French immigrants to America, Jean Gabriel Jerome Guerin and Antoinette Chapus, the créole Odile was a mere fourteen years old when she married the thirty-seven-year-old Bertrand in a Catholic ceremony in 1834. He planned to bring the family back to France and purchased a home there the following year; she was pregnant with their second child during the boat journey that returned the family to France. This second son, Bertrand Jean, was born April 22, 1840, at 10 a.m. on the rue Neuve-Saint-Seurin in Bordeaux. He was named after his father,
but nicknamed Odilon after his mother. A local newspaper notes that he was “chétif,” or “puny,” and so given to a wet nurse on the family property at Listrac; the article concludes: “official art has always remained unaware of Odilon Redon, the greatest painter who was born in our town.”

Growing up in an era before either automobile or bicycle, Redon’s childhood was spent at home in Peyrelebade (fig. 1.1), the Redon family’s newly-purchased sixteenth-century estate in the flat, wine-growing countryside just north-west of Bordeaux, where, he recalled, “the exterior life was very little, the interior life was everything.” The property was isolated from the city, and even fifty years after Redon was born, a letter describes its main attractions as “good milk, fruits you gather by hand, old wines, potatoes and summer green beans.” Redon was the second of the five children relatively close in age, four boys and one girl, a set of siblings known to their Bordeaux hometown as “the five fingers of a hand.” Epileptic as a child, a condition that carried a social stigma at this time, the young Redon was kept hidden by his family and left to his own devices until at least age eleven. At times his family lived in Bordeaux while Odilon, cared for by an elderly relative, remained in the countryside. Accounts show that his mother took him to the local shrine of the basilica of Verdelais, south-east of Bordeaux, in attempts to cure him of his epilepsy, and that the alleviation of Bertrand Jean Redon’s seizures at age 10 was registered as one of the 133 miracles documented there.

Redon was by all accounts a mediocre student, although he excelled at music lessons (like his talented older brother, Ernest, who would become a professional violinist), and took watercolor and printmaking classes with local artists Stanislas Gorin and Rodolphe Bresdin. Redon liked to wander in the vineyards and swampy plains
surrounding his home, doodling trees and clouds in his notebooks. Isolated socially and geographically, Redon romanticized his family’s American origins, retaining a strong identification with Créole myth and Listrac legend. As a young adult, he wrote autobiographical short fiction about his mother’s native Louisiana in the style of Edgar Allan Poe, one of his literary idols.

Redon had been oriented towards Delacroix through his childhood in Bordeaux. Whether he remembered it or not, in his hometown he had seen "key works by Delacroix at the exhibitions of the Société des Amis des Arts in Bordeaux" at age 11.21 His first art teacher, the Romantic watercolorist of landscapes and port-scenes, Stanislas Gorin, had "directed Redon to study the works of Delacroix, at that time visible in the Musée de Bordeaux."22 At around the time of its publication Redon had read the poet Charles Baudelaire’s “Salon of 1859” at the recommendation one of his Bordeaux friends, the naturalist Armand Clavaud, and been much impressed by the poet’s homage to the imagination and to Delacroix. On one of his first visits to Paris, when Redon was just nineteen, the young artist saw Delacroix in person and, star-struck, stealthily followed him home through the city streets at night.23 The famous painter made a deep impression on the teenage boy. Redon recounts:

In 1861, Delacroix attended a ball at the Hôtel de Ville, where my brother and I were presented to him. I was then twenty-one years old, my brother was younger; so we did not venture to speak much to him, but all evening we followed him from group to group in order to hear every word he should say…. When he left the ball…. We walked behind him through the streets. He went slowly and seemed to be meditating, so we kept at a distance in order not to disturb him.
There had been rain, and I remember how he picked his steps to avoid the wet places. But when he reached the house on the Right Bank where he had lived for so many years, he seemed to realize that he had taken his way toward it out of habit, and he turned back and walked, still slowly and pensively, through the city and across the river, to the Rue de Furstenberg where he was to die, two years afterwards.²⁴

The story shows the much younger artist watching the older one, awe-struck. The generational portrait it paints is one of an older figure so stuck in his ways that he doesn’t initially notice that he can’t find his way home; close to death, Delacroix is ripe for reinterpretation and reinvention as well as homage.

His father wanted a Redon to become an architect,²⁵ so the teenage Odilon dutifully took, and twice failed, the examination for the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris for the study of architecture; his identification paper from 1862 identifies him as an architecture student from Bordeaux.²⁶ In 1864, after his second failure, his father deposited him in the prestigious independent atelier of Jean-Léon Gérôme for training in drawing and painting.²⁷ His family wrote in 1868 that they toasted the exhibition of his first painting in the Salon with two bottles of their family wine.²⁸ Unused to academic pedagogy after his isolated childhood, however, Odilon did not thrive in Paris. “I was tortured by the professor,” Redon recalls.²⁹ He quit his tenure at Gérôme’s studio after only four months, although he would continue to list himself as a student of Gérôme’s for over a decade.³⁰

Redon returned to Bordeaux and resumed his studies with Bresdin. In the face of so many potential ateliers in which Redon might have situated himself in Paris, this was an odd choice. In the early 1860s, Redon might have entered the atelier of Charles Gleyre
along with Bazille, Renoir, Monet, or Sisley, or that of Thomas Couture, training ground of Manet and Puvis de Chavannes. It is more than likely that Redon met some of these students of independent ateliers, his peers in age, during his months spent copying in the Louvre. The fees for such affiliations were relatively modest, and these studios explicitly distrusted the academic system; Redon’s own bitter memories of Gérôme’s studio are presaged by Couture’s remark, “I have never been able to learn by academic methods. I cannot say whether academic teaching was bad or good, for I never understood it.” Perhaps Redon’s father would not have supported his preparation in studios outside of the academic system that conferred public legitimation upon artists; the Redons were not bohemians, or perhaps they had other reasons for wanting their son close to home.

Delacroix’s notoriety as someone repeatedly declined by the Academy for membership, as well as his famous rivalry with Ingres, may have compelled Redon to identify with the painter more strongly after his exit from Gérôme’s atelier. Ingres, Delacroix’s rival in the battle of line against color, was the artist with whom Gérôme was most closely associated stylistically—both painters shared an academic, linear neoclassical style. Delacroix was, furthermore, championed by the regional, provincial artists and thinkers Redon associated with in Bordeaux, especially Gorin and Bresdin. Bresdin was a refugee from Paris—an impoverished friend of Baudelaire’s who had settled in Bordeaux and taught art lessons between there and Toulouse during the period 1864-1869.

As Redon’s criticism of the Salon of 1868, published in his hometown paper La Gironde (Bordeaux), demonstrates, Redon had nothing but contempt for the naturalism in
the visual arts that marked both Manet’s succès de scandale with Olympia, and Millet’s retrospective at the 1867 World’s Fair in Paris. In his review Redon takes up Baudelaire’s statement about the relationship of imagination to painting—“the visible word is only a store of images and signs” to which the imagination “gives place and relative value.”³⁶ It is during this time that Redon’s taste for Delacroix as Baudelaire’s painter of the imagination emerges most clearly. The critic had long maintained that “a picture should first and foremost reproduce the intimate thought of the artist, who dominates the model as the creator dominates his creation.”³⁷ In the essay “The Salon of 1859,” Baudelaire crowned the imagination “Queen of the Faculties,” associating it not just with flights of fancy, but also with a God-like power of composition. “It is the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the soul; and this he [Delacroix] has done—allow me, please, to emphasize this point—with no other means but color and contour; he has done it better than anyone else,”³⁸ he wrote. Baudelaire imagined a painter declaring “I prefer the monsters of my fancy to what is positively trivial,”³⁹ and sees Delacroix as the embodiment of the painter of the imagination, calling him “one of the rare elect…his imagination, burning like a chapel aglow, blazes with every flame and every shade of crimson…. like the banks of glowing candles before a shrine,”⁴⁰ and a “painter of the soul.”⁴¹ Redon, too, appealed to a higher reality that is “felt” rather than “seen.”⁴² In his own criticism he wrote that the realism of Manet was lacking in “moral life, [life] of the interior.” Six months later, Redon praised Bresdin as a lithographer of the “imagination,” drawing a clear parallel between his Bordeaux master and Baudelaire’s Delacroix.⁴³
Copy of Apollo

Redon copied Delacroix’s painting *The Apollo Ceiling (Le Plafond d’Apollon, d’après Delacroix)*, in 1868 (fig. 1.2). The painting, at 71 x 65 cm, is not a large work. The copy might have been easily carried by the 28-year-old art student *manqué*; it is many times smaller than the twenty-five foot square Delacroix ceiling it mimics. At the time, Redon had permission to paint from master works in the Louvre, and his copy’s close attention to the colors of the original corroborates that substantial on-site study took place. Current scholarship notes that “[while] the copy might have been made from a photograph, some *in situ* observation is indicated by the faithfulness of the colors,” but little attention has been paid to the role of color in this very early Redon. Yet examining this work more closely, and looking at it alongside Redon’s writings, helps us understand Redon’s later, seemingly cryptic, uses of color in painting.

Delacroix’s ceiling was an odd choice for a young artist. A copy was a showpiece for an academically trained student. An attempt to analyze as closely as possible the work of a master, it was itself a work of art. Competitions tested the skill of young artists and encouraged “[their] loyalty to the institutional system.” Such copies follow a proscribed academic trajectory: monochrome drawing before color painting, which was reserved for advanced students. Lessons in anatomy aimed at mastery of the human form, while aiming to instill in the pupil a memory of the antique, which might “correct” nature in the future. In drawn copies, which largely date from 1866, Redon chose to copy Italian Renaissance masters of the sort he might have studied had he been a successful academic art student and Prix du Rome recipient: Lorenzo di Credi, Signorelli, Andrea del Sarto, Masaccio, da Vinci, and Raphaël. For example, Michelangelo’s *Dying Slave (Esclave*
mourant], which Redon also drew during this time, was a typical object for study, fitting
as it does within the more sculptural requirements of academic figure training. He also
drew conventional life drawings: blocky anatomical figure studies representing models in
poses that emphasized their musculature and bone structure, often accompanied by
drawings of bones or muscles to the side of the main figure (fig 1.3). Redon later drew
copies of works by Descamps, Géricault, and other French artists in 1869 when the
French curator Reiset placed French drawings on display at the Louvre.  

When Redon copied Delacroix’s painting in 1868, Delacroix had been dead for five
years, and Baudelaire for one; the end of the Romantic era probably seemed palpable to
the young man. Redon’s copies of Delacroix should be seen both as activities meant to
mark the young artist’s independence from the atelier of Gérôme, and part of his attempt
to create an artistic lineage for himself that includes “artists of the imagination,” such as
Delacroix, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rubens. As the Academy put it in an entry from the
1858 Dictionnaire de l’Académie des Beaux-Arts, “between the model [the painting
copied] and the artist a secret relationship springs up, producing in the latter vibrations
that might be compared to a singing instrument”; students even grew to regard
themselves as distant relations of the artists they chose to copy most frequently. To copy
after being cast out of academic training, though, was also to enact the self-creation of
artistic influence outside of the Academy. Redon’s copies of Delacroix were declarations
of his independent desire to achieve a sense of almost genealogical continuity with that
painter.

Apollo
Delacroix’s *Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python* (fig. 1.4) had been commissioned as part of the new Second Republic Constituent Assembly’s effort, begun in 1848, to renovate the Louvre, a project intended to celebrate the new Republic following the Revolution and give work to artists. Over half of the funds for the project were allocated to the restoration of the Apollo Gallery. The narrow and long (62 x 10 meter) gilded chamber, illuminated by a dozen tall, east-facing windows, was a space Delacroix termed “the most beautiful spot in the world.” The room’s mythological motif had been chosen in self-homage by Louis XIV, the “sun king” who often cast himself as Apollo. After the ruler moved his residence from Paris to Versailles in 1682, however, the structure, with its magnificent ceilings and frescos by Charles Le Brun, had been neglected, along with the Louvre as a whole. After generations of disuse such that “the gallery was for a long time blocked up by scaffolding, which obstructed the light, and was used but once a year for the exhibition of drawings, engravings, and lithographs,” the state repaired the chamber’s cracked walls and ceiling, replacing the damaged paintings and sculptures that had been removed during the renovation with commissions by a number of artists (fig. 1.5). The political significance of such an architectural restoration was hard to miss, and Delacroix, the artist who in 1830 had created *Liberty Leading the People* (*La Liberté guidant le peuple*), was well positioned to execute the central painting for the commission. The formerly radical painter had already completed several major paintings conceived of as *in situ* projects, including the Bourbon palace (the Salon du Roi, 1833-7, and library, 1838-47) and the Palais du Luxembourg Library ceiling (1840-6) when, in April 1849, he was contacted by Frédéric Villot, Louvre painting curator, to undertake the most central painting for the Apollo Gallery’s ceiling.
Le Brun had left a theme, but no visual suggestions for the project. Over two hundred preparatory sketches and drawings show Delacroix settling on and elaborating upon the dynamic and politically potent theme of Apollo killing the serpent python. Delacroix wrote to Georges Sand, “‘Pythons of every rank’ would see the ceiling.” Although he had already made extensive studies of the science of color during and after his trip to North Africa in 1833-4, and in relation to Chevreul’s 1839 book, *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors* (the French title, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l’assortiment des objets colorés*), places emphasis as the work did on the perceptual role in composing colors), he went to Belgium and Antwerp to study the colors of the large-scale religious paintings of Rubens for the Louvre project. Delacroix’s *Apollo* was finished only four months after the opening of the gallery (nearly on deadline for the often unpunctual artist), and was generally hailed, as Maxime du Camp would put it, as “the most beautiful work of our time.” Given the general state of admiration for the work, the Louvre commission even recommended to the Minister of Public Works that Delacroix’s fee be raised from 18,000 to 24,000 francs, a staggering amount of money at the time.

The painting depicts the slaying of the swamp monster python by the chariot-riding figure of Apollo, the Greek god whose attribute is the sun. Isis, Juno, Minerva, Mercury, Hercules, Victory, Diana, Boreas, Night, Venus, Ceres, and Vulcan add to the scene’s complexity. Each is accompanied by an iconic attribute: arrows, quiver, club, crown, harp, etc. Delacroix described the subject of *Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python*, shortly after its completion in 1851, in a way which underscores the narrative drama of the scene, and assumes the mid-nineteenth-century viewers’ familiarity with the panoply of depicted
gods and their associated attributes:

[Apollo], seated in his chariot, has already let fly a part of his arrows. Diana, his sister, flying after him, presents him with his quiver. The serpent, pierced by the darts of the god of life and heat, is writhing in agony, and breathing out his remnant of life … Hercules crushes [monsters] with his club; Vulcan, the god of fire, drives away Night and noisome exhalations; Boreas and the Zephyrs dry up the waters by their breath, and scatter the clouds…. Victory descends to crown the victorious Apollo, and Iris strikes her harp as she flies through the air to celebrate the triumph of Light over Darkness, and over the rebellious waters.64

The dynamic painting’s narrative links the colorful gods with the objects and actions associated with their attributes: serpents writhe, bodies rot, clubs crush, fire drives away night, laurel wreaths crown victory, and harps sonorously celebrate light’s triumph over darkness.

The painting, situated on a ceiling and meant to be viewed from underneath, is in some ways hard to grasp in reproduction. Apollo is strangely foreshortened, so that we look down on his forearm and head but up toward the underside of the chariot and horses. We look down upon Apollo’s face, but more or less up neighboring red-sashed Ceres’ backside. When seen properly from below, the perspectival success of the composition is clear as the figures jut forward, aided by the illusion of gravity, and the space of the background recedes. The gods and monsters tumble weightless, vignetting Apollo with their swirl and blur. All the figures appear to be falling,65 a visual effect evocative of Baudelaire’s characterization of Delacroix’s work as the art of color and movement, rather than the art of form and line.66
The painting’s subject lends itself to a study in color contrasts. The bottom region of the painting is the python’s territory, rendered in a range of murky browns, greens, olive hues, and black (for example, the bottom of the tiger’s feet, or the back of the serpent). Populated by deliquescing animal and human bodies, the muddy area embodies the etymological root of the word *python*, found in the Greek verb *pythein*, to rot. In contrast, the center of the work, housing Apollo, and the surrounding areas to the right and above, are the domain of the celestial gods. Painted in dazzling colors, Delacroix’s jade-on-orange and red-on-blue skies, which are executed as a chromatic circle around Apollo, ring the attendant angels and deities in resplendent hues that shift from puce to red, orange to white-yellow, then brown to murky olive and green.

Delacroix’s color techniques in the Apollo ceiling derive from traditional Northern European painting procedures. He wrote in his journal as he made the preparatory studies based on Rubens’ paintings in Brussels: “[For] the most orange part of the sky starting from the circle of light: on an orange ground, dry rub Naples yellow, green-blue and white, leaving only a little appearance of the orange tone.”67 Designed to make the most glowing and luminous canvas possible, this over- and under-painting technique using dry paint builds up layers of contrasting, saturated colors to create a rich overall visual effect. The layered interweaving of orange and green, yellow and blue would create a more subtly but visually scintillating appearance than the pure application of orange alone. The rubbing built up layers of paint, creating the rich illusion of depth, with the base of orange giving a hint of inner glow. That Brussels was the site of this research reaffirms longstanding French critical rhetoric surrounding Delacroix and his rival Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres that characterized the latter as having an abiding relationship to linear
Italian classicism, while linking the former to English and Flemish color tradition.\textsuperscript{68} Delacroix perpetuated his notoriety as a colorist with the spectacular breadth of his palette, which contemporary art historian Michelle Hanoosh characterizes as containing: "twenty-seven pure colors plus twenty-three mixed ones, not to mention the half-tone, reflection, and shadow of each, in contrast to the usual seventeen for David and Corot, five for El Greco, eleven for Renoir and Whistler, fourteen for Rubens, nine for Titian, eighteen for Van Dyck."\textsuperscript{69} A fetishization of Delacroix’s painting palettes during his lifetime further attests to the perception of the artist as modernity’s color embodied. "I might mention in passing that never have I seen a palette as meticulously and delicately prepared as that of Delacroix. It was like an expertly matched bouquet of flowers," wrote Baudelaire. Théophile Thoré, writing under the pseudonym W. Bürger, noted that you might “cut off, at random, a square inch in a painting by Delacroix, and you will have the pleasure that a bouquet of flowers of a jewel with fine stones gives” because color was a Delacroix painting’s “soul.”\textsuperscript{71}

In its richly interwoven passages of underpainting (green under orange), and its color contrasts (jade next to orange), the painting exhibits an apprehension of the color theories of Chevreul, who summed up his own theory as follows: “All the phenomenon I have observed seem to depend on a very simple law, which, taken in its most general signification, may be expressed in these terms: in the case where the eye sees at the same time two contiguous colors, they will appear as dissimilar as possible both in their optical composition and in the height of their tone.”\textsuperscript{72} The critic Charles Blanc discussed Delacroix’s paintings as textbook cases of Chevreul’s chromatic propositions applied to the fine arts, exemplified by his writing about Delacroix’s painting in the Palais du
Luxembourg library (fig. 1.6), a commission the artist executed between 1840 and 1846:

Amid the mythological or heroic figures which compose the decoration, and which were walking in a sort of enchanted garden, we distinguished a half-nude woman…

As we admired the admirable freshness of this rose-tone, an artist friend of Delacroix, who had seen him at work on the paintings in the dome said, smiling, ‘You would be really surprised if you knew what colors had produced the rosy flesh that charms you. They are tones that, seen separately, would seem, pardon me, like the mud of the street.’ How does this miracle work? By the boldness with which Delacroix had slashed the naked torso of this figure with short strokes of green, which partly neutralized by its complement rose, within which it is absorbed, forms a mixed and fresh tone which one can only see from a distance, and which is, in a word, the color resulting from what is rightly called optical mixture.73

This anecdote was a lesson in the application of the simultaneous contrast of colors Chevreul had codified in The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors, by which juxtaposed colors reinforce their differences in relation to one another such that, for example, reds appear more vivid next to greens, or red-oranges more orange next to blue-reds. Blanc also created easy-to-understand schematic diagrams (fig. 1.7). These, like Delacroix’s own color triangle from his North African notebooks (fig. 1.8), were influenced by Charles Bourgeois’ Manuel d’optique expérimentale à l’usage des artistes et des physiciens (1821).74 Painters subsequently tried to copy these lessons about chromatic mixture and simultaneous contrast for themselves.

Just after the painting was finished, Baudelaire would write of Delacroix’s color with a different proposition about its role: “Delacroix’s color thinks for itself,
independently from the objects which it clothes.” The power of this color allowed the painting to “project its thought at a distance,” communicating even before the specificity of form or narrative had become legible to the viewer. To Baudelaire, in short, “colors speak.” Thus, chromatic effect, to Baudelaire, had primacy in painting. It had a direct relationship with the experience of artwork not dependent on form.

Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python was one of Redon’s few painted copies. Other painted copies represented one work by Rubens, (The Triumph of Truth [Le Triomphe de la vérité]), one by Rembrandt, (The Angel Raphaël leaves Tobie, which he copied twice), and four of Delacroix’s works. In addition, Redon copied a portion of Delacroix’s A Jewish Wedding in Morocco (Noce juive au Maroc) (figs. 1.9-1.10), probably prior to his reproduction of Apollo. Not strictly a copy, this small painting is a detailed study of the central character in the Jewish Wedding—an oud player: the work makes careful note of each string of the instrument and every aspect of the figure’s Moroccan costume. The work is nearly monochrome, all white and tan, with only flat sections of green and red to complicate its large areas of white and shadow, perhaps a nod to Chevreul’s theory that primary colors are enhanced visually next to white (fig. 1.11). From Redon’s 1864 notebooks we know that he used emerald green, and lead white, while the red was most likely carmine or vermillion. Nevertheless, he manages to make the main figure’s white-on-white turban stand out against the dirty white of the wall. Yet in other ways, the simplification in the copy is startling: figures on the oud player’s left and right have lost their faces to featureless blobs of brown paint, achieving the suggestion of an abstract, cavernous depth with the deployment of shadowy dark brown. This suggests not only that their expressions are unimportant because they are not central
to the painting, but also, that the use of color was the main aspect of interest in Redon’s copy of the painting.

Before he attempted his Apollo Redon also copied a Delacroix work in his hometown museum in Bordeaux, *Greece Expires on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (*La Grèce expirant sur les ruines de Missolonghi*) (fig. 1.12), a work Redon had seen in 1851, as a child, at the Salon de la société des Amis des Arts de Bordeaux.\(^82\) *Greece* is a faithful copy: although there is little facial detail, the figure’s costume is rendered with precision which denotes careful observation of the original and every aspect of the Turkish male figure standing behind her, from his turban and belt to his staff and robe, is executed with great care (fig. 1.13). The colors, although seemingly darker and more somber in Redon’s version, are faithful to Delacroix’s color scheme, and he captures the key chromatic points with verve: the contrast between the standing figures of pale, bared breast and shadowy soldier and the green sleeve and red cuff on the arm of the corpse.\(^83\) Redon’s painting of the gaily colored *La Chasse aux Lions* (figs. 1.14-1.15), was executed before the original Delacroix, also housed in the Museum of Fine Art in Bordeaux, was partially destroyed in a fire in 1870, which sets a limit as to how late the work could have been painted. These studies are dated by Bacou as *Grèce* (1857-1864) and *La Chasse aux Lions* (1860-70).\(^84\) It seems likely that Redon’s two other painted copies of Delacroix paintings were executed at around the same time as the Apollo ceiling copy, in or before 1868.

In his copy of *Apollo*, Redon simplifies forms and paints figures without modeling. The painting’s execution is blocky and awkward: Apollo’s chariot, in Redon’s copy, is a bright-toned, conical swirl devoid of the intricate shaping gleams and shadows of the
celestial carriage as painted by Delacroix. The coiled serpent and flying and rotting bodies in Redon’s painting are rendered in sketchy, broken brushwork. The billowing cloak held by Victory has become a streaming scrap of green and pink without its most consequent swells and flutters. Details are omitted: her dress is angular, her left foot and face are absent. The horses’ heads turn at crazy and improbable angles. The small size and casual factura of the copy lend credence to the conventional understanding of this painting as mere juvenilia, a pedagogic exercise marked above all by Redon’s lack of adroitness.

Yet, given Redon’s repeated reference to the Delacroix Apollo as the single work which best represents “the abundance of [Delacroix’s] talent and his powers,” his nearly obsessive return to the Apollo theme later in his life, and the fairly successful copies Redon had executed of other paintings by Delacroix, this act of copying warrants a closer examination. Upon second examination, Redon has stripped the gods of their defining attributes: Mars no longer holds his spear, for example, and Hermes behind him has lost his kerykeion. The putti are without staffs and arrows. The visible, crucial traits used to identify the gods have been transmuted from qualities portrayed by form and line to those expressed by color (fig. 1.16).

In an unpublished essay written in 1878, entitled “Delacroix,” Redon suggests this significance of his copy of Apollo. According to Redon’s text, color, rather than the details of the figures’ forms, carries the iconographic meaning of the painting: “this work is so powerful, so strong because it is new, altogether a poem, a symphony. The attribute which defines each god becomes useless, so much does the color undertake to say everything and to say it accurately, the rest of tradition that [Delacroix] conserves for
clarification is useless.” Redon’s copy of Delacroix’s Apollo should be seen as an attempt to translate the well-known symbolic attributes of the gods and animals into an evocative language of color—color that conveys publicly apprehensible narrative meaning. Thus, Redon has deliberately simplified the painting in order to copy the aspects he sees as most significant; chromatic elaboration, rather than form or iconography, bears and conveys narrative and symbolic content. “Color undertak[ing] to say everything” is why Redon’s gods have lost their defining attributes. The phrase echoes Baudelaire’s 1855 assessment of the role of Delacroix’s color. Individual deities are represented by color rather than by iconography: “Venus is bounded by tender blue; in an exquisitely tender gray cloud, cupids fly.... Mercury expresses through his red coat all the pomp of cushioned well-being and commerce. Mars is of a terrifying purple; his helmet is a bitter red, symbol of war.” Redon vividly describes the “sickly tones which convey the idea of death,” in the lower areas of the work, and how Ceres, by contrast, is “surrounded by sunshine.” If color had often held second place to form in the history of painting, in this painting color has entirely usurped the primary narrative function.

While it might be argued that Redon’s early formal omissions might be a convention of academic training, this was neither the purpose nor the standard procedure for executing the academic copy. Rather, the copy was a process of “faithful and painstaking reproduction of the original based upon pre-occupation with the executive process,” meant to create “a work of art in its own right, worthy of the original chosen as model.” His copy after The Jewish Wedding focuses on a single figure, a lute player, although abbreviated, fits into this description of a copy, and makes careful study of the man’s accouterments at the expense of the overall tonality of the composition, which it
crops and renders almost entirely in white, green, red, and brown. Similarly, his copy after *Greece* is essentially a figure study of that painting’s main subject, a woman with outstretched arms. In that painting as well, although there is a loss of detail in the expression on the faces, the items carried by the figures, such as the background figure’s staff and turban, are carefully and competently rendered. Comparing Redon’s emphases in his Apollo study, and Delacroix’s in his own preparatory sketch of 1850, further underscores the unique nature of Redon’s work. In Delacroix’s own small study for the painting, *Apollo Vanquishes the Serpent Python* (fig. 1.17), a comparably sized (137.5 x 102 cm) oil on canvas work, each feature ascribed to a god is carefully rendered: Mars and Hercules have their helmet and sword, Apollo his arrows and his attendant Diana her quiver. The colors in Delacroix’s sketch, however, are muted when compared to the completed painting.

In contrast, and seemingly in response to Baudelaire’s call to create a color which speaks independent of the object, Redon’s work simplifies the scene, stripping it of detail while punching up the work’s brightness and the extent to which figures are blocks of single colors. The bright lemon yellow of the sun seems to glow behind the silhouetted gods. He either fails to grasp or eschews the strictly mathematical chromatic circle of Delacroix’s painting, sacrificing the unity of a blended and gradually moving tonal shifts for more discrete areas of color. Redon’s heightened attention to color goes beyond a typical academic study in which the painter might be asked to faithfully render the formal qualities of a painting. It can best be seen as a particular reading of Delacroix’s painting and a study of how color might function in the work to express vivid luminosity and “usurp the primary narrative function.”
Moral Color

By 1878, when he had returned to write about the Delacroix painting, Redon had been conscripted and fought in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, notably in a battle in late December. After the war he “revisited” many of the desolate places he had once loved as an adolescent, such as the isolated Uhart-Mixe area in the Pyrenees, and in 1873 wrote in his journal that the region was less grand than he remembered.93 His father died in 1874, causing the Redons’ long-term financial difficulties in relation to a murky will regarding the family estate, but also granting the children some short-term financial independence. Two of his four siblings passed away in 1875, leaving Redon without the context, community, and validation which being part of a relatively large family could provide, especially for an isolated and objectively unsuccessful young man.

With his favorite teacher, Bresdin, decamped for Canada, and his father dead, Redon returned to Paris, this time not under his father’s orders but through his own volition. The drawing The Artist’s Studio at 81 Boulevard Montparnasse, Paris, 1874-77 (L’Atelier de Redon, 81 boulevard du Montparnasse à Paris, 1874-1877) (fig. 1.18), serves as a self-portrait of the post-Prussian War Redon. It shows the atelier of a sartorially self-possessed young man—note the cane, jacket, and top hat on the bench on the left. His small studio is cluttered with matted prints and some easels and chairs, a few settees and heavy curtains, and a wide-planked wood floor studded with gleaming nail points that match up to perspectival diagonals. The room is heated with a coal-burning stove and lit by its wide, high windows. The process of making art might be difficult (he seems to have trouble depicting the space using the gridded precision of perspective) but
his sartorial self-presentation seems elegant, and his circumstances, if not opulent, are not penurious.

Redon had started attending the salon of Berthe de Rayssac, where a group of Romantic poets and musicians met. There, he became friends with Henri Fantin-Latour, the artist four years older than Redon, and with him discussed Delacroix (perhaps with reference to Redon’s copies and Fantin-Latour’s 1864 painting, *Homage to Delacroix*). While Redon had attempted traditional lithography with Bresdin, he learned transfer lithography in 1877 or 1878 from Fantin-Latour. Thus, in his thirties, Redon was finally able to test out his aesthetic predilections, such as his identification with Delacroix, and to learn new techniques, in conversation with a group of Parisian peers and mentors. At the Rayssac salon he even found an actual relative of his hero: Léon Riesen, a cousin of Delacroix’s, as well as numerous spiritualist figures like Maurice Bouchor, the religious mystic, poet, and regular reader of the esoteric journal *L'Etoile*.

In contrast with his earlier reputation as the artist of political revolutionaries Delacroix was, by the 1870s, a favorite of spiritualist thinkers. Delacroix’s late paintings were striking in their metaphysical mediation on the relation of the visible to the invisible, and as such must have appealed to the Rayssac group. Just before he died, Delacroix had completed the painting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1861, a mural (and part of a trio of paintings) at the church of Saint-Sulpice (fig. 1.19). Critic Louis Brès, in the *Moniteur des arts*, characterized *Jacob* as "the combat of matter against spirit." This final trio of works was seen as an example of painting’s ability to mediate between the sensual and spiritual realms. Baudelaire praised the work as a perfect example of color’s almost mystical ability to unify the earthly material and the divine idea, poising the 1861
Delacroix painting of Jacob to become what Suzanne Singletary has characterized as a touchstone for Symbolist artists including Gustave Moreau and Paul Gauguin. Attention to color and its meanings were key to the Symbolist recoupment of the Romantic painter. In contrast, Édouard Manet’s earlier, 1854 copy of Delacroix’s *The Barque of Dante* (fig. 1.20), renders each detail of the copied Delacroix with precision down to the button of Dante’s robe and the laurel wreath on Virgil’s head, yet seems more concerned with rendering the bodies in the water with anatomical precision in stark chiaroscuro than replicating the colors of Delacroix’s original; the copy does not emphasize Delacroix the colorist. Redon would later paint his own version of the Jacob and the Angel story, in 1905, but his earliest and most persistent obsession is the *Apollo*.

How did Redon imagine that color conveyed meaning? Redon’s great discovery was the secret of “moral color.” In the essay “Delacroix,” Redon says that the earlier artist’s use of color from the creation of the Apollo mural in 1850 onward is one of “pure expression,” echoing commonly held academic tenets about the polarized relationship between line and color, logic and feeling. Redon writes that Delacroix, “without returns or regrets enters the true path, which is that of expressive color, a color which one could call moral color.” What, then, does Redon mean by “moral color”? “Moral” has nothing to do with ethics or principles, character or conduct, but rather denotes the mid-eighteenth-century sense of the word: “relating to the soul or spirit, as opposed to the physical.” *Le Dictionnaire Littré* corroborates that sense of the term: “That which, in the human, is the domain of the spirit, as opposed to that which is the domain of the physical.” Redon thus establishes Delacroix’s color as the opposite of “material” as well as re-entrenches the divide between material and spiritual worlds and their one-to-
one correspondence. To Emanuel Swedenborg, in his 1758 book *Heaven and Hell*, correspondence is a theory of the relationship between the “natural” and the “spiritual” world, such that “the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world, and not merely the natural world in general, but also every particular of it; and as a consequence everything in the natural world that springs from the spiritual world is called a correspondent. It must be understood that the natural world springs from and had permanent existence from the spiritual world.” In this way color in the natural world might signal some particular moral meaning in the spiritual world. Such preoccupations common to the Swedenborgian metaphysical thought would have interested the de Ressayac salon.

The phrase “moral color,” while not in common usage in either English or twentieth-century art history, has some resonance in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century aesthetic texts. Although it is unlikely that Redon was directly aware of the book, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his *Theory of Colors* (*Zur Farbenlehre*), a polemic against Newtonian optics, writes about the “[e]ffect of color with reference to moral associations.” (Among his examples are instances such as these: “rooms which are hung with pure blue, appear in some degree larger, but at the same time empty and cold,” and “A yellow-red cloth disturbs and enrages animals.”) Baudelaire, in his essay on the Salon of 1859, briefly mentions the term, stating that “[imagination] has taught man the moral meaning of color, of outline, of sound and of perfume.” Baudelaire’s own poem “Correspondences,” published in his book of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857, develops this notion that the senses might blend and point to higher meanings. Some writers attempted to discern the mechanism for this connection.
between sensation and meaning in the physical body of the viewer, describing synesthetic associations between taste and sound, matter and meaning. Hippolyte Taine, in his *On Intelligence (De l’intelligence)* of 1867, sought to “discover the link between the physical and moral world,” when he talks about “the sensation of golden yellow, that of a musical note…the taste of sugar…the pain of a cut…the necessary and sufficient condition of such a sensation is an internal movement in the grey substance of the protuberance of the *corpora quadrigemina*…it consists of a more or less complex and extensive displacement of molecules.” Taine is attempting to describe in scientific terms the mechanism by which the color yellow might create a certain emotional resonance, and resorts to talk of “molecules” to explain it. Again, moral is distinct from physical, it is the sensation which arises from gross physical cause, such that “the mental event being single, necessarily appears double; the sign and the event signified are two things which can no more be confounded than separated…the physical world, then, is reduced to a system of signs, and all that remains to enable us to construct and conceive it are the materials of the moral world.” Taine could be describing the relationship between the material of color (the sign in the physical world which is the origin of sensation) and the consequence of color (an emotional, mental, or even spiritual effect). The viewer’s body is the location at which this mysterious correspondence between higher meaning and lower sensation takes place, and the sensation of the experience of color is one of the ways this correspondence occurs.

Redon’s reading of Delacroix’s use of color was informed by other critics’ assessments of the latter during the 1870s, most notably the somewhat obscure 1876 text *The Artists of My Time (Les Artistes de mon temps)* by Charles Blanc (fig. 1.21). Blanc, a
journalist who founded and edited the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, was the figure in charge of the Ministry of Fine Arts. His popular 1867 work *The Grammar of the Arts of Design* (*Grammaire des arts du dessin*), contained a discussion of contemporary color theory written explicitly for an audience of artists. Blanc introduced a generation of painters to Chevreul’s theories about color through his writing on Delacroix. Redon’s own essay on Delacroix closely follows Blanc’s influential descriptions of the use of color in Delacroix, with sections echoing Blanc’s own on the artist’s use of the simultaneous contrast of color and optical color mixing. In fact, scholar George Roque has characterized Redon’s essay on Delacroix as “a pasted montage of quotations” from Blanc’s *Artists of My Time,* even going so far as to pick out the paragraph headings of the Redon text which directly correspond to pages from Blanc’s book (subjects include “Si les complémentaires…,” “Mélange optique,” “Femmes d’Alger,” and “Pour exalter et harmoniser…”). It is certain Redon read the book.

Blanc’s 1875 *Art in Ornament and Dress*, (*L’art dans la parure et dans le vêtement*), also uses the term “moral color”: “It is true then that colors have in themselves not only an optical character, but in some sort a moral one, by reason of their close union with feeling.” What he means by “moral color” is somewhat more obscure than his championing of Delacroix’s interest in Chevreul. Blanc separates the emotionally evocative moral color from color’s optical qualities. In his writing on Delacroix in *Artists of My Time*, Blanc’s analysis of the painter’s *The Barque of Dante* (*La barque de Dante*) (fig. 1.20) equates narrative with color and prefigures Redon’s understanding of Delacroix’s “moral color”: “Dante, assumed to be alive, has the horrible complexion of the place. Virgil, crowned in a somber laurel wreath, has the colors of death.” Blanc
says that the use of color in the work evinces a dramaturgical foreshadowing of content that precedes a viewer’s narrative apprehension of the painting:

What drama announces itself from afar by this sinister violet light? It’s the death of Pliny the Elder…Throughout, in Delacroix’s work, color is eloquent, with an infallible eloquence. It is, I repeat, even without a sense of who the figures are, of their pantomime, their role, that we are aware of the emotion we feel, and, if the picture were upended, the decoration viewed in reverse, it would already produce the desired impression, or at least strike the first blows on the soul.\textsuperscript{118}

To Blanc, Delacroix’s color has an unambiguous and immediate effect on the viewer—it “announces” narrative, almost as if it could speak—this is color’s famous “eloquence.” Color’s direct quality conveys feeling and meaning, even if form is upended. Delacroix’s color is not that of local or descriptive tone proper to individual objects, but of scene-setting affect.\textsuperscript{119} Delacroix understands color’s “moral harmonies, he knows better than anyone the world of theatrical language, the poetry, and so truly the secret which he told no student.”\textsuperscript{120} Blanc’s terms echo Baudelaire’s apprehension of color as that which can speak with a direct line to the “soul.”

Yet Blanc distrusted color because of its almost promiscuous equivocality. His name is apposite in that he saw the triumph of color over form as dangerous, and explicitly advocated for the importance of drawn form over the imprecision of color. Young artists, including Redon, would treat as their manifesto Blanc’s notion that “[t]he passionate colorist…invents his forms to color them. Everything to him is subordinated to the brilliance of the tints. Not only drawing yields and must yield, but composition is dominated, restrained and violated by color.”\textsuperscript{121} But Blanc saw "color [as] a mobile,
vague, ungraspable element, while form, precisely the opposite, [as] precise, limited, tangible and constant, \(^{122}\) while drawing was precise and permanent. He called for art to retain a balance between color and line, or to err on the side of favoring line over color, to favor the absolute and the permanent (masculine) realm of drawing, rather than the fleeting and relative (feminine) realm of color. \(^{123}\) For Blanc, the “moral” qualities of color have pejorative connotations; these include its relation to the senses, its ephemeral nature, and its physicality. These are ultimately signs to Blanc of color’s femininity, its irrationality, its subjectivity, and its uncontrollable and sensual relationship with emotion. Blanc warned that color is subjective and decadent. When posed with the problem of the dominance of line or color (“when [form and color] are united, there is always a dominant one”\(^ {124}\), Blanc cautions:

The predominance of color at the expense of drawing is a usurpation of the relative over the absolute, of fleeting appearance over permanent form, of the physical impression over the empire of souls… art grows material and inevitably declines when the spirit that draws is conquered by the sensation that colors. \(^{125}\)

For Blanc, ultimately, color is mere matter—‘stuff’—while drawing is closer to the soul. It is precisely this dichotomy that Redon would reverse. The distrust of color in Blanc also has a tinge of xenophobia, with its talk of the (French) artist being conquered by (foreign, exotic) color. Blanc sees the “secret relations of color to feeling,” \(^{126}\) as cultural, writing about the “national preferences that different peoples have given to them, as, for example, the preference of the Near East for green, because it was the favorite color of Mahomet.” \(^{127}\) He focuses on the symbolism of colors held by what he calls the “black or tawny” Indian people, Chinese people, or the exotic Spanish, ultimately
concluding on an essentializing note that, although all cultures have a symbolic relationship with color, “primitive” people have a closer relationship to color than French people do. 128 Blanc strongly cautioned artists against the irrational qualities inherent in color, and linked them not just to decline and decadence, but to femininity and primitivism. 129 Ultimately, Blanc’s celebration of Delacroix is at unresolvable odds with his old distrust of color. While Blanc valorizes Delacroix as a colorist despite his programmatic mistrust of color, he also cautions that Delacroix’s use of color is “dangerous” to imitate for art students; 130 derides Delacroix’s drawing skills; and sees his severe black neo-classical grave as a monument to sculpture and classical form, a subtle indication that to Blanc this is where lasting legacies rest (fig. 1.22).

Redon departs from Blanc in his appraisal of the role of color for the future of painting. 131 Such a stance echoes and amplifies Baudelaire’s assessment of Delacroix’s color from his essays in 1855 and 1859. While, as we have seen, Blanc distrusted color, Redon writes on Delacroix: “This free master, [this] ardent artist made the colors of the prism speak passionately…[he was] the first [to be] touched by a lofty genius which endowed [colors] with the power to express inner life.” 132 Redon sees in color the future of painting, writing as if in defiance of Blanc, “Color, henceforth expressing passion and interior life…has been, in the chronicles of art, a discovery of greatest importance, but until now only the preserve of landscape painting. Delacroix has imperiously subjected it to history.” 133 Redon, siding with Baudelaire, saw color as the means by which Delacroix achieved the representation of the unseeable: Redon in his essay is attracted to color as a signifier of interiority and catalyst of affect, with the power to usurp the ideal which Blanc saw as the provenance of achromatic line or white, classical sculpture.
The interior and ideal quality of moral color affords is a unique capacity. Redon called this quality “human color.” He writes, “Delacroix alone touches at moral color, at human color; this is his legacy and his title to posterity.”¹³⁴ To Redon, color is not just significant because it is evocative of a non-material plane; part of the “morality” of color is the way in which it relies on the viewer’s senses to elicit affect. This elevates the status of the viewer to a crucial intermediary between painted representation and depicted thing. Delacroix’s color, to Redon, is always deployed with an eye to the human perception of material objects. In a reading of color common to both Chevreul and Goethe, color is subjective, defined in relation to the spectator through the process of perception. Redon writes, “In all he has painted, one feels the presence of man. This is not to be neglected. And humanity should be careful not to forget an art in which it is reflected and exalted.”¹³⁵ While his initial forays into painting were nearly grisaille depictions of imaginary beings, such as his copies of Rembrandt’s angels (fig. 1.23), Redon’s sustained interest in Delacroix brought him to a more complex understanding of the relationship between not just color and narrative content, but also color’s role as a conduit between the physicality of paint and the emotional and idiosyncratic interpretations a viewer might bring to an image.

Redon’s notion that color might replace gods’ attributes raises questions about the extent to which color could be keyed to a symbolic language. While colors in the Delacroix Apollo are vivid, and the use of color contrasts striking, there is no obvious use of a color code in his splendid representation of a bevy of gods. Redon’s logic is to dematerialize the attributes and forms of mythical figures while attempting to convey their identities through color: their capacity to instill fear, or convey fecundity, arises
through the power of color itself. Examining the painting, such connotations are largely one-to-one: purple and red for Mars, green for Ceres, brown for the python, for example. Each color attempts to stand in for a single meaning.

Yet Redon has trouble harnessing single colors to convey single meanings: in his copy red is both the color of “pomp” and of “war,” depending on the context. If Apollo lacks his quiver of arrows, he is surrounded by a blinding yellow light, nearly the same lemon-yellow which is found around the body of an angel, or even highlighting a deliquescing body’s flesh. Redon’s color therefore cannot quite follow a grammatical program. Combinations of colors, such as flesh/blue and flesh/grey, also seem to interest the artist. In a technique common to both Delacroix and Redon, the color describing bodies, whether corpses or Venuses, is not painted in wildly differing hues throughout the two contrasting zones of the painting. By altering their backgrounds, the painters manage to create the effect of increased vivacity of color due to the contrasting tones Delacroix spoke of in the often-repeated quotation: “Give me mud and I will make the skin of Venus out of it, if you will allow me to surround it as I please.”

The use of color in the Apollo ceiling is a literalization of his claims. It is a study in the effect of the contrasts between muddy creatures on murky backgrounds, and the rosy beauty of gods and goddesses heightened through juxtaposed reds and greens, yellows and purples. As such, it is uneasily positioned between exemplifying symbolic meaning, and the less iconographically fraught discoveries of Chevreul.

Precedents long existed for the symbolic reading of color in painting. From *Pictures of the Ancients (Imagini de’ Dei de gl’Antichi)*, a seventeenth-century Italian book on classical imagery, we find symbolic readings of the colors of Apollo’s four
horses, in which they correspond to the four seasons of the year: red, white, fiery orange, and muddy yellow represent spring, summer, fall, and winter. Their heads are low for the horses on the far left and right, when the sun dips, and raised to strangely horizontal and directly upright positions to indicate the sun’s zenith at midday for the middle two. Through accident or plan, these correspond to the attitudes of Delacroix’s equine team. Such arcane symbolism was lost on contemporary viewers, though: the strange colors and postures caused at least one nineteenth-century critic to exclaim that the front-most horse looked like “a red squirrel in movement and in color.”

Baudelaire’s own poem “Correspondences” evokes the gently synesthetic and material elision of senses and transitions between spheres of aesthetic logic which Redon’s color theory ultimately describes, a world in which “Perfumes, colors and sounds answer each other/. . . perfumes as cool as children’s skin, soft as oboes, green as prairies—and others, corrupt, rich, and triumphant.” Delacroix’s color theory resonates with this synesthetic sentiment: in his unpublished essay, “Réalisme et Idéalisme,” he wrote about the commonalities between painting and music: “There is an impression that results from a certain arrangement of colors, of lights, and of shades, etc. It is what one calls the music of the painting. Before even knowing what the painting represents, one enters into a cathedral…and often one is captivated by that magic accord…that emotion addresses itself to the most intimate part of the soul.” Poet Arthur Rimbaud would write of the correlation between language and colors in his sonnet, “Vowels” (1870 or 1871): A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels. The poem playfully situates itself in relation to those programmatic associations described by essentialist explications of symbolic color, and has been read as an invocation of medieval hermetic alchemical
Yet if Redon initially hoped to create one-to-one equivalences of color and iconographic legibility in his copy of Delacroix’s *Apollo*, this early foray into painting color was a failure. Four years later, in 1882, he wrote decisively of attempts at painting a Wagner symphony, “no color can translate the musical world, which is solely and uniquely internal, and without support in actual nature.” Such a declaration can perhaps be seen as a sense of defeat about the symbolic capacity of color. Much more tellingly, Redon worked for nearly the next decade without using color. This may have been at the advice of Bresdin, who would encourage Redon as a lithographer, claiming with a logic that echoed academic pedagogy that “the mastery of color—which he equated with ‘life’—too early in an artist’s career inevitably resulted in artistic inferiority,” implying that Redon might later return to color. Yet later, when exposed to readings of Delacroix’s color by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, Redon would return to working in color painting and pastel.

**Night and Day**

Early in 1879, the year after his essay on Delacroix, Redon requested to copy Delacroix’s paintings in black-and-white lithography, writing to the state: “Having been informed that you will reproduce in lithography and etchings master paintings, including those of Delacroix, I solicit your benevolence for one of these commissions.” His request was denied. Never before reprinted or noted, the letters documenting the rejection Redon received when he requested to copy Delacroix’s paintings in lithography are strange. Although neither archival copy is entirely legible, between two extant versions it is clear that the administration of fine arts has taken Redon’s primary medium to be
painting, despite his clearly stated request to copy the Delacroix paintings in lithography or etching. The document, written to his sponsor, Baron Larrey,\textsuperscript{148} states:

You do me the honor of recommending to me Mr. Odilon Redon who would like to be commissioned with executing one of the copies after [illegible] Delacroix which will be commissioned at this moment. The Administration cannot at this moment commission anything except lithographs for the publication of the illustrious master and can’t [illegible] give the order for painted reproductions. Mr. Odilon Redon has therefore been led in error on this subject, but I hasten to add that I would be very happy to take notice of this artist whom you honor with your interest, as soon as an occasion presents itself.\textsuperscript{149}

This dismissal might have been caused by the sponsor, Baron Larrey, identifying the young former painting student, whose first solo show (in lithography) was still two years in the future, as a painter; Larrey’s letter is now lost. More cynically, it could also indicate that Redon was deliberately misunderstood for the sake of denying his request. Perhaps impassioned by his identification with Delacroix, the letter suggests that Redon saw an opportunity for a state-sanctioned relationship with the artist—a way to achieve official recognition of his fantasy of a continuous lineage with the colorist. The letter also makes clear that Redon’s interest in Delacroix was not exhausted by his 1868 copy or 1878 essay.

Towards the end of his life, Redon returned to the theme of Apollo’s chariot, creating dozens of works in color on this motif. These evince a variety of strategies to integrate color and figure.\textsuperscript{150} The 1905 *Phaéton* (fig. 1.24) is infernal orange and black, with Delacroix’s horses in embryonic poses like fetal and semi-translucent versions of
their original flying selves, and Apollo tumbling, Icarus-like, down the vertiginous vertical of the shoji-screen-like compositional format, headfirst and doomed into the black muck below. Color and form don’t align—in fact they operate separately here as if registered poorly on a color print to create three zones of a painting in which the figurative aspects of the work are nearly obscured by the blinding light emanating from Apollo.

The 1908 horizontal version of the Apollo chariot is more theatrical and encompassing of the viewer—it has the four horses pulling upwards, sky-bound, surrounded by a sunset-illuminated sky with lavender and yellow clouds ringing the figures and Apollo seemingly steering the horses to some imaginary destination to the right (fig. 1.25). Chariot of Apollo (fig. 1.26), of 1909, has the four horses launching themselves up into a blue sky, the charioteer behind them, the entire composition in chalky, nearly monochrome hues of pink and blue. The fourth version now at the Musée d’Orsay (fig. 1.27) omits the precise contours of the chariot and charioteer for a hint of some figural musculature surrounded by a glowing yellow nimbus, and puts the horses, now white, but unmistakably those of Delacroix’s Louvre painting, at the composition’s center. Hints of a coiled, venomous green serpent loom below. (This switch of the form of a chariot for amorphous sunny color reverses the mythic logic that initially substituted the notion of a chariot for the sun itself.) The version now at the Petit Palais (fig. 1.28), circa 1912, might be drawn from his mural Day (Le Jour) (or, as Groom suggests, intended as an over-the-door mural151). It is a monochrome Apollo’s chariot in which a shadowy charioteer steers his celestial team of horses up towards a mustard-yellow sky, through treacherous yellow mountains, which can scarcely be seen, since they have been
so dematerialized by color and light.\textsuperscript{152}

In these pastels Redon has revisited the Delacroix painting. This same team of four horses is reimagined again and again, from the side, from underneath, from the back, from the front. The images are a reprise of Delacroix’s team, from the rearing white horse, and the chestnut-brown horse who looks to the side, to the way the four horses surge forward with no visible means of propulsion. Critics have cited the fact that Redon lived near a stable, for example, and not the influence of Delacroix’s Apollo ceiling, as the origin for his colorful Apollo paintings.\textsuperscript{153} But Redon is not depicting horses, he is depicting Delacroix’s Apollo, that specifically posed team of four, in blocky color, for nearly a decade. The bottommost horse in \textit{Day} is so odd in his flattened form, it is evident Redon had not drawn these horses from life; the horses have become a set cipher for Delacroix’s ceiling, and have no relation to the horses which one might have seen on the street. Redon pays careful attention to these horses in his copy, emphasizing and isolating their odd postural kabuki.

These paintings and pastels, which can be dated between 1908-1912,\textsuperscript{154} suggest the importance of Delacroix’s legacy—which for Redon was essentially the legacy of “moral color”—in contemporary painting. In these different examples, the colors shift from greens and blues to yellows and greys—there is no attempt to harness a single color scheme for Apollo’s meanings. The figure of Apollo is frequently aligned with the blinding and chromatically unifying sun. The works do not teleologically dissolve iconography with color but instead constantly reconfigure the balance between color and the figural elements of horses, Apollo, and the serpent.\textsuperscript{155}

The lasting importance of Redon taking up Delacroix’s deployment of “moral color”
can best be seen in Redon’s largest Apollo painting, *Day and Night (Le Jour et la Nuit)*, 1910-11 (figs. 1.29, 1.30). This work was painted on site in the home of the Fayet family. Gustave Fayet, introduced to Redon by Maurice Fabre in 1900, was owner of a wine-growing estate from Béziers, amateur painter and tapestry designer, and art collector and longstanding supporter of the work of Paul Gauguin.\textsuperscript{156} He purchased work by Henri Matisse as early as 1908, and commissioned Redon to make a three-part, large-scale painting to be installed in the library of Fontfroide, their home in the south of France.\textsuperscript{157} Fayet loved color in painting; the poet André Suarès (Félix-André-Yves Scantrel) wrote in a description of his collection, “Color has absolute power over Fayet… He is possessed by color; it intoxicates him, it is his delight.”\textsuperscript{158}

In 1908 the Fayets acquired a former monastery in the south of France as it was being sold following the enforced separation of church and state which took place in the early twentieth century in France.\textsuperscript{159} The property’s remote location in the cool, green mountains above the small town of Narbonne, on the Southwest Mediterranean coast, and its historically religious function, appealed to the couple’s interest in mysticism and the occult.\textsuperscript{160} The books flanking the Redon paintings in the images of *Night* and *Day* were from the library of Edmund Bailly, the spiritualist bookstore owner, purchased as a whole and relocated to the southern former monastery.\textsuperscript{161} The family invited artists and musicians from Paris to stay in residence. The pianist Ricardo Viñes came to play Schumann, Chopin, and Debussy.\textsuperscript{162} Redon painted and installed a grand mural (figs. 1.32-1.33). By day the Fayets repaired and restored the former abbey and its gardens during the years between 1908 and 1914. Redon, at Fontfroide, advised Fayet to create an “Apollo garden”\textsuperscript{163} at the entry of the abbey and in 1908 the family purchased an
enormous, eighteenth-century terracotta statue of Apollo in his chariot from Château Vaux-le-Vicomte (fig. 1.34) outside of Paris, and moved it to the south of France to fulfill this role. The theme of Apollo at Fontfroide almost certainly did not refer to the vanquishing of academic serpent enemies, as it once had to Delacroix, or to Le Brun’s “Sun King.” Such an interest, given the Fayet purchase of the Bailly library, might have been related to the cult of the sun, a notion with currency in Egyptian, Freemason, and pagan practices and amply documented in the Theosophist’s bookshelf.

Redon’s murals Day and Night (figs. 1.29, 1.30), executed in the Fontfroide library, are vast works restaging and responding to Delacroix’s Apollo. The works, at six feet high by nearly eighteen feet long, are Redon’s largest (although still not as large as Delacroix’s ceiling). Their position in the library echoes Delacroix’s major commissions. While Delacroix’s work was oil on canvas glued to the ceiling, Redon’s is distemper on canvas applied in panels to a wall. In Day, four horses pull a chariot along a golden valley. The rearing horse in the back of the team is taken directly from Delacroix’s team of four horses; while color is the site of pictorial focus and meaning. Color appears through forms, with golden horses floating on a gold ground, color taking priority over form. Red and blue painted on yellow ground create the complements of purple on yellow, echoing the Apollo ceiling. Lush ferns, trees, and flowers are silhouetted along the edge of the canvas. These draw from Delacroix’s effect of painting the sun’s splendor as if through the silhouette of darker figures inserted between the spectator and the glowing background. This foliage is painted in blacks and vivid blues, golds, and reds, making the seemingly burnished surface of the canvas appear to shine with glowing light. Rendered with pastel-like, discrete strokes of distemper in vibrant turquoise, ultramarine-
blue, and persimmon-orange, each shadowy tree leaf is silhouetted against the flat golden background of the work, which, in its lack of modeling or perspective, and segmented composition, is rendered as if it were a painted Japanese *shoji* screen. Blue mountains in the center panel find their color echoed by the light blue hills and trees framing the work’s outer two panels; the distance recedes to a mountain range replete with pink peaks against an orange sky. It could not be accused of being a copy. The potential meanings of the painting emerge instead from its striking, non-mimetic use of color, which engulf a viewer and seem to take the place of line as the painting’s primary means to engage and communicate experience.

*Night*, on the facing wall, draws from the bottom half of Delacroix’s Louvre tableau. In *Night*, “those sickly tones which carry the idea of death” (as Redon had described *Apollo*) dominate. The palette and lack of vivid color contrasts is reminiscent of that canvas and its deliquescing bodies and muddy terrain. The modeling and the spatial coherence of the figures are largely inconsequential here. In its dark palette of blues, blacks, olives, and browns, and its black-outlined contrasting silhouettes, the work is a study in tonal contrasts to *Day*. *Night*, executed after *Day*, departs even more from standard painting techniques: inky pure-black areas, a blue expanse which appears stained and dripping, and bright red dots explore the physical material of the canvas support. Here, color is unmixed, and colorful areas are discrete from one another, creating a calm or somber effect. In *Night*, blue leaves frame a yellow world in which yellow is not a stand-in for the sun. Local color has been abandoned: yellow horses and the field they ride on are the same sunny yellow, delineated only by line, a yellow disengaged from representing local tone. The rest of the painting shifts between
murmuring reds and blues, tempered with a dull olive. There is no doctrinaire method of painting: stippled dots of red and blue achieve optical intensity in passages, a factured tâche describes the ferns, while the chalky purples which are the result of such combinations predominate elsewhere. In monochrome passages reminiscent of his earlier Noirs, floating beings representing the members of his patron Fayet’s family and other friends and family members, including Redon’s son Ari, float. The caryatid columns might be those from Fontfroide monastery’s courtyard.

In Day and Night the Apollo ceiling’s two chromatic halves are spatialized over the Fontfroide library.¹⁶⁷ Redon’s friends and family take the place of the floating, mythical gods, with as Redon put it in 1878 “the color undertak[ing] to say everything,” rather than form or line.¹⁶⁸ Most of all, the works in their use of seemingly ungraspable forms, and glowing, decorative, and exotic color, embrace Blanc’s positions about the dangers of color, and make these a central premise, rather than a pitfall to be avoided, in the work. In their striated brushwork, and the repetition of rubbing and scraping gestures, the works demonstrate the tactile materiality. From their scale, the paintings create for the viewer engulfing colored environments.

Signac in “From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism” had reified Delacroix’s legacy as that of optical mixing, pure colors, methodical division, and the divided touch by invoking a scientific theory of colors,¹⁶⁹ Redon makes, in Day and Night, an alternative reading of Delacroix, which was not adopted and promulgated by Signac, one which owes much to Baudelaire’s notion of color speaking over form and Blanc’s writing on the power and danger of “moral color.” Ultimately it was the use of color as evocative of the imagination or even the soul that won out for Redon. Rather than optical mimesis,
Redon’s Delacroix is more interested in the affective role of colors, the depiction of imaginary beings, and the unseen. Instead of becoming a color symbolist, Redon is ultimately a chromatic relativist who revels in the ambiguities color poses to the viewing subject.

Redon’s projects in color demonstrate a lifetime attempt to engage with Delacroix’s painting in the Galerie d’Apollon. Overall, tracking Redon’s series of Apollos represents not a meaningless iconographic recurrence over time but one which frames Redon’s initial forays into and final thoughts about the role color—corresponding to and experiencing a slippage from meaning, glowing, creating affective visualizations of interior or invisible states, and perhaps even rendering a spectator “intoxicated” with color—plays in his painting.


“Let us invoke the authority of that above and beyond genius, Eugène Delacroix: the rules of color, of line and of composition that we have just listed summarize Divisionism and were promulgated by the great painter.” “Invoquons l’autorité du génie haut et clair d’Eugène Delacroix: les règles de couleur, de ligne et de composition que nous venons d’énoncer et qui résument la division, ont été promulguées par le grand peintre.” Paul Signac, *D’Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme* (1899; reprint, Paris: H. Floury, 1921), 5. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.


See Jacques Morland’s introduction to Redon, *À soi-même*, 6-7 for the publication history of Redon’s writings.


Mellerio archive, A.I.C., Box 17 #14.


“Quand on pense que de mon temps, lorsqu’il n’y avait pas de bicyclette ni d’automobile, on mettait des heures pour faire un chemin qui demande quelques minutes aujourd’hui, on peut penser à quel point les esprits peuvent être changés. Alors la vie

16 “[De temps en temps on tord le cou à un poulet, puis des caris (a traditional Réunionaise curry, also favored by art dealer Ambrose Vollard) de toutes sortes,] du bon lait, des fruits qu’on cueille soi-même, du vieux vin, des pommes de terre, des haricots été.” Camille Redon in a letter to the art critic Émile Hennequin, dated 2 August, 1884. Auriant, “Des lettres inédites d’Odilon Redon et E. Hennequin,” *Beaux-Arts* no. 128 (June 7-14, 1935): 2. Peyrelebade was purchased by Edmond de Rothschild as Château Peyre-Lebade in the 1970s, and is used today for viticulture.

17 “On nous appelait à Bordeaux les cinq doigts de la main.” Terrasse, *Conversations avec Odilon Redon*, 11. His sister and one brother would die in 1885, within two months of one another and of the same illness.


20 Ibid., 22.


22 Ibid., 17-19.


25 The youngest Redon brother, Gaston, would eventually fulfill this paternal ambition by winning the Prix du Rome and becoming the architect of the Louvre extension (now the Musée des arts décoratifs).

26 Mellerio archives, AIC, Box 17 # 14 (Redon’s passport).


Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 71 is one among many sources that relate an account of the miseries of this period in Redon’s life.

He was listed as a student of Gérôme in the exhibitions Salon and Société des amies des arts de Bordeaux exhibitions in which he took part, 1865-1879. See Druick, *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams*, 453.


Boime cites a charge of 120 francs a year for Couture’s atelier. Ibid., 68.

Thomas Couture quoted in Ibid., 69.

A successful career in the fine arts in Paris in the nineteenth century might follow this path: some years as a student at the École des Beaux-Arts, a scholarship to the Villa Médicis in Rome, admission of a picture to the Salon, work accepted to the Luxembourg, election to the Academy, with posthumous work accepted to the Louvre. See Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: The Viking Press, 1984), 205-6.

Eisenman, *The Temptation of Saint Redon*, 47.


“C’est l’invisible, c’est l’impalpable, c’est le rêve, c’est les nerfs, c’est l’âme et il a fait cela, — observez-le bien, monsieur,— sans autres moyens que le contour et la couleur ; il l’a fait mieux que pas un.” Charles Baudelaire, “L’Oeuvre et la vie d’Eugène Delacroix,” in Ibid., 531. For more about Baudelaire on Delacroix’s color and eroticism, see Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 114-121.

Il est bien un des rares élue...son imagination, ardente comme les chapelles ardentes, brille de toutes les flammes et de toutes les pourpres. Tout ce qu’il y a de douleur dans la passion le passionne ; tout ce qu’il y a de splendeur dans l’Église l’illumine,” in Ibid., 401.

“Eugène Delacroix peint surtout l’âme.” Ibid., 404.


Redon, À soi-même, 157.


Ibid., 11.

Ibid., 73.


Ibid., introduction and 2-4; 66. By works I mean paintings, drawings, and watercolors.

As we have seen, Delacroix copied Rubens extensively, and Redon’s copies of Rubens might be seen as furthering his imitation of Delacroix.

Ted Gott states: “On ne saurait souligner que, dans sa période de maturité, la copie n’est plus pour lui en exercice de volonté ou un contrôle de son savoir-faire, mais un effort visant à instaurer un dialogue avec les artistes du passé.” Gott, “La genèse du symbolisme d’Odilon Redon: un nouveau regard sur le Carnet de Chicago,” 55. It is in this respect that I introduce this study with Bloom’s theory of influence.


For this chronology: Ibid., 126.


“The Apollo Gallery at the Louvre,” The Illustrated Magazine of Art 1, no. 2 (1853): 77.

Ibid.

In Ovid’s Metamorphosis, after Jupiter’s floods receded, the earth was covered by monsters, including the python. Apollo killed this animal.

Delacroix quoted in Rubin, “Delacroix and Romanticism,” 44. By this he meant apparently not so much governmental pythons as academic ones; he had been denied election to the Academy for the sixth time that year.


Cited in “The Apollo Gallery at the Louvre,” 77. This description by Delacroix, repeated throughout the literature on the painting, is traced by Lee Johnson to a quotation of Delacroix by Philippe de Chennevières, 1851, p. 69f [I couldn’t find a de Chennevières source in the bibliography]. (Johnson, The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix, A Critical Catalogue, 118.) It is also quoted in Charles Baudelaire, “L’Œuvre et la vie d’Eugène Delacroix,” in Baudelaire, Œuvres Complètes, 535, and attributed by Baudelaire to “the program which M. Delacroix distributed to his friends when he invited them to inspect the work in question,” (“le programme distribué par M. Delacroix à ses amis, quand il les invita à visiter l’œuvre en question”), indicating that it was part of an original printed description of the painting written and distributed by Delacroix.
The painting is canvas applied to the ceiling of the room. Such a fish-eye perspectival problem is common to religious fresco ceiling paintings. See Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 15-20.


Théophile Thoré writing under the pseudonym W. Bürger (August 9, 1861) quoted in Spector, *The Murals of Eugène Delacroix at Saint Sulpice*, 162.


“Parmi les figures mythologiques ou héroïques dont se compose sa décoration, et qui se promènent dans une sorte de jardin en chanté, on distingue une figure de femme à demi nue, assise sous les ombrages de cet Élysée, et dont les carnations conservent dans l'ombre la teinte la plus délicate, la plus transparente, la plus aimable. Comme nous admirions l'admirable fraîcheur de ce ton rose, un peintre qui avait été l'ami de Delacroix et qui l'avait vu travailler aux peintures de la coupole, nous dit en souriant: Vous seriez bien surpris si vous saviez quelles sont les couleurs qui ont produit ces chairs roses dont l'effet vous ravit. Ce sont des tons qui, vus séparément, vous auraient paru aussi ternes, Dieu me pardonne, que la boue des rues... Comment s'était opéré ce miracle? Par la hardiesse qu'avait eue Delacroix de sabrer brutalement le torse nu de cette figure avec des hachures d'un vert décidé qui, neutralisé en partie par sa complémentaire, le rose, forme avec ce rose, dans lequel il s'absorbe, un ton mixte et frais qui n'est sensible qu'à distance, en un mot, une couleur résultante qui est justement ce qu'on appelle le mélange optique.”

74 Martin Kemp hypothesizes that Delacroix’s North African color triangle was influenced by three French texts in particular: G. Grégoire’s *Théorie des couleurs* (1820), C. Bourgeois’s *Manuel d’optique expérimental* (1821), and J. Marimée’s *De la Peinture à l’huile* (1830), based in part on the orientation of red at the top of the triangle; Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 308. Kemp demonstrates that three-color systems, in which all colors result from mixtures of three primary colors, experienced a revival of interest through the work of Sir David Brewster. Painters had long understood this feature of color mixing that resulted in a tripartite system of primary colors, and the system represented a challenge to Newtonian systems of seven primary colors (Ibid., 261-62). The first definitive three-color system had been developed by the printmaker Jakob Christof le Blon in Germany (Ibid., 282), and marked a transition into a post-Newtonian understanding of color (Ibid., 263). As the sketch and Moroccan journey were made in 1832, they were too early to have been influenced by Chevreul’s publication in 1839.


76 “On dirait que cette peinture, comme les sorciers et les magnétiseurs, projette sa pensée à distance. Ce singulier phénomène tient à la puissance du coloriste.” Ibid.

77 “Les couleurs parlent.” Ibid., 370.

78 Bacou, *La Donation Ari et Suzanne Redon*, 3.

79 The painting was situated in the Musée de Luxembourg until 1874, then moved to the Louvre Museum (Bacou, *La Donation Ari et Suzanne Redon*, 4). Given that the copy probably dates prior to 1868, Redon most likely copied the painting in the Luxembourg.

80 Delacroix’s painting, executed between 1837-41, was contemporaneous with the 1839 publication of Chevreul’s book.

81 Redon’s young palette included Lead White (*Blanc d’argent*), White Blond (*Blanc d’blond*), Brilliant Yellow (*Jaune brillant*), Yellow Ochre (*Ocre Jaune*), Natural Earth (*Terre Naturelle*), Chrome No.1, Chrome No.2, Vermillion, Red Ochre (*Ocre Rouge*), Carmine, Burnt Sienna (*Sienne Brulée*), Black Ivory (*Noir d’Ivoire*), Plum Blue (*Bleu de prune*), Ultramarine (*Bleu d’outremer*), Emerald Green (Vert Véronèse), and Iron Brown (*Brun de Fer*). Notebook, 1864 Louvre Cabinet de Dessins RF 40.954.
Bacou, *La Donation Arï et Suzanne Redon*, 4. Redon’s final copy from Delacroix was not a painting, but his drawing *The Education of Achilles*, from the Louvre, made in preparation for the cupola of the Bourbon Palace. See Ibid.

Although he misses some of the subtlety of Delacroix’s pink-under-white and green-under-black underpainting in the figures.

Ibid.

“Voici l’ouvrage qu’il fit dans toute la plénitude de son talent et de ses forces.” Redon, *À soi-même*, 167.

“Cette oeuvre si puissante, si forte parce qu’elle est nouvelle, est tout un poème, une symphonie. L’attribut qui définit chaque dieu devient inutile, tant la couleur se charge de tout dire et d’exprimer juste; le reste de tradition qu’il conserve encore, pour la clarté, est inutile.” Italics mine. Ibid., 168.


See *Apollo Victorious over the Serpent Python* (1850) and Lee Johnson, “A New Oil Sketch by Delacroix for ‘Apollo Slays Python,’” *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1018 (January 1988): 35-36, on other works in this sequence; in more preliminary sketches the gestural qualities of the paint definitively mark them as early studies.

The ceiling has been restored several times, starting in 1868 and was even removed and later restored during World War II, so it is also difficult to ascertain to what extent the brightness of the color in the extant ceiling is a result of those restorations; however, Delacroix’s attention to linear details throughout his studies for the ceiling is remarkable.


Ibid., 90.


97 Spector, The Murals of Eugène Delacroix at Saint Sulpice, 162.


100 See Blanc, Grammaire des arts du dessin.

101 “Expression pure,” “que le romantisme n’est autre chose que le triomphe du sentiment sur la forme, et sans retours ni regrets, il entre dans la vraie voie, qui est celle de la couleur expressive, de la couleur que l’on pourrait appeler couleur morale.” Redon, À soi-même, 166.

102 Oxford English Dictionary: “Moral,” “etymology: Anglo-Norman and Middle French moral (late 13th cent. in Old French in phrase vertu morale : see moral virtue n.; c1370 modifying other nouns; 1403 in philosophie morele ; late 17th cent. in sense ‘founded on opinion, sentiment or belief and not on meticulous facts or reasoning’; mid 18th cent. in sense ‘relating to the soul or spirit, as opposed to the physical’).”

103 Littré: “Qui, dans l’être humain, est du ressorte de l’âme, par opposition à ce qui est du ressorte du physique.”

104 Emanuel Swedenborg, Heaven and Hell, also, The World of Spirits, or Intermediate States, From Things Heard and Seen (1758; reprint, Boston: Swedenborg Printing Bureau, 1883), 50.


106 Ibid., 311.

107 Ibid., 310.


109 Charles Baudelaire, “Correspondances,” in Ibid., 46.

Ibid., 196.

He held the post of *directeur des Beaux-Arts* between 1848 and 1852, and between 1870 and 1873, according to the website of the French Academy, http://www.academie-francaise.fr/les-immortels/charles-blanc, accessed October 22, 2013.

Blanc was considered the author who codified Delacroix’s use of color into scientific laws, and Seurat and Signac were among the painters who later read him. Seurat’s apprehension of Delacroix through the lens of Charles Blanc in 1881 was fundamental to his creation of the pointillism of *La Grande Jatte* in 1886. For more on Blanc’s understanding of Delacroix and its accuracy, see Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, chapter VII, especially 316.

Roque, *Art et science de la couleur*, 318 and footnote no. 6, p. 591. “Mais il convient de souligner que ces notes sont bien des notes...recopiées des *Artistes de mon temps* de Charles Blanc, et collées en un montage de citations,” and “selon toute vraisemblance, il ne s’agit pas d’un plagiat, Redon n’ayant jamais revu ces notes avant leur publication par sa veuve;” cf. Dario Gamboni, *La Plume et le pinceau : Odilon Redon et la littérature* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1989). I would use Gamboni’s note to clarify Roque’s point: the artist was making notes for his own work, and so the essay was not intended for publication. Redon’s widow first made the essay public after his death in 1916. We might even consider the 1878 Redon essay to be a postdated publication intended, after his reputation as a painter was established, to explain his own interest in color and connect it to Delacroix. This reading only underscores the importance of Delacroix and “moral color” to Redon’s later work.


“Quel drame s’annonce plus loin par cette lumière d’un violet sinistre? C’est la mort de Pline l’Ancien...Partout, chez Delacroix, la coloration est éloquente, d’une éloquence infaillible. C’est, je le répète, que sans rien savoir encore du sens des figures, de leur pantomime, de leur rôle, on est averti de l’émotion qu’on ressentira, et que le tableau
renversé, la décoration vue à l'envers, produiraient déjà l'impression voulue, on du moins frapperaient sur l'âme les premiers coups.” Ibid., 59.

119 Blanc’s recurring metaphors relate to dramaturgy. It would be interesting to examine the color used in theatrical lighting during this era; paintings and pastels by Degas and prints by Toulouse Lautrec give us some indication of the practice as it existed during the 1890s.

120 “Les harmonies morales, il en savait mieux que personne au monde le langage dramatique, la poésie, et voilà véritablement le secret qu’il n’a dit à aucun élève.” Blanc, Les Artistes de mon temps, 62.


122 “La couleur est un élément mobile, vague, insaisissable, quand la forme est au contraire précise, limitée, palpable et constante.” Ibid., 559.

123 Blanc, following a tradition that went back to the Renaissance, posited color as gendered, writing that "drawing is the masculine side of art, color the feminine.” As he wrote in another work, Art in Ornament and Dress, color is associated with “our feelings and our passions. This is why women, who are led by sentiment, attach more importance to color than men do” (Blanc, Art in Ornament and Dress, 60). See also Jacqueline Lichtenstein, The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), especially p. 50; David Batchelor, Chromophobia (London: Reaktion, 2000) 51-71. In general, for more on Charles Blanc see Misook Song, Art Theories of Charles Blanc: 1813-1882 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984).

124 “L’art dans parure et dans le vêtement.” Charles Blanc, Art in Ornament and Dress, 60.


126 Charles Blanc, Art in Ornament and Dress, 66.

127 Ibid., 65.

128 Goethe also saw bright colors as associated more closely with non-Western people. In his chapter entitled “moral colors,” Goethe discusses how “robust, uneducated men” and
“savage nations” are especially pleased with the brightest yellows (Goethe, Theory of Colors, 309-10), and that “the Inhabitants of South Europe make use of the very brilliant colors for their dresses” (Goethe, Theory of Colors, 327). To Goethe “Lively nations, the French for instance, love intense colors...[and] Sedate nations, like the English and Germans, wear straw-colored or leather-colored yellow accompanied with dark blue” (Goethe, Theory of Colors, 328). From this passage, we might conclude that “moral” color has long been associated with culture and race, as well as with affect.

129 Humbert de Superville’s Essai sur les Signes Inconditionnels dans l’art (Leyde: C. Van der Roek, 1827) might be seen as a predecessor for this work in its fascination for classifying linear forms—faces, architecture and statuary from various cultures from roofs in China, to Egyptian mummies, Giotto angels to Greek columns—and linking these linear reductions to feelings and ideas.


131 Redon, unlike Blanc, also takes up the Apollo painting by Delacroix. Although the painting had existed for some twenty-five years at the time Blanc’s book’s publication, the subject is conspicuous in its absence. Blanc only addresses Delacroix’s Apollo and his murals at Saint-Sulpice in a tiny footnote (Ibid., 80, 82), and he does not discuss Delacroix’s great murals explicitly in this essay.

132 “Ce maître libre, ardent, artiste... avoir fait parler passionnément les couleurs du prisme... le premier, touchées d’un génie altier qui les dota do pouvoir d’exprimer la vie morale.” Redon, À soi-même, 173.

133 “La couleur, exprimant désormais la passion et la vie intérieure...l’unité de la couleur appliquée à l’histoire aux sujets humains. Elle est dans les annales de l’art un avènement capital, mais elle n’était jusque-là que l’apanage du paysage. Delacroix l’a impérieusement soumise à l’histoire.” Ibid., 167.

134 “Venise, Parme, Vérone n’ont vu la couleur que par le côté matériel. Delacroix seul touche à la couleur morale, à la couleur humain; c’est là son oeuvre, et ses titres à la postérité.” Ibid., 168. The morality of Delacroix’s use of color is presented as a development in contrast with that of other painters who have been considered historically great colorists: “Venice, Parma, Verona have only seen color from the material side,” he writes, evoking artists like Titian, Correggio, or Veronese with the names of these cities.

135 “Le produit de l’humaine passion. Dans tout ce qu’il a peint, on sent la présence de l’homme. Le cas n’est pas négligeable. Et l’humanité se garderait bien d’oublier un art où elle se mire et s’exalte; elle s’en écarte parfois, mais elle y revient toujours.” Ibid., 174.

According to Pliny, their tones also represent the four basic alchemical colors of matter. See, for example, F. S. Taylor, “A Survey of Greek Alchemy,” The Journal of Hellenic Studies 1 (1930): 109.

De Mirbel, paraphrased in Johnson, The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix, A Critical Catalogue, 124. Madame de Mirbel, better known as Lizinska Aimée Zoé Rue, the painter of miniatures and published salon critic, was wife of Charles-François Brisseau de Mirbel, the noted botanist.


“Nulle couleur ne peut traduire le monde musical qui est uniquement et seulement interne et sans nul appui dans la nature réelle.” Redon was writing about Fantin-Latour’s attempts at painting directly from music. Redon, À soi-même, 149.

Odilon Redon in Redon file, A. N., F21 Redon doc. #1709 dated 3 May 1879.

For a full transcript in French and English see Appendix 1.

The romantic partner of Juliette Dodu, Larrey was most likely a connection Redon established after he met Camille Falte, his future wife and Juliette’s sister. Redon and Camille would marry in May of 1880; Larrey would sponsor Redon for his cross of the Legion of Honor for battle in 1878, and the Redons would inherit part of his property in Bièvres when Larrey passed away. See Mellerio Archives, Box 17 #15.

“Vous m'aimez fait l'honneur de me recommander M. Odilon Redon qui désire être chargé d'exécuter l'une des copies d'après X Delacroix qui serait commandées, en ce moment. L'administration n'a jusqu'à présent commandé que des lithographies d'après la parution de l'illustre maître et n'est X donner l'Instruction d'en faire exécuter les reproductions peintes. M Odilon Redon a donc été induit en erreur à ce sujet, mais je m'empresse d'ajouter que je serais très heureux de tenir compte a cet artiste de l'intérêt dont vous l'honorez dès qu'une occasion s'en présentera).” See Redon file, A. N., F21 Redon doc. # 1709. (Letter dated 2 May 1879).


See Gloria Groom, “The Late Work,” in Druick, *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams*, 339; she derives this conclusion in part because of its great simplicity and the space between Apollo and his team of horses.

Ted Gott links Redon’s mid-career Pegasus-themed pastels iconographically to a work by Andrea Mantegna, “Parnassus,” at the Louvre. This is intriguing but manifestly of lesser importance than the persistence of Delacroix’s work in Redon’s Apollo images. Both admittedly deal with flying horses, but Gott’s essay is largely unmotivated in its articulation of the significance of the connection between the flying horse and the Mantegna canvas or Mantegna as an artist. See Ted Gott, “Redon, Mellerio, Mantegna and the Melbourne ‘Pegasus,’” *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, no. 27 (1986): 37-65.


Gloria Groom sees these later Apollo paintings as part of Redon’s comfort with his “inability to achieve the [chromatic mastery] of his celebrated precursor Eugène Delacroix,” Ibid., 333. She cites the cheerful flowers and butterflies, which occasionally accompany the Apollo, as evidence that Redon has come to terms with his relationship with Delacroix’s Apollo. Yet Redon keeps returning to the chariot and experimenting with the role of color in relation to the image, indicting not peace, but rather an obsession with the iconography.


Groom, “The Late Work,” in Druick, Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 335.


The Fayets purchased the entire library of Edmond de Bailly, owner of the occult bookshop in Paris, to furnish Fontfroide around 1908. See Margaret Stuffmann and Max Hollein, eds., “Fontfroide,” in As in a Dream: Odilon Redon (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 306. The books on the occult in the Fayet library in 1910 are documented in their entirety at the end of Lévy, Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes : Odilon Redon et le milieu occultiste.

Margaret Stuffmann, “Fontfroide,” in As in a Dream, 306.

Lévy, Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes : Odilon Redon et le milieu occultiste, x, 16.

Noce, “Fontfroide sanctuaire de Redon.”


See works like Hasegawa Kyuzo’s Pine in the Midst of Grass and Flowers, late 16th century. Redon might have encountered such items at Samuel Bing’s antiques shop in Paris, and they would have been a common reference among his Nabis friends. See


169 Signac, *D’Eugène Delacroix at Néo-Impressoinisme*. Many of these phrases are the titles of section headings in the text.
CHAPTER TWO

“Dérivée de celle d’un autre”: Redon, Gauguin, and Primitivist Color

There was a man born blind and he said: “I do not believe in the world of light and appearance. There are no colors, bright or somber. There is no sun, no moon, no stars. No one has witnessed these things.” His friends remonstrated with him, but he clung to his opinion: “What you say that you see,” he objected, “are illusions. If colors existed I should be able to touch them. They have no substance and are unreal.”

—Paul Carus, The Gospel of Buddha

Redon’s closest artistic allies shared his passionate dialog with Charles Blanc’s text and his particular point of contention with Blanc’s warnings about exotic or primitive color. Redon called Gauguin’s color “dérivée de celle d’un autre,” color “derived from an other.” Such a foreign palette is catalytic to Redon’s earliest paintings in seemingly arbitrary colors. In Redon’s encounter with neo-Impressionist color theory in the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition of 1886, his friendship with Paul Gauguin, and in his own self-identification with non-Western colonial subjects, Redon proposes a strong relationship between non-Western identity and the rejection of local color. Choosing colors from Eastern tradition, or invoking colors that signify a fictional “Eastern-ness” in his work allows Redon to respond to Blanc’s charge that color is a corrupting and oriental influence on art with his own affirmation of the power and primacy of color.

Redon exhibited Les Yeux Clos, 1889-90 (fig. 2.1) with Les XX in Brussels in 1890. On December 28, 1890, an unsigned article appearing in the Brussels-based magazine L’Art Moderne describes the painting: “You remember, esthetes, a painting by Odilon Redon…the very sweet head of a woman, inclined, with an expression as calm as
death, the eyelids shut over invisible eyes…one shoulder nude.”

The work, which marks a transition between exhibiting for a decade in black-and-white and the start of exhibiting in color for the artist, became part of Redon’s first series to deploy his unusual non-mimetic color. I will argue that in the series of works painted between 1889 and 1894, Redon comes to use seemingly arbitrary color—flat, unmixed blocks of non-local color often executed in aniline, modern pigments—in reaction to contemporaneous neo-Impressionist theories. In doing so, Redon brings Gauguin’s chromatic evocation of the cultural “otherness” of color to a resolution regarding the role of new technological and cultural influences in relation to French tradition.

Although *Yeux Clos* has been considered a portrait of the artist’s wife, Camille, and while she might have posed for the painting, in its absence of signifying markers it is not a conventional portrait. While there is a tradition of depicting Christ with closed eyes, the image is not explicitly religious. Certainly, the painting is neither an orthodox nude (the body is obscured), nor a genre scene. The size of *Yeux Clos* testifies to Redon’s ease with the 44 x 36 cm format, the size of many of his previous works on paper. Examining the paintings across several iterations lets us see Redon’s transition from local to non-local color. The first (1889-90) *Yeux Clos* is a nearly colorless painting. It shows a head contoured with heavy graphite lines, raked into relief by lighting from the right, and surrounded by a wash of sky-blue so thin it lets the grain of the canvas show through. In an expanse of foreground, rubbed white areas mark a rectangular patch of sunlight. It is practically two-toned, and sculptural, its blue and brown relieved only by white, black, a bit of yellow, and a microscopic application of red added practically as afterthoughts. Male or female, the figure depicted is undoubtedly European.
Redon would repeat the motif of closed eyes several times over the next few years, each time varying the work’s colors in increasingly radical shifts. The painting’s main figure would take on purple, blue, green, orange and yellow flesh tones, exhibiting the seemingly arbitrary coloration that puzzled Tolstoy, Mauclair, Signac, and other viewers. Like the *Golden Cell*, the 1892 *Yeux Clos* (fig. 2.2) presents the figure as deep blue, evoking the Indian myth of the Hindu god Krishna, often represented as blue. In some instances, the figure is surrounded by a subtle halo of striated gold; other figures possess a radiant red, electric purple, or aniline-orange halo. What’s more, the features of the figure become distinctly non-Western in paintings which evince these radical changes in color, such as the *Yeux Clos*, c. 1894 (fig. 2.3). This figure seems almost traced from the first *Yeux Clos* (fig. 2.1), yet with some important modifications. The brown hair has become a purple scarf that cascades down over the right shoulder. The rendering of the body has become blocky and anatomically unlikely, with the chest an undifferentiated flat area that intersects with the yellow surface of the foreground. The features are now quite distinct from the classical contours of the face in the first *Yeux Clos*. The eyes and nose have widened, and the bridge of the nose is no longer aquiline; the mouth turns down slightly. The blue skin tone with mottled red shadows seems to indicate darker skin. The figure in the painting has changed not only colors, but also, seemingly, ethnic origins. What might be the connection between the two?

While it is clear that later versions of *Yeux Clos* (figs. 2.2 - 2.3), with their blue and purple heads, show Redon’s shift to painting in unconventional colors, criticisms of the works ask questions which remain unanswered: Where do these colors come from? Can the colors be understood as symbolic, or expressive—or are there other categories
more useful for thinking about the function of color in these early, unusually colored Redon paintings? After exhibiting his *Yeux Clos* (fig. 2.1) in 1890, another version appeared (fig. 2.2), dating c. 1892, in his Durand-Ruel show of March-April, 1894, along with *The Golden Cell*. The c. 1892 version of *Yeux Clos* is similar in style and color to *The Golden Cell*: the figure is cobalt; the background is burnished gold. This work initially seems to confirm Dario Gamboni’s reading of Redon’s painting as utilizing a symbolic vocabulary of color (e.g., blue for the Virgin Mary), when he writes of *The Golden Cell*:

> Blue plays a crucial role in Redon’s colored works, not only cobalt blue but also cerulean blue, ultramarine, and other blue pigments, nuances, and mixtures. In nature, blue is associated above all with the sky and sea, both of which Redon regarded as symbols of the infinite. In Western iconography, blue is used in images of devotion to the Virgin Mary, to whom Redon was dedicated as a six-year-old in the (later fulfilled) hope of experiencing miraculous cure... This choice of colors should by no means prompt one to conclude that the figure of *The Golden Cell*, which Redon deliberately left ambiguous, is meant to represent the Virgin Mary. Yet this association—which would have been unavoidable for Redon’s first viewing audience—makes a legitimate contribution to the reception and interpretation of the painting.6

While Gamboni concedes that, “an Eastern element may have played a role in *The Golden Cell*,’’7 his references to color and its symbolism and evocative capacity are primarily keyed to longstanding associations in Western art. Mary is rarely represented as an entirely blue figure, however, and I would argue that it is more centrally an Eastern
and “non-Western” color usage that Redon draws upon as he begins to exhibit his paintings in Paris, and that furthermore color in these works is best looked at not against the background of an extant and unchanging Western or even Eastern art historical symbolism of color, but rather against the rich and rapidly changing cultural and technological contexts in which color is produced and distributed during the late 1880s and early 1890s in Paris.⁸

While the notion of primitive art as a formal field of study would not enter an art-historical discourse in France until the very end of the nineteenth century (art historian William Rubin traces the term to the period dating 1897 to 1904⁹), the experience of exotic works of art and their novel textures, colors, and effects was widely available to artists in Paris in the last two decades of the nineteenth century through ethnographic museums and universal expositions. As Robert Goldwater has argued, the growth of ethnological museum displays, from the entry of Captain Cook’s South Sea objects in the British Museum to the ethnographical museums of Leipzig and Dresden, took place concurrently with the expansion of European colonial empires (fig. 2.4).¹⁰ In 1878 the Universal Exposition in Paris put on display ethnographic objects, particularly from the Americas, in a structure that became the basis for the ethnographical museum in the Trocadéro later that year.¹¹ In 1889, the same year Yeux Clos was painted, numerous Oceanic art objects were on display in the Universal Exposition in Paris.¹² Brighter and more unusual colors were also found in the commercial availability of new imports from the East, particularly following the opening of Japan for trade in 1854. Edmond de Goncourt wrote in his Journal in 1876: “Now that my eyes are accustomed to living in the colors of the Far East, my eighteenth century is losing its colors. I see it in
The next year he wrote that exposure to Japanese colors had radically altered the French painting palette: “It’s curious, the revolution brought by Japanese art to a people enslaved, in the arts, to the symmetry of Greece and who, suddenly, have found passion for a plate where there is a flower which isn’t perfectly in the middle, or for fabric with harmonies not made through the transitions of half-tones, but only through the savage juxtaposition of bright colors. Who would have dared to paint, twenty years ago, a woman in a really yellow dress? It only became possible after [Henri] Regnault[’s]… introduction of the imperial color of the Far East to the eyes of Europe yes, it is a true revolution in the color of pictures and of fashion.”

While the link between the rise of the ethnographic museum and European colonialism has been widely explored, and William Rubin and Robert Goldwater have dealt extensively with the topic of primitivism in twentieth-century art, no one to my knowledge has taken up the role of the novel and exotic colors of the 1890s as they apply to Redon’s transition to painting. Redon’s art seeks to reconnect painting to a “primitive” world of materials and colors and yet acknowledges painting’s status vis-à-vis new technologies of color, particularly aniline pigments widely available in Paris at this time. As such, I will argue, his first series in color proposes a model for a modern, hybrid Francophone subject and subjectivity visually defined by bright and exotic colors.

“Scientific” Color: Redon and Neo-Impressionist Color Theory

Redon’s participation in the 1886 Impressionist exhibition thrust his work squarely into the context of novel neo-Impressionist color techniques used by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. Just before Redon began to make and display his chromatically
innovative early paintings, he participated as a charcoal artist and lithographer in the Eighth Independent Exhibition of the Impressionists on the rue Laffitte in 1886—a display of over 50 paintings by such artists as Seurat, Signac, Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Paul Cézanne, and Camille Pissarro. Redon, who by this time had achieved some notoriety as the artist described by J.K. Huysmans in À Rebours, was invited to participate by Jean-Baptiste Armand Guillaumin, the Impressionist painter. Having painted alongside Cézanne at the Académie Suisse, the amateur artist and government employee Guillaumin had been a part of the Salon des Refusés, and in 1884 exhibited in the Société des Artistes Indépendants, an exhibition that Redon helped organize. Even though Redon’s black and white work, as a 46-year-old printmaker, was quite different from that of other “Independents,” Martha Ward confirms that Guillaumin was responsible for bringing several new artists into the group for the 1886 exhibition, including “push[ing] through” Redon, presumably against protests pertaining to his style. (Guillaumin aspired to keep the Independent exhibitions free from the influence of art dealers, and perhaps saw Redon’s involvement as vice-president of the Society of Independent Artists as an indication of a non-academic and independent attitude that aligned him with the Impressionist group despite his obvious stylistic dissimilarities.)

While the 1886 Impressionist exhibition was Redon’s biggest show to date, his work was placed in a corridor. What’s more, his reviews were very poor. Fénéon chided Redon for a number of “poorly chosen” pieces whose peripheral placement underscored their marginality. Others focused specifically on the lack of color in his art and focused
on the disconnect between Redon’s work and the new uses of color by other artists in the show.\textsuperscript{18} A derisive review by the young critic George Auriol read:

And now let us go to Mr. Odillon [sic] Redon…Seeing his drawings the other day, I started to laugh! … In the dream, Mr. Redon? What a joke… ‘Oh,’ they say, ‘you don’t know Redon! He is one of the most profound thinkers of the century!’ Then he should do verse or prose! The profound thinkers don’t draw; Puvis de Chavannes doesn’t paint profound thoughts, he paints things, which can suggest them. If Mr. Redon has too many profound thoughts, he should publish books, or write [his thoughts] on the sidewalks, but he shouldn’t smear papers! For my part, I would offer all of Redon and his future oeuvre for a simple watercolor by Berthe Morisot, three brush strokes, a little blue and a little green—and then I would truly dream. Because there is dreaming and there is dreaming, and between us, I don’t care for those of Odillon [sic].”\textsuperscript{19}

Redon’s black-and-white art posed a problem of classification for Auriol. His art was associated with those who wrote “verse,” indicating poetry, or “prose,” suggesting literary essays—perhaps because of its exhibition history in the offices of literary publications, but also because it, like text, is made of monochrome lithography rather than colorful oil. At the same time, Redon’s art is also likened to the childlike or primitive—“smeared” as if with fingers rather than accomplished with a tool like a brush, an art of the sidewalk (childlike, horizontal) rather than the salon (socially mature, vertical). Examining the lower-left corner of his \textit{Il y eut peut-être une vision première essayée dans la fleur} (There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower), 1883 (Fig. 2.5), one of the most commented-upon entries by Redon in the show, we see a wide
range of visually rich mark-making techniques at play—parallel lines, semi-circles, leaf-like forms, cross-hatchings—which are anything but casually “smeared,” as the word suggests. Yet at a moment when painting is defined as above all the plastic translation of the visual sensation of exterior color (“Three brush strokes, a little blue and a little green”), Auriol considered Redon’s art too “thoughtful,” too material (“smear papers”), and too monochromatic to be visual. Beyond creating a confusion between the fine arts and other disciplines, Redon, at his first big show, is effectively told to stop making art: he is charged to “write,” to “do verse or prose” rather than visual art, “to publish in pamphlets,” or even to “write [his thoughts] on the asphalt of the sidewalks,” a suggestion which further marginalizes Redon’s practice.

Young critic Octave Mirbeau, an Impressionist supporter, also singled out Redon for attack during the same exhibition in 1886, mocking his work in print in the pages of the journal Le Gaulois, in the offices of which Redon had exhibited just a few years before. Mirbeau’s criticism centers on the vague nature of Redon’s drawings, which require viewers to guess at or fill in their indistinct subjects. Of There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower, 1883 (Fig. 2.5), he writes:

M. Odilon Redon draws you an eye that floats, at the end of a stem, in an amorphous landscape. And the commentators assemble. Some will tell you that this eye exactly represents the eye of Consciousness, others the eye of Uncertainty; some will explain that this eye synthesizes a setting sun over hyperborean seas, others that it symbolizes universal sorrow, a bizarre water lily about to blossom on the black waters of invisible Acherons. A supreme exegete arrives and concludes: ‘This eye at the end of a stem is simply a necktie pin.’ The
very essence of the ideal is that it evokes nothing but vague forms, which might just as well be magic lakes as sacred elephants, extra-terrestrial flowers as well as necktie pins, unless they are nothing at all. Yet, we demand today that whatever is represented must be precise, we want the figures that emanate from an artist’s brain to move and think and live.”21

Mirbeau criticizes Redon’s vague and nebulous forms as “magic lakes [or] sacred elephants, extra-terrestrial flowers as well as necktie pins”—exotic, obscure, alien, superfluously decorative and most of all ridiculous against the content of contemporary art. Redon’s tiny work fails the first precept of Western aesthetics, the primacy of form. Instead, its indeterminacy seemingly resolves into Oriental (sacred elephants refers to Indian culture) or even alien (“extra-terrestres”) forms. Mirbeau characterizes Redon as regressive—“we demand today”—and advocates for an art with many of the same qualities as science: precision, and representations drawn from close observation.

Redon’s art, in contrast, is vague, nebulous, and evocative, requiring that the viewer complete the meaning of the work which, without interpretation, might mean “nothing at all.”

Critic Félix Fénéon’s famous essay on the exhibition, “The Impressionists in 1886,” praises the same exhibit and lauds a new tendency in painting. Fénéon described this new painting as concerned above all with the optical color mixing established by American scientist Ogden Rood, describing the neo-Impressionist project as “require[ing] no manual dexterity…only vision.”22 He praised the art of Seurat, Signac, and Pissarro: “These painters particularize with an excessive sensitivity to reactions of colors, by a tendency towards the decomposition of tones and by an effort to invest their canvases
with intense clarity. In the choice of subjects, they proscribe history, anecdote and dream and, as a way of working, tend towards rapid execution, and execution directly from nature.” Fénéon’s articulation of the burgeoning neo-Impressionist style describes a new art which exhibits a scientific analysis of color. It is lucid, and explicitly eschews dreams. A champion of Seurat’s “chromo-luminism,” Fénéon described this technique as creating “[a] mixture on the retina [which] gives a painting a luminous vibration that enlivens the look,” rather than the mixture of pigmented colors on a palette. While the basis for Seurat’s use of color, particularly post-1886, was more complex than Fénéon’s account articulates here, to Fénéon, the decomposition of color into discrete tones is central to the problem of transcribing the visual sensation of the external world. Painting is the execution of this theory of color (Fénéon famously suggests that, “The skill of the hand is a negligible question, because every material difficulty of the application of paint is eliminated. It is enough that the executor has an artistic vision to be a painter, finally!”). Seurat’s use of color, staged in a room alongside similar works by Paul Signac, and Camille and Lucien Pissarro, established the optical mixing of colors using the scientific theory of the mutual intensification of adjacent contrasting colors as the major new tendency in art. Such work was obviously in aesthetic tension with Redon’s colorless, nebulous work, which stood out in contrast to such chromatically innovative canvases and their representation of modern, urban life.

It could not have escaped Redon’s notice that painters of the new group made much of connecting their lineage with Chevreul, and through him, Delacroix. Paul Signac claimed to have sought out the chemist in 1884 at the Gobelins, when Signac was a twenty-one-year old self-taught artist interested in the origins of Pissarro’s yellow-and-
violet-based harmonies. Signac spoke of meeting Chevreul just before creating his paintings for the 1886 Impressionist exhibition, and in his journal refers to Delacroix repeatedly as the figure before himself who best executed Chevreul’s precepts in painting. Pissarro echoed the assessment of the new neo-Impressionist style in contemporary painting as a scientific heir to Chevreul, writing to his son in 1887:

Surely it is clear that we could not pursue our studies of light with much assurance if we did not have as a guide the discoveries of Chevreul and other scientists. I would not have distinguished between local color and light if science had not given us the hint. The same holds true for complementary colors, contrasting colors, etc.

Signac’s method called for the division of color into pure tones that are “objectively exact.” Even as color is central to this new method of painting, color is under the mantle of science. As a method that relied on discoveries in the field of optics and chemistry, Signac’s theory can be seen as a manifestation of Blanc’s desire to tame and control color.

During their participation in the 1886 Impressionist exhibition Redon met Paul Gauguin, whose work would be influential to his first color paintings. Forty-year-old Gauguin was a painter with an ambitious nineteen works on view. Gauguin’s chromatically muffled works in the show all date from among his first years of full-time painting, 1884–85 (he had painted as an amateur for some time before). Un Coin de la mare (Cows at the Watering Place), 1885 (fig. 2.6), was a depiction of rural life at Dieppe from the summer of 1885. The painting awkwardly depicts spatial relationships (one cow appears decapitated by a bush, while two others seem to float above a creek), and is chromatically unremarkable. In his review of the Impressionist exhibition of 1886
Félix Fénéon called Gauguin’s palette “muted” and noted his “contrasting russet tones…with his greens,” a description of a fairly standard use of complementary tones. Henry Fèvre described Gauguin’s colors as “somewhat smothered,” while other reviews associated his palette with those of Pissarro, Signac, and Seurat, and he was even called a follower of Guillaumin. Gauguin was conspicuously absent from Fénéon’s list of the show’s “gifted colorists,” “masters of landscape,” or “artistic revolutionaries,” while the names of neo-Impressionist painters Guillaumin, Pissarro, Signac, and Seurat appeared under these superlative categories.

From this twinned, inauspicious start in the same show of 1886, Redon and Gauguin became friends, in part based on their mutual distaste for “scientific” neo-Impressionist color. Redon and Gauguin—neither artist native to Paris—would be close advocates of one another’s work, making repeated references to one another in their paintings, and defending one another’s works in articles published both in L’Art Moderne, and in Gauguin’s Essais d’Art libre. In the earliest extant copies of Gauguin’s correspondence with Redon and his wife, it is clear that both artists read similar texts about color, most notably the Delacroix chapter of Les Artistes de mon temps by Charles Blanc. After creating the paintings for the 1886 Independent exhibition, and perhaps inspired by news of the Delacroix painting retrospective the same year, Gauguin read the Charles Blanc text on Delacroix which had so impressed Redon. Like Redon, Gauguin reacted to the marginalization of color in relation to line, writing incredulously in contention with Blanc in his notebook in late 1885, “Can you really make me believe that line doesn’t derive from color?” switching the hierarchy of the categories Blanc provides to put the priority on the chromatic. Gauguin later in the 1890s would describe
his frustrating encounters with Impressionist painters and their inability to go beyond what he termed the slavish representation of atmospheric effects on color:

Then came the Impressionists! They studied color, and color alone, as a decorative effect, but they did so without freedom, remaining bound by the shackles of verisimilitude. For them there is no such thing as a landscape that has been dreamed, created from nothing. They looked, and they saw, harmoniously, but without any goal: they did not build their edifice on any sturdy foundation of reasoning as to why feelings are perceived through color. They focused their efforts around the eye, not in the mysterious center of thought.\textsuperscript{36}

The Impressionist interest in observational precision would soon stand in sharp contrast with Gauguin’s fantastic painted scenes with their interest in affect and painterly imagination. Gauguin disassociated himself from Signac and Seurat’s color theory and initiated a social break with Signac, Seurat, and Pissarro in May 1886 that culminated in Gauguin’s refusing to speak to or exhibit with his former friends.\textsuperscript{37}

Gauguin, immediately following the 1886 exhibition, travelled first in Brittany (Fall 1886) and then in Panama and Martinique (Spring 1887) with the artist Charles Laval. While Laval’s paintings of Martinique, such as \textit{On Martinique}, 1887 (fig. 2.7), are not radically colored, they exhibit several stylistic characteristics that would prove significant for subsequent works by Gauguin and Redon. In \textit{On Martinique}, the non-Western figures are depicted in red and grey clothing rendered as single chromatic blocks; the contrasting tones between the women’s dresses and their dark skin is a central characteristic of the painting. The sky over the sea behind them is rendered in a series of vertically hatched brush strokes which shift from turquoise to purplish-blue, but which do
not mix or stipple color (as the neo-Impressionist style might prescribe). Gauguin’s own paintings from this period, such as *Mangoes* (1887), would also draw chromatic parallels between laboring women’s skin and the brown earth.

Returning to the Brittany countryside, a short journey outside of Paris, Gauguin painted *Vision After the Sermon* (*La Vision après le sermon*) (fig. 2.8), of 1888, the painting which, along with Gauguin’s *Yellow Christ* (*Le Christ jaune*) of 1889, is the clearest Western artistic predecessor of Redon’s *Yeux Clos*. The work is Gauguin’s interpretation of Delacroix’s *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, part of Delacroix’s great, final mural cycle painted in the church of Saint-Sulpice (fig. 1.19). Yet Gauguin’s figures wear Breton costume, a signal of his rejection of modern Western subjects and a fascination with the proximate “other” of Brittany’s pre-modern French culture. A field of vermilion grass sets the stage for a man to wrestle a yellow-winged, orange-footed angel. The colors, which are executed as blocks, conspicuously avoid a pointillist division of tones. A single, tiny cow prances on the field, improbably scaled at about the same size as the women who kneel behind him. Some of the Breton figures are depicted with their eyes closed, praying, as if the scene were being imagined.

The composition has been widely linked to Japanese woodblock prints, particularly those of Hokusai (an artist whose prints, along with those of Utamaro, Gauguin owned by 1888), as well as to the broad areas of color and bold, naïve contours of the *images d’Épinal*, popular French prints. In depicting this scene, Gauguin aligns himself with pre-capitalist systems of meaning-making: non-mimetic color signaled a privileged relationship between Breton figures (and the creative artist who painted them) and spiritual truths lost to the modern bourgeois man. This primitivist assumption
extended geographically to presume that people in remote foreign cultures were
exemplars of unchanging belief systems preserved amid the rapid evolution of the values
and mores of industrialized Europe.\textsuperscript{38} The terms of Gauguin’s primitivism echo
Baudelaire’s description of Delacroix as the painter of the imagination; like Delacroix, it
favored “oriental” subjects, heightened emotion, a cultural distance from the subject
matter, and embraced a disregard for precision in favor of the exotic and extraordinary.

Gauguin expressed an association between color and the non-European tradition.
“Coming from Europe,” he wrote of his journeys to Martinique and Tahiti, “I was
constantly uncertain of some color [and kept] beating about the bush: and yet it was so
simple to put naturally on to my canvas a red and a blue. In the brooks, forms in gold
enchanted me - why did I hesitate to pour that gold and all that rejoicing of the sunshine
onto my canvas? Old habits from Europe, probably—all this timidity of expression of our
bastardised races.”\textsuperscript{39} In this passage the painter links the purity of primary color—
gold/yellow—with the purity of the ‘primitive’ race of people he encountered (here in
Tahiti). To picture France as “abâtardies,” or bastardized, is to call it corrupted,
degenerate, and enfeebled, but also to characterize an exhausted artistic tradition.
Gauguin viewed stippling or optically mixing color as symptomatic of this exhaustion.
The brash color blocks in Gauguin’s painting critique a decline in French culture due to
miscegenation, mirrored in both the tobacco-brown painting surfaces Gauguin
encountered in Paris, and the free-mixing optical effect of pointillist technique.

Gauguin set his developing notion of primitive color in direct opposition to the
neo-Impressionist stippling of color. His particular target was the work of Paul Signac.
Gauguin created parodies of pointillist paintings during this period, such as \textit{Still Life}
“Ripipoint” (1888) (fig. 2.9), a study of red and green peppers, three lemons, a pear, and a teapot and bowl on a white tablecloth. The signature on the upper left of the canvas, “Ripipoint,” made fun of the style of Signac, especially his method of utilizing the painterly “point.” Although Gauguin doesn’t quite demonstrate a grasp of the pointillist decomposition of colors—the green peppers are composed entirely of dots of dark and light green, the red peppers of points of red, and the lemons of yellow—the artist’s satirical intent is clear.

Later, Gauguin shows his apprehension of the theory of the optical augmentation of the intensity of color through complementary pairings, even as he disparaged it. In fact, Gauguin wrote that his physical presence in Tahiti gave him a close relationship with the perception of color that corrected for Signac’s theories. He wrote in his 1903 book *Avant et après*: “Before me the coconut palms and banana trees [of Polynesia]. To please Signac, I will tell you that there are little points of red (the complementary color of green) scattered throughout the green. Despite that, and this would displease Signac, I swear that in all this green one perceives great swaths of blue.” To discuss the effect of seeing the tropical trees as large swaths of blue and green, the artist combines both biographical authority (his journey to the tropics) and phenomenological data (his physical presence in front of tropical nature) to assert that Signac’s color theory, which advocated the depiction of nature through little red and green dots, is, in practice, faulty. The harmonic combination of blue and green—and “swaths” rather than “points”—is a more accurate representation of the experience of non-Western color than Signac’s complementary “points of red.” The dig at Signac’s color theory was reciprocal: Signac, criticizing Gauguin in 1895, disparaged his understanding of Delacroix in his notebooks: “Oh how
literary the gentleman is. But can this excuse his horrible forms and his atrocious color?

These people definitely have nothing in them of the ‘painter,’… let us study Delacroix, Corot, Puvis, and let these frauds make fun of us.”41 Gauguin and Signac’s brewing antagonisms repeatedly pit certain terms against one another: Literature against science, East against West, and memory against the immediacy of experience. Both sides claim Delacroix as their own.

Given their friendship and the fact that Redon lived close to and wrote about attending the Universal Exposition, Redon likely saw Gauguin’s Vision After the Sermon at the exhibition the artist and his peers organized at the Café Volpini, just outside the grounds of the fair in 1889.42 If Redon didn’t see the paintings there, he was certainly familiar with the canvas through the groundbreaking essay, “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin,” published by Albert Aurier in the Mercure de France in 1891.43 Aurier praised Gauguin’s expressive and non-naturalistic use of color in Vision After the Sermon. He charged the Impressionists with merely painting from external sensation,44 and declared Gauguin’s color—particularly the use of “scintillating vermilion” to depict grass—indicative of a new tendency in representation, one that represented a return to both “true” and “primitive painting.”45 Aurier characterized Gauguin as a visionary painter who captured the internally generated experiences described in Swedenborg’s book Heaven and Hell.46 To Aurier, Gauguin was the painter of this immaterial world of ideas, and his paintings opened the “inner eye” of the critic; non-mimetic color was a route to this prelapsarian, pre-capitalist world. Could there be primitive origins to color? Could color, rather than mere artifice to form, better represent the origins of the world?
The “Color of an Other”: Fictions of Primitivism and Creole Hybridity

Even before he started exhibiting his paintings, Redon’s drawings and charcoal works from the 1870s and early 1880s, such as his Cactus Man of 1881 (fig. 2.10), demonstrate a fascination with non-Western figures—the black woman, the creole man—and both his sketchbooks in the Louvre and his prints of this period reflect this interest. In 1881, Redon wrote about visiting the “primitives” or “primordial muds” (boues primitives) of Tierra del Fuego at the "Acclimatation anthropologique" in the Bois de Boulogne, where Nubians, Zulus, and other “primitive people” were exhibited in a popular display:

A group of several sublime barbarians who arrived from Tierra del Fuego, proud human beings, haughty, cruel, mighty and grotesque, gave me a glimpse of primitive life, a nostalgia for the pure and simple life of our origins…They are cast in antique bronze, those limbs so firm and so fine; delicate joints complete those perfect extremities where not a single jewel sparkles, not a single error is visible…They undoubtedly speak only to say things which are of the utmost importance to them; the way they look at us expresses as much superiority as wildness…A rich investor enters, probably the owner of the garden… I compare them. How ugly he is, this old bourgeois; and they beautiful, these sublime children of polar life! Their nudity emerges from the earth like a flower of India, in full bloom, luxurious, harmonious and immobile in the splendor of its radiant
and mute life. One must see that firm flesh framed in lianas, in the shadow of the
virgin forest, or lying on the golden sand of the desert, on immaculate shores.47
This fantasy of the primitive men uttering phrases of “utmost importance,” and those
“immaculate” landscapes of South America stand in contrast to Redon’s perception of the
physical imperfection of corrupt, contemporary France embodied by the bourgeois
investor. Redon in the early 1880s is a romantic primitivist, projecting impossible powers
and perfections onto people of other cultures as a critique of modern French capitalist
urban culture. Such an articulation is typical of Redon’s black-and-white representations
of non-Western people. Yet in his use of color, as I will demonstrate, he would develop a
more complex articulation of his interest in the primitive, re-imagining primitive subjects
within the context of contemporary France.

Shortly after Vision After the Sermon went on display, in 1889, Redon and
Gauguin began their correspondence. From their earliest letters, Gauguin and Redon
expressed their avid interest in cultures outside of France. During this period, right before
Redon’s first Yeux Clos paintings, they write often extolling the virtues of various exotic
locations, emphasizing how favorably they compare to Paris. During the winter of 1889
until the spring of 1890, after Gauguin had returned to Paris from Martinique and before
his second trip to Pont-Aven, and while Redon was starting to paint the first Yeux Clos,
Gauguin wrote to Redon to inquire about the possibility of living on Réunion, the island
off the coast of Madagascar where Redon’s wife had lived until she moved to Paris. He
asked about the cost of daily life, the availability of fruit and natural shelter, and the
possibility of living well and inexpensively as an artist there. The subtext in these letters
is a fascination with escaping the complications of modern culture for a fantasy of exotic
simplicity. His intention was to found an *atelier des tropiques*, an artists’ colony in a tropical climate, a utopian critique of the financial difficulties of life in Paris, where rent and the need to work played all-too-great a role. The relocation to Réunion was soon abandoned—ironically, for the island’s high cost of living—and Gauguin would begin an ill-fated venture, his atelier with Van Gogh in Arles.

How does primitivist color work in the paintings of Gauguin and Redon? Certainly, their identification was tied for both men to their biographical and cultural experiences. We have during this time ample evidence that Gauguin copied the Cambodian, Japanese, and Aztec sculpture on display at the Exposition of 1889 in his sketchbooks, and wrote in praise of Marquesan art and the art of the Maori. We also know that Redon was introduced to Buddhist and Hindu texts through his friendship with the botanist Armand Clavaud during his childhood in Bordeaux. He also frequently referred to his mother’s creole origins and his own conception in New Orleans, as well as his wife’s background on Réunion. Gauguin certainly advertised his grandmother’s Peruvian origins and painted self-portraits to emphasize his South American features and biographical family roots in Lima; he wrote to Théo Van Gogh, in 1889, “You know I have Indian, Inca blood in me, and it comes across everything I do. It’s the basis of my whole character, I’m looking for something more natural to set against the corruption of civilization, with savagery as my starting point.”

Yet more important than actual biographical relationships to other cultures, or any specific knowledge about the colors deployed in non-Western art, an enormous element of fiction was central to both these artists’ identification with the position of the cultural
“other” and their invention of radical color schema to signify “otherness.” On Gauguin’s death in 1903, Redon wrote about his friend:

His color, though derived from that of an Other, belongs to him; [some] young eyes, not habituated to what is called Impressionist art, will see there, easier than we do, a large and simplifying mode of coloration taken equally from observation as from thought, and organized according to the laws which he takes personally.53

Redon called Gauguin’s arbitrary color “dérivée de celle d’un autre.” How might we characterize Gauguin’s use of color in relation to how it drew on that of other cultures? Rather than cultural accuracy or a precise investigation of the uses of color in any particular country, it was in seeing in the exotic a space for invention, imprecision, and imagination, which allowed both Gauguin and Redon to execute such bold chromatic shifts. Gauguin and Redon adopt fictional narrative positions of Indian and Turkish origin, the “oriental” people who Blanc warned against when he wrote on the corrupting influence of color on Western art. Such texts provide a glimpse at what I would call a fictional narrative strategy embedded within their radical upending of the traditional hierarchies of color and line in Western painting.

The term “literary”—suggesting as it does narratives, fictions, and words read over time on a page—was used as an unmistakable pejorative in Auriol’s declaration that Redon should write and not make art, and while it evoked Redon’s longstanding identity as a black-and-white illustrator and visual interpreter of literary texts, it also evokes the invented characters, puns, and stories which were used as tactics by early practitioners of non-mimetic color. As artists, Gauguin and Redon remade or imagined a world in new colors on canvas – a painterly parallel to the practices of fiction.
One example is the strange case of Gauguin’s fantastical Turkish color theorist. Gauguin invented a fictional Turkish aesthetic philosopher, and quoted him frequently as the basis for his color theory.\(^5^4\) The same year Fénéon published “The Impressionists in 1886,” he also published passages from a man named “[L’H]indou Wehli-Zunbul-Zadé” in *L’Art Moderne*, claiming to have translated the text by himself from a Turkish *Livre des Métiers*, a painting manual. This publication, listed in the issue’s table of contents as “Préceptes,” would recommend color theories from a source very different than Chevreul.\(^5^5\) Who was this Wehli-Zunbul-Zadé, and what was the origin of this document? As art historian Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński has shown, Gauguin as early as autumn 1885 turned to and often quoted from an undoubtedly fictional book of painting theory written by a man he called Mani Vehni Zunbul-Zadi, a Turkish aesthetic philosopher whose views ventriloquize the use of color in Gauguin’s new, post-1885 painting style.\(^5^6\) While the name almost certainly belonged to Turkish professor and poet Vehbi Mohamed Zunbul-Zadé, or Sünbülzade Vehbî, (b. 1719, d. 1809), records in the Bibliothèque Nationale indicate no translations of Zunbul-Zadé’s extant in any language which Gauguin or, for that matter, Fénéon, would have understood during this time, nor do the actual Sünbülzade Vehbî’s writings correspond with the theories Gauguin circulated; the texts Gauguin presented also changed from one instance to another over time.\(^5^7\) These notes, and the notion that the laws of color might derive from a non-Western source and authority, were tremendously significant for Redon’s early use of color.

Gauguin’s “Zunbul-Zadi” notes—promoted by Gauguin throughout his lifetime, published by Fénéon in 1886, copied and frequently made reference to by Seurat, published in the *Mercure* in 1903, and then posthumously in 1906 by Jean de
Rotonchamp—provided a fabricated “Oriental” authority on aesthetics to bolster Gauguin’s painterly precepts about color. In effect, these created a counter to Signac’s claims about the authority of Chevreul. The fictional Turkish critic chastises those who attempt to use color based on pre-determined theories: “It is better to render your color and your drawing as and how you see, than to color [them] in the mold of a theory prepared in advance in your brain,” Gauguin as Zunbul-Zadi wrote. While the statement “It’s the eye of ignorance which assigns a fixed and immutable color to each object,” advocates for a rejection of local color, it also is a stance against pointillist technique. The Turkish critic explicitly condemned Pointillism and painting color based on theories of vision, writing of the Pointillist painters, “He who paints has little point, except, like the mason, to build a house, compass in hand, according to the plans furnished by the architect.” The word tâche, translated here as point, is a word-play on the term for the discrete factured mark often employed by Pointillists. Gauguin advocates for the use of memory rather than direct experience. “It’s good, for young people, to have a model, but it places limits on them as they paint. Better is to paint from memory. Thus, your work will be yours; your impressions, your intelligence and your soul will then survive in the amateur eye.” Gauguin’s choice of the word “survivront,” survival, places emphasis on the spiritual and even mystical nature of painting, evoking the religious afterlife; by painting from memory rather than immediate experience, the painting has a better chance of surviving as a memory in the viewer’s eye. The word amateur it is not a pejorative term; rather, it sets the uninitiated viewer apart from the professional, the art-lover, and enthusiast from the businessperson, and might even be seen as a critique of Pointillism and the “scientific” professionalism of painting. His “young people” might refer directly
to the 23-year-old Signac. Gauguin finally concludes derisively that the Pointillist painter “goes into his barn when he wants to count the hairs on his donkey and to determine the place of each one,” likening the process of painting with dots of paint to counting hairs on an ass—a futile, mechanical, absurd, and entirely uninspired activity!

When examining works of the 1880s and 1890s like Market Day (Fig. 2.11), we can observe that many of the precepts central to Gauguin’s painting are articulated in the self-authored painting manual. Gauguin’s Zunbul-Zadi manuscript advocated compositional strategies such as painting the silhouette rather than the figure straight on. The poses of the five seated women and three standing figures in Market Day can be seen to be painted from an exaggerated side view, almost like Egyptian hieroglyphs. Zunbul-Zadi recommended painting figures in repose rather than those in action, and painting from memory rather than direct observation, creating a languid sense in the subjects’ poses and a dreamy quality to the painted scenes. “Zunbul-Zadi” writes, “Everything in your work must entirely exude calm and peace of spirit. Also avoid moving poses. Each of your figures must be static. Apply yourself to the silhouette of each object; the sharpness of the contour is the prerogative of the hand which no hesitation of will can dull.”

Most important for this study, Zunbul-Zadi proscribed harmonious color combinations, rather than those strongly contrasting colors artists like Seurat and Signac employed in the name of Chevreul, recommending that the artists “[s]earch for harmony, not for opposition, accord and not conflict,” a precept which might be see in the gradual transition between orange and yellow, green and black in the central figures. Indigo, a pigment possessing myriad colonial associations, was recommended by the supposed
Turkish aesthetician as “the best base” for painting. Known as the color of Impressionist shadows (because the sun was orange, its complement), indigo was imported from the French colony of Saint-Domingue. As art historian Natasha Eaton has demonstrated, tracing the origins of such natural dyes reveals the history of colonial labor and trade behind the circulation of colors—and hints at the circulation of bodies—between East and West in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1890s, oil pigment rarely used true indigo as a base, while it remained as a pigment for use in painting shadow in watercolor. This was in part due to the widespread availability of chemical aniline pigments. Mauve, the first aniline dye, was synthesized from chemical coal-tar waste products created during industrial manufacturing process; during the 1860s and 70s a rainbow of novel aniline colors, from Bleu de Paris to Perkin’s Green, entered fields from the fine arts to fashion. Demand for imported natural dyes (cochineal, indigo, and madder among them), meanwhile, plummeted during the first decades of the aniline boom.

In Market Day, then, it is notable that indigo—or a color that looks like indigo—acts as the base color for the trees and mountains as well as in the central woman’s clothing and the shadows under the bench. Zunbul-Zadi recommends indigo not as an accent in a painting, but as its ground. He furthermore advocates for yellow and red tones derived from indigo (“[indigo] becomes yellow, when treated with spirit of nitre, and red in vinegar”), proclaiming this trio of indigo, red, and yellow his primary colors. In the period 1889-1893, as Jirat-Wasiutynski has shown, Gauguin’s colors included a restrictive grouping of mainly chrome yellow, carmine lake (made from the cochineal insect), green earth, emerald green, lead white, and cobalt—pigments whose origins
primarily dated back to at least the 18th century. But even when he uses aniline synthetic pigments, like synthetic ultramarine, and Prussian blue, the visual effect is of a keyed-down palette of natural-looking colors—he avoids the glowing and “dream-like” aniline mauves, violets, and oranges embraced by artists including Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Redon. The indigo-blue trees, reddish bushes, orange gowns, and yellow textiles in Market Day signify colors as colonial commodities.

As we have seen, Gauguin employed a fabricated non-Western aesthetic philosopher to provide an exotic, albeit invented, lineage to his radical painting theories, perhaps in defiance of Blanc. Redon also wrote fiction in which the protagonist was presented as a Turkish or Créole subject. Redon’s short stories from the 1870s—written around the time he was reading Charles Blanc in 1876—indicate Redon’s interest in presenting himself as occupying the role of the “other” in just the moment after he was reading Blanc’s diatribe against the dangers of French art being conquered by foreign and exotic color. Yet his stories also complicate the familiar primitivist narrative by introducing foreign-born, French-speaking figures who navigate modern French culture.

Redon wrote a fictional story about an exotic Indian “fakir” living in and alienated from the bourgeois culture of a small French town; the man takes opium and hashish, meditates, and on his turban wears a prominent jewel of “rainbow colors,” the “symbol of his feeling.” The description underscores the affective and emotional effect of foreign color. The 1878 short story “The Tale of Mad Martha (A Creole Story),” (Appendix 2), recently reconstructed from handwritten notes in the André Mellerio archives in Chicago, explores the trip a middle-class, foreign-born francophone (like Redon’s mother and namesake Odile, or his wife Camille) takes between Paris and
Pondicherry. The narrator, Marthe, having been educated in France, is travelling home to Pondicherry, India, the French colony. But when her ship capsizes off the coast of Africa near Réunion (birthplace of Redon’s wife), she experiences an unexpected feeling of homecoming on the African continent: “The coconut, the papaya, the mango, the guava, the pineapple, I had finally found them again and their soft flavors carried me back to my earliest childhood, and to I don’t know what joy, the nectar of my first years.” The description of Marthe transported to her childhood by the taste of tropical fruits only underscores Redon’s fantastical relationship with colonial French India (where pineapples and guavas would not grow), as do her repeated references to Marthe having been raised by “blacks” and “negros”—caregivers seemingly displaced from tales of the American south. “Marthe” and “The Fakir” are two of a dozen short stories which focus on outsider figures living in French society yet unable to entirely assimilate, longing for another culture or caught between two cultures, which interrogate the place of the colonial subject in France. The plots hinge on bizarre cultural and biological assumptions: In “Marthe,” a monkey holds the woman hostage on the island, a theme of abduction also found in sculpture of the era such as Emmanuel Frémiet’s *Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman*, of 1887 (fig. 2.15). Such works evinced the discomfort with the theory of evolution brought to the fore by the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, as well as racist fears of miscegenation.

Yet unlike Frémiet’s sensationalistic provocations, or even Gauguin’s rhapsodic rhetoric of primitive “purity,” Redon’s stories are told in the first person by protagonists who are sophisticated francophone immigrants, and this leads to lengthy narrative exegesis as his characters are torn between multiple cultures or worlds. Born in colonial
India, Marthe “suffered” in France, yet finds peace and a sense of homecoming in Africa. The Fakir is both a Turkish man and a citizen of a small provincial French village. His Maori men evoke “Indian flower[s].” These elisions signal Redon’s créolization of culture—he rarely keeps his “other cultures” straight, but instead tends to mix and conflate them.

Similarly, through his bold use of electric, aniline colors alongside primitivist themes, Redon makes works which suggest that cultural hybridity might be a desirable, rather than degenerate, cultural position, and that “otherness” and contemporaneity might reside in the same body. In short, Redon, in contrast to Gauguin’s embrace of “pure primitive” people and color, embraced modernity and modern color. In 1889, the same year he began painting Yeux Clos, Redon wrote to his mother about the novel sights of the Paris Exposition Universelle: “There are ‘eaux d’artifice,’ fountains colored with electricity, with changing colors, marvelous, like flowers of light. Each night, a hundred thousand eyes watch this novel display, and all manner of exotic things which make you travel in spirit”73 (fig. 2.12). It is significant that for Redon the electric colors of the fair created the symbolic sense of travel. The display of technology, fine art, and political prowess he encountered was unprecedented and of great interest to the man who, although he rarely travelled in person, throughout his life romanticized foreign cultures and his own exotic background. There was an Algerian palace, Javanese dancers, a Norwegian chalet, rickshaws, and a colonial palace planted with palms all around. Urban landmarks became the backdrop for foreign spectacle: the Pont Neuf was the site of hundreds of Vietnamese colonials, women and men, in native dress. In front of the Eiffel Tower two glowing fountains shot jets of colored water to the sky. The fountains were lit
from within by electric lights shining through red, blue, green, yellow, and “vert d’eau”\textsuperscript{74} glass planes mounted on twenty-five levers, manipulated hand and foot by two engineers stationed in chambers under the structure. With the use of a mirror, light hit enormous eruptions of water from below and within and made the glowing fountains, with their marvelous changing electric colors, “one of the principal attractions of the Exhibition, much talked about.”\textsuperscript{75} Amid the imported cultures and architecture and the new technologies of the colored light display, one word was clearly legible at the base of the tower: \textit{Progress}.\textsuperscript{76} Color in the World’s Fair could be said to wed both technological progress (the electric fountains) and the exotic (the colonial pavilions with their native people), with the vast colonial display another form of technology putting France’s global centrality and economic vigor on display.

Rather than resisting aniline color, Redon’s transition to working in color embraced the bourgeoning chemical color industry. In Paris he was exposed to the visual effect of the new aniline colors not just in pastel expositions which promoted the medium in its rainbow of newly available tones (in 1889 the Société des Pastellistes Français put up a Pastel Pavilion in the World’s Fair, for the promotion of the new medium\textsuperscript{77}), but in colorful fashions on the street and the advent of inescapable color lithography advertising displays. He created modern color lithographs of silhouetted bodies in non-local colors for Ambroise Vollard’s color lithography series. And by examining his color paintings and pastels, we know that colors that were fantastical and artificial had an immense appeal to Redon. We know from records of the pastels fading, and from chemical analysis, that Redon was using aniline, coal-tar color pigmented pastels in his work.\textsuperscript{78} By 1899, we find in his sketchbooks references to paints with vivid names like “antimony
yellow,” “mars orange,” “mars pink,” “red ochre,” “mars violet,” “Naples yellow,” and “vermilion.” These represented a departure from his earlier palette, and an array of colors and pigments—particularly the “mars” tones—derived from the new, glowing, chemical palette. Employing the myriad new cultural and technological colors available to the modern Parisian constituted not just symbolic choices but also historically and technologically specific instances of new colors, bringing color into a new age in which both foreign trade and technology advertised color’s affective power, a discovery at odds with a French academic notion of color. These colors were also in their way “other”—not just to France, but also to French academic painting tradition.

Painted soon after his friend Gauguin’s death on May 8, 1903, Redon’s first of two *Homage to Gauguin* paintings, a blue head with closed eyes over dreamy vivid red hibiscus flowers (fig. 2.13), is an evocation of Gauguin on a distant, tropical isle. It is a painting made in clear relation to *Yeux Clos*, and an image in which the “color of the other” is also an exploration of aniline pigments. The blue-faced figure extends the *Yeux Clos* motif, and works with Gauguin’s triangle of indigo-red-yellow, yet surrounds the figure with an electric halo of aniline yellow, red, and purple blossoms. Gauguin’s natural bases have been heightened with coal-tar chemistry. The red flowers—hibiscus-like—evoke the bold flora and colors of the tropics, but their palette also incorporates the tones of modern Parisian life with pink and blue marks in the lower right as fashionable and current as any new textile or color lithographic poster. Rather than Gauguin’s vision of pure primitivism, Redon’s flat blocks of color were executed in a mix of primitivist and glowingly modern pigments.
Redon’s relation to Gauguin’s color can be seen in the painting *Black Profile*, *Gauguin* (*Le Profil noir, portrait de Gauguin*), 1903-05 (fig. 2.14), the face—here emphasizing Gauguin’s so-called “Inca” features—is shown in profile on a canvas stained with oil and flecked with gold-leaf, its reflective property giving it an appearance evocative of Japanese Buddhist art. The face is framed on the left by a climbing column of blue leaves and from below and to the right by blooming vines whose red and green color has probably faded, a sign of their aniline pigment base. The dark, silhouetted profile, seemingly in shadow, floats on a thin plane between the depth of saturated paint and the reflective surface of gilt. Here, Gauguin is almost “in drag” in art historical terms, fully outside French culture, disguised in feminine color, represented as a shadowy absence that evokes popular silhouette portraits, sandwiched between layered cultural associations, and festooned with red flowers against a golden plane, evoking cultural hybridity. Redon would repeat this composition under the title *Créole Profile* a number of times in the first decade of the twentieth century, further underscoring its association with the hybridized identities with which he associated himself. No longer tied to form or the demands of perspective or mimesis, this color instead traced a line from Delacroix, Baudelaire, and Chevreul that embraced notions of exoticism, fiction, and novel color quite different from the lineage Signac attempted to establish.

Even while they are chromatically modern in some of their choice of pigments, Redon’s two *Homages to Gauguin* owe much to Mani Vehni Zunbul-Zadi’s aesthetic theories. Figures are shown in profile, in repose, and are painted from memory, rather than observation. The bald, idealized, meditating head at the center of the composition is not a likeness—it has no resemblance to Gauguin, but rather evokes Redon’s *Yeux Clos*.
compositions. More vivid than the figure at the center, the red hibiscus flowers’ jewel-like intensity renders their relation to reality suspect. The figure is shrouded in blooms of yellow and red, pink and blue. The explosion of colorful flowers next to the figure showcases a variety of techniques used in the pastel (the colors are dotted, rubbed, highlighted in white, cross-hatched), embracing the free mixing of colors Gauguin eschewed, but explicitly avoiding any pointillist method or adherence to scientific theory.

In his two posthumous paintings of Gauguin, Redon explicitly brings together the *Yeux Clos* theme with the radical non-mimetic colors that Gauguin’s paintings helped him catalyze in his work. In both his fiction and in his palette, Redon’s invocation is pidgin. While Gauguin attempts to represent the “pure” primitive as a setting for Western myth, Redon seeks out, represents, and returns to the culturally conflicted—the bilingual, the multi-cultural, the inhabitant of one land whose origins are elsewhere. Gauguin is invested in incorporating Tahitian text in his paintings, and writing in his letters that “[i]n the languages of Oceania, with elements preserved in all their rawness, isolated or fused together without concern for polish, all is naked, radiant and primordial.”\(^80\) Redon’s interest in the “other,” by comparison, is experienced through dialect—imagining a multiplicity of cultures in the francophone world and extending the experience of *francophonie* beyond the population of people living in France to the Caribbean, Maghreb, North America, Franco-America, French India, the Antilles, and Réunion, too. By representing the extent of cultural difference within francophone culture, Redon’s art also implies multiplicity, diversity, and hybridity, not universality or cultural purity.\(^81\) The emphasis on this “otherness” might be termed an interest in the créole—the Breton,
Norman, American, Haitian, Indian, Guadeloupian, and African French linguistic variants of French—all locales of a diasporic France which function against normative French language and culture, and indeed by their very existence demonstrate the instability of the notion of the unified and homogenous French subject. The creole in all its iterations was a favorite subject of Redon’s *noirs*. His use of color in *Yeux Clos* further elaborates the visual condition of such a state of plurality and hybridity. The cultures to which his colors point are often the Indian and the American as well as the novel and evocative colors of the French fin-de-siècle palette of bright, electric aniline tones.

Unlike Gamboni’s claims about the *Golden Cell* as continuous with the history of Western color aesthetics, and yet again in opposition both to Signac’s pointillist theories and Gauguin’s equation of primitive purity and the unmixed color of pure indigo, Redon extends Charles Blanc’s characterization of color as the realm of the foreign and the primitive to create a creole palette. His portraits of Gauguin mix browns, reds and blues with flecked metal and the sea-green bright effect of an aniline floral foreground. Redon’s use of color creates hybrid paintings that were made possible only in their moment of technological invention of new colors and exposure to the commercial and colonial mixing of chromatic traditions embodied by the glowing electric lights of the 1889 World’s Fair.

“What is he, then? He is Gauguin, the savage who hates an oppressive
civilization with something of the Titan who, jealous of the creator, creates his
own little people in his spare time, the child who takes his toys to pieces to make
new ones, the one who denies and defies, who would rather see the sky red than
blue.”

Gauguin’s desire to “see the sky red [rather than] blue,” suggests that to re-envision in
color is to exercise a god-like power, to return to the moment of creation, prior to
Western aesthetic precepts. As a project it attacked the fundamental principles of
aesthetics and searched for new origins, new foundations, and new starting points. The
radical use of color was tied to a critical sense that Gauguin had abandoned Western
social expectations as well. Responding to critics who accused Gauguin of abandoning
his family to become an artist, Charles Morice in the Mercure de France, writing on the
occasion of Gauguin’s death in 1903, defended Gauguin’s move to Tahiti in 1891 as the
right of the painter to seek internal truth rather than conform to external reality. An
extension of this freedom was the permission to register color as the artist saw fit: “The
painter has the right to do the lines and the colors as he wishes, provided that he has a
sense of overall harmony and that his will is governed by logical and individual design.
He has the right to distort, provided that he has the desire and power to symbolize,”
does Morice, just as he was entitled to declare autonomy from capitalist society and the
commodification of rent and other necessities in Paris. The critic goes on to describe how
in Gauguin’s case, this looks like “a red earth, a blue tree, and light without
shadow…Gauguin has dared this: one is astonished.” The 1893 article, appearing just a
year before the derisive criticism of The Golden Cell, prefigures the shock of the
deployment of seemingly arbitrary color in Redon’s painting, and aligns such uses of color with the politics of liberation from bourgeois French norms.

In this context Redon’s incredibly tactile, worked, pictorial surface, which inflects his use of pigment both in pastel and in paint, is worth emphasizing. In his 1903 *Mercure* text on Gauguin, Redon wrote about Gauguin’s engagement with tactile art practices such as ceramics and woodcarving, which Redon associated with “freedom” and saw as closer to “primitive” expression than painting:

I like above all about him the sumptuous and superior ceramicist; there, he creates new forms. I compare them to flowers of a first region where each flower would be the example of a species, leaving for the next artist the task of giving order by affiliation to the varieties. The sculptor of wood had a savage refinement, grand or delicate, and above all was free of any school. As a painter, he was the voluntary researcher, very aware of his character; he found this strong originality of which one can follow the repercussion among others. All that he touched has his marked fingerprints; those of a master. He took the most energetic meaning of the word, if, at least, mastery consists of commanding by influence, in transmitting new rudiments.86

Redon remembers Gauguin for his “griffe,” “marked fingerprints” or evident handiwork. Gauguin’s term describing his own woodcarving work, “ultra-sauvage,”87 demonstrates his emphasis in the primitivist qualities of the medium, as does his penchant for carving African-looking “fetish” figures from Tahitian wood. Gauguin’s carved wooden chests, and most of all his woodblock prints and pottery, suggest a link between the resistance to
neo-Impressionist opticality in painting and an investment in the primitivist physicality of other media.

Redon’s descriptions of making art emphasize the tactility of his media and link the material qualities of a medium to the unconscious mind:

How many times, oh sincere witness, had I taken the charcoal with a hand bronzed with earth that I had just touched while gardening! Sainted and silent material, source of healing and refuge, to which I am indebted for sweet reassurances! What balm ever had on me, on my spirit and also on my pains, an action more subtle, more beneficent, than the view of the green grass or the contact of all other unconscious elements.”

Charcoal seems to spring from the dusty Bordeaux soil, and artistic work is parallel to the labor of working the earth in a garden—honest, unsophisticated, more rural than urban, and linked to the natural and spiritual world. Redon’s techniques in charcoal and pastel, including layering and wetting the medium, scraping, scratching, and cutting the paper, and his heavy build-up of pigment in his oil paintings, emphasize the materiality and texture in an artwork and suggest a continuity between material tactility in painting and a thematic search for primitive truths in his earlier works (for example in his series *The Origins*, in which one print is entitled *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower*).

This interest in tactility might give us a new way to return and analyze in a second way the primitivist color in *The Golden Cell*, in *Yeux Clos*, and in Redon’s portraits of Gauguin. The rubbed and burnished reflective gold surfaces, the hatched, rubbed, built up color, and the striated or dotted surfaces all transform visual art into a hybrid experience,
an optical and haptic experience, apprehended both through sight and physically in relation to the sensation of touch. In this way the materiality of Redon’s art echoes the paradox of the *Yeux Clos* theme, in which we are asked to consider a work of art about the absence of sight, itself the primary sense by which we apprehend an artwork. An invocation of touch in painting invites the viewer to become an embodied spectator—a physically present, participatory being rather than a pair of eyeballs.

The particular emphasis on the tactile physicality of color is evident in the rubbed, built-up, striated and hatched pastel and surface in *Homage to Gauguin* (1903-04). The multi-colored blues are mottled, smeared into the surface of the paper and overlaid with yellow pastel applied over the top of the surface. The reds and pink-and-blues at the bottom of the work are thickly applied. In *Le Profile Noir*, the underpainted blues bleed through a burnished golden surface painted over in blue leaves and red and yellow flowers. These surfaces—in which bleeding or built-up color is richly material and uncontrollable by line—evoke the gold-leafed surfaces of Byzantine icons and Japanese Buddhist screens. In the rubbing, scratching, and use of nontraditional mark-making techniques in his colorful painting and pastels, Redon creates a productive confusion between painting and other art practices. The move to prioritize the materiality of charcoal, printmaking, wood-carving, or even pottery, and primitivist art over the academically valorized medium of purely optical painting was part of Redon’s upending of traditional hierarchies established in French aesthetic tradition.

The Musée du Luxembourg bought the 1889-90 *Yeux Clos* in 1904; it returned to the Louvre in 1929, later finding its way to the Musée d’Orsay. Some of the other versions of *Yeux Clos* (there were twelve in all, most executed between 1890-1900) were
Redon’s entries to the Salon d’Automne of 1904 and 1905, and to the Exposition Centennale de l’Art Français of 1900. Increasingly bold in their deployment of non-mimetic color, with their blue-, green-, and orange-faced variations growing fabulously exotic, the inclusion of versions of this painting in some of Redon’s most visible state exhibitions underscores their importance. Although the significance of its deployment of non-local color has never been adequately analyzed, Yeux Clos would be the only painting mentioned by name in the very short obituaries of the artist, and it is described as his major work.

Redon, Gauguin, and other artists of their circle shared interest in “primitive” color, tactility, and materiality, and in the potential of literary fiction and invented non-Western characters to act as devices to distance the artist and his work from a hegemonic culture which relegated color as necessarily secondary to line and form, in order to find in chromatic experimentation the possibility of remaking the world anew. Far from a simple bid for commercial success, as is frequently claimed, Redon’s reach to color after 1886 was an attempt to find a means of resistance to an overwhelmingly mechanized and commodified world. The project articulates a reaction to the scientific theories of color which dominated the neo-Impressionist moment into which Redon emerged as an artist.

A set of interesting postcards (fig. 2.16) sent from Redon to the Dutch collector Andries Bonger in 1913 attest to Redon borrowing avidly, and publicly, from the pictorial traditions of other cultures. One depicts Krishna, the other the silhouette of Egyptian and Greek figures. The images, with their cancelled stamps on the recto, collapse vast cultural distances: India and Paris, France and Holland, Greece and Egypt. Yet such culturally disparate figures are signified on the surface of that most modern
instrument of image dissemination and communication: the French photographic postcard. The two cards testify to the sort of novel conveniences and technologies Redon embraced in his painting and pastel practice, from aniline pigments to omnivorously disparate cultural references.

Color “from that of an other” characterized both Redon and Gauguin’s responses to the “scientific” chromatic experimentation of the Neo-Impressionists. It also potentially embodied a politics of resistance. Extending Blanc’s characterization of color as the realm of the foreign and the primitive, Gauguin and Redon, two outsiders in Paris, argued passionately for identification with the colonial subject, rather than homogenized French academic and cultural tradition. In doing so they placed touch over sight, the foreign over the French, invention over academic tradition, and, in Redon’s case, extended the definition of francophonie itself. If his identification was largely a fiction, and involved extensive fantasies about the “oriental” and primitive identities constructed and performed, this does not render these experiments any less vital as factors at the heart of the development of some of the first widely discussed modern paintings in non-mimetic color. While the politics of Gauguin and Redon’s investigation of otherness in relation to people from other cultures may be essentializing, the politics of paintings which explicitly embrace rather than exclude the marginal subject and innovate to use color as a signal of “otherness,” are, formally and conceptually, radical—an attempt to remake the world in new colors in order to re-enchant it.

2 “Sa couleur, quoique dérivée de celle d’un autre, est bien à lui: des yeux jeunes, non habitués à l’art dit impressionniste, y verront, plus aisément que nous, un mode simplificateur et large de coloration prise objectivement dans le vrai autant que dans la pensée, et organisée selon des lois qui lui étaient personnelles: point de grus, trois ou cinq tons généraux, leurs rappels juxtaposés ou atténués selon des rythmes, une analogie avec la fugue.” Odilon Redon, “Quelques Opinions sur Paul Gauguin,” Mercure de France XII, no. 167 (November 1903): 428-429.

3 The series of exhibitions invited twenty foreign artists working in an experimental manner to show each year.

4 The text is not a review but an advertisement for lithographic reproductions of the painting. The full text reads: “Vous vous souvenez, Esthètes, d’un tableau Odilon Redon…une très douce tête de femme, penchante, au visage calme comme la mort, mais, néanmoins, avec un appui des paupières rabattues sur les yeux invisibles…une épaule, nue.” Ellipses are part of the original. The text concludes: “La voici en lithographie, avec cette désignation: YEUX CLOS. En cinquante exemplaires, pour vous, Esthètes, pour vous seuls…Art qui fait penser ! Art qui fait rêver ! Art qui mixture la réalité et la mysticité.” “Yeux Clos,” L’Art Moderne (December 28, 1890): n.p., from AMA.

5 Redon tends to dwell on themes making multiple attempts at a single theme in his painting, often rather than one iconic work. For the case of Yeux Clos, see Wildenstein, Odilon Redon: catalogue raisonné de l’oeuvre peint et dessiné, Vol. I, 173, which documents its iterations.


7 Ibid., 128.

8 Discussions of Redon’s ‘shift’ to non-mimetic color painting and pastels from printmaking, between 1889-1892, have focused on biographical events to explain a transition from black and white lithograph and charcoals to color paintings and pastels:
the birth of his son, an end to a depression, and the sale of a house. While admittedly these events do coincide with Redon’s transition to exhibiting works in color, they obscure the more global issues that this work and particularly the quick dive into non-mimetic color raise.


11 Ibid., 7.

12 Ibid., 274.


14 “C’est curieux, la révolution amenée par l’art japonais chez un peuple esclave, dans le domaine de l’art, de la symétrie grecque et qui, soudain, beau milieu, pour une étoffe où l’harmonie n’était plus faite au moyen savamment coloriste des couleurs franches…Qui est-ce qui aurait osé peindre, il y a vingt ans, une femme en robe jaune? Ça n’a pu se tenter qu’après la Salomé japonaise de Regnault. Et cette introduction autoritaire, dans l’optique de l’Europe, de la couleur impériale de l’Extrême-Orient, c’est une vraie révolution dans la chromatique du tableau et de la mode.” Entry dated February 18, 1877, Ibid., 2: 728.

15 Eisenman establishes that Redon was invited by Guillaumin to participate in the Impressionist exhibition (Eisenman, The Temptation of Saint Redon, 160), while Guillaumin’s name appears on the roster of the 1884 Society of Independent Artist exhibitions, for which Redon was a founding member and vice-president.


19 “Et maintenant laissez venir à moi M. Odillon [sic] Redon. Je ne connaissais de lui qu’une tête fumante qui, je l’avoue, ne m’avait guère fait vibrer. En voyant ses dessins l’autre jour, j’ai éclaté de rire! Voilà donc ce grand artiste; il fait des paysages qui ne ressemblent à rien du tout. Dans le rêve M. O. Redon? Quelle bonne plaisanterie. Parce que ce monsieur fait dans l’air une tête boquillonnesque il est dans le rêve! En vérité le rêve n’est pas aussi inaccessible que je croyais. Est-ce que M. Lavrate serait lui aussi dans le rêve par hasard?

Et dire qu’on a comparé M. Redon à Gustave Moreau et à Rops! Rops a en ces gens-là de bien faibles admirateurs, sur ma foi! Sans doute, ils ignoraient son talent, si on ne leur avait dit: ‘Rops a du talent.’ Lorsque par hasard on les laisse aller seuls ils font des découvertes comme celà: O. Redon. C’est triste. Ah! disent-ils, vous ne connaissez pas Redon! C’est un des plus profondes penseurs de siècle!

Et bien! Alors, qu’il les écrive ses pensées! Qu’il fasse des vers ou de la prose! Le profondes pensées ne se dessinent pas; Puvis de Chavannes ne peint pas des profondes pensées, il peint des choses qui peuvent en suggérer. Si M. Redon a trop de profondes pensées, qu’il les publie en livraisons ou qu’il les fasse graver sur l’asphalte des trottoirs, mais qu’il ne barbouille pas des papiers!

Pour ma part j’offre tout Redon et son oeuvre future pour une simple aquarelle de Berthe Morisot, trois coups de pinceau, un peu de bleu et un peu de vert. -- Et j’aurai du rêve du vrai.

Car il y a rêve et rêve, vous savez, et entre nous je me méfie de celui d’Odillon [sic].” George Auriol, “[Untitled],” Le Chat Noir 228, (May 22, 1886): 706.


“Ces peintres se particularisaient par une excessive sensibilité aux réactions des couleurs, par une tendance à la décomposition des tons et par un effort à investir leurs toiles d’intenses clartés, et, comme discipline de travail, prônaient l’exécution rapide et directe devant la nature.” Ibid., 138.

“Ce mélange sur la rétine donne au tableau une vibration lumineuse qui en vivifie l’aspect.” Ibid., 139.

James Clerk Maxwell’s “Perception of Color,” in Ogden Rood, Modern Chromatics: With Applications to Art and Industry (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1879), and of course Chevreul’s texts were color treatises which influenced Seurat, who also read Humbert de Superville, Charles Henry, and James Sutter’s psychodynamic theories of line and color, and even Gauguin’s own color theory. See his letter to Maurice Beaubourg (August 1890) in John Rewald, Post-Impressionism: from Van Gogh to Gauguin (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 142.

Roque, Art et science de la couleur, 363. While admittedly this visit might have been a fiction (art historian George Roque is suspicious of this self-myth-making on Signac’s part, and points out that Chevreul had actually retired from the Gobelins in 1883, he grants that Signac probably visited the chemist at home, if not in the tapestry manufacture, in 1884), it is significant that Signac publicized his interview with Chevreul, as the event speaks to his desire to be part of a color theory lineage that extends from the scientist.

See Paul Signac, “Extrants du Journal inédit de Paul Signac I: 1894-1895,” ed. John Rewald, Gazette des Beaux-Arts XXXVI, no. 2 (1949): 97-128; the short text has over a dozen references to Delacroix, each time chastising the uninitiated for not paying adequate attention to Delacroix’s use of color, for example: “Regarde-t-on maintenant les tableaux de Delacroix? Combien de visiteurs à Saint-Sulpice! Il embête encore les gens, maintenant tout autant que pendant sa vie… On l’admire de parti pris, mais on ne le regarde pas. Pourquoi le public le regarderait-il, du reste ? Il n’y comprendrait rien. Quelques sont ceux du public ou de la critique qui ont d’œil assez formé pour jouir de belles lignes et de belles couleurs?” (September 15, 1894); Signac, “Extrants du Journal,” 104, and Roque, Art et science de la couleur, 281 and 364.


31 Octave Maus, *L’Art Moderne* (June 27, 1886), quoted in Ibid.


34 We know Gauguin did not see the Delacroix exhibition because he was in Copenhagen at this time, but he made reference to it in his letters. See Gauguin to Émile Schuffenecker, Copenhagen, May 24, 1885, “Envoyez-moi une photographie de la barque de Don Juan de Delacroix si toutefois celà ne coûte pas trop cher.” Paul Gauguin, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: Documents Témoignages*, ed. Victor Merlhès (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), 104-105. See also Jirat-Wasiutyński, *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism*, 28 and 114.


38 Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 52.

J’ai devant moi, des cocotiers, des bananiers; tout est vert. Pour faire plaisir à Signac je vous dirai que des petits points de rouge (la complémentaire) se disséminent dans le vert… Malgré cela, ce qui va fâcher Signac, j’atteste que dans tout ce vert on aperçoit de grandes taches de bleu.” Paul Gauguin, Avant et après (1993; reprint, Paris: La Table ronde, 1994), 14.


Ibid., and G. Albert Aurier, Oeuvres Posthumes (Paris: Mercure de France, 1898), 208.


C. Swedenborg, Heaven and Hell, quoted in Ibid., 210.

“(1881) Un groupe de quelques barbares sublimes, arrivés de la Terre de Feu, êtres fiers, hautains, cruels, puissants et grotesques, m’a donné comme un rêve de la vie primitive, la nostalgie de la vie pure et simple des commencements. Je n’ai jamais senti avec autant de force, l’écart que fait notre propre nature entre la bête qui rampe et notre fin plus haute. Ils ont les signes de notre grandeur; elle éclate en leurs yeux et gestes, avec plus de force que dans l’homme civilisé. C’est l’animal dans la toute-puissance de son instinct, la certitude, la beauté non corrompue de sa plastique; car ils sont moulés dans le bronze antique, ces membres si fermes et si fins: de délicates attaches achèvent ces extrémités parfaites, où il ne brille aucun bijou, aucune erreur à la vue.

Et, cependant, pour qui les observe, il est facile de comprendre l’état relatif de leur perfection, à eux aussi: ils s’assemblent et parlent bas, avec mystère, comme par crainte d’être surpris dans cet échange secret de leurs idées. Ils ne parlent, assurément, que pour dire quelque chose qui leur est de première importance: ces regards qu’ils jettent sur nous expriment aussi bien la supériorité que la sauvagerie; nulle crainte n’y paraît, d’ailleurs. Celui-ci, couché le long de la terre, le menton sur les deux poings, suit de l’œil, jusque fort loin, un homme civilisé qui passe. Dans le dédain qu’il ressent, sa curiosité ne lui donne pas surcroît d’un plus grand effort, car il reste immobile et tourne ses regards vers un autre objet humain qui est à sa portée, sans que son corps ni sa tête ne bougent.
Un riche financier, actionnaire du jardin sans doute, entre dans le cercle grillé qui les enferme. Les sauvages regardent avec obstination le ruban rouge qui pare sa boutonnière, tandis que je les compare. Est-il laid ce vieux bourgeois; sont-ils beaux ces sublimes enfants de la vie polaire ! Leur nudité sort de la terre comme une fleur de l’Inde, épanouie, luxuriante, harmonieuse et immobile, dans la splendeur de sa vie radieuse et muette. Il faudrait voir ces chairs rigides encadrées de lianes, à l’ombre de la forêt vierge, ou s’étalant sur le sable d’or des grèves désertes et immaçulées.

Quel poème qu’un organisme aussi parfait, sortant des boues primitives pour bégayer à côté de nous les premières strophes d’un hymne universel!” 

Redon, À soi-même, 81-82.

48 Paul Gauguin to Odilon Redon, Spring 1890, in Redon and Bacou, eds., *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren à Odilon Redon à Odilon Redon*, 192.

49 Paul Gauguin to Odilon Redon: Letter i, 1889-1890, in Ibid., 191.


53 “Sa couleur, quoique dérivée de celle d’un autre, est bien à lui: des yeux jeunes, non habitués à l’art dit impressionniste, y verront, plus aisément que nous, une mode simplificateur et large de coloration prise objectivement dans le vrai autant que dans la pensée, et organisée selon des lois qui lui étaient personnelles: point de grus, trois ou cinq tons génériques, leurs rappels juxtaposés ou atténués selon des rythmes, une analogie avec la fugue.” Redon, “Quelques Opinions sur Paul Gauguin,” 428-429, italics mine.

54 “I find that in a text attributed to a Turkish painter called Vehbi Zunbul Zade, which Gauguin circulated among the Neo-impressionists and whose author he may well have been, he poked fun by implication at the meticulous approach of the Neo-impressionists.” Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński, “Authentic Gauguins: Avant-garde Originality and the


56 Jirat-Wasiutyński, *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism*, 47. See also Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Impressionist Circle*, 267-68, and for a partial quotation and translation of the text, see Herbert, “Seurat in Chicago and New York,” 146-153, 155. In Féneón's *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, the authenticity of Zunbul-Zadi’s text is also called into question, the mysterious document having been "reproduit tel qu'il fut publié à cette époque dans l'Art Moderne, l'hebdomadaire bruxellois d'Octave Maus. Le Paul Gauguin de Jean de Rotonchamp, imprimé en 1906 à Weimar, à 300 exemplaires, par les soins du compte de Kessler, le réédita sur manuscrit de Gauguin rédigé en Océanie et comportant de légères variantes de noms et de libellé et une petite mise en scène romanesque. La 'parabole' du 'grand professeur Mani-Vehni-Zunbul-Zadi' y est considerée, du fait sans doute de sa présence dans les papiers de Gauguin, comme une fantaisie de celui-ci. Laissons en suspens la question d'authenticité. Que ce soit Gauguin qui s'exprime, ou une sagesse plus vieille, le document garde de l'intérêt" (Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que completes*: Tome 1, 281-82). I have also found examples of passages from “[L’H]indou Wehli-Zunbul-Zadé:” one *Livre des Métiers*, presented and translated by Félix Féneón as “Préceptes,” *L’Art Moderne* (July 10, 1887): 218-19. If Gauguin gave Seurat the texts in the fall of 1885-spring of 1886, Féneón, close with Seurat, could easily have published Gauguin’s fictional texts out of support for Seurat in 1887, without having consulted an “original” Persian manuscript.

57 Henri Dorra has seen two versions of Gauguin’s supposed copy of the Turkish author’s manuscript, and claims that these are “sensiblement” different, indicating that a large amount of fiction was at work between various versions of the text that Gauguin produced over time as well— most likely changing as Gauguin’s own aesthetic theories changed (Henri Dorra, “Le ‘Texte Wagner’ de Gauguin,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de l’art français* (1984): 283). Robert Herbert claims that although an unpublished manuscript by one Mohammed Sounboul-Zadé exists in the Bibliothèque Nationale, the late Samuel Wagstaff confirmed to him in correspondence that the text is not at all similar to the one on file in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Gauguin’s own hand, concluding “Gauguin’s source is unknown, and his text might be his own fabrication.” Robert Herbert, *Seurat: Drawings and Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 185-86.

59 “C’est l’œil d’ignorance qui assigne une couleur fixe et immuable à chaque objet.” Ibid., 216.

60 “Qui peint n’a point pour tâche, comme le maçon, de bâtir, le compas à la main, une maison sur le plan fourni par l’architecte.” Ibid.

61 “Il est bon, pour les jeunes gens, d’avoir un modèle, mais qu’ils tirent le rideau sur lui pendant qu’ils peignent. Mieux est de peindre de mémoire. Ainsi votre œuvre sera vôtre; votre sensation, votre intelligence et votre âme survivront alors à l’œil de l’amateur.” Ibid. Gauguin’s discussion of memory, articulated just before he lived with Van Gogh in the Studio of the South, is almost undoubtedly a major influence on Van Gogh’s idea of painting color from memory in his color copies from black and white prints.

62 “Il va dans son écurie quand il veut compter les poils de son âne et déterminer la place de chacun.” Ibid.


The copy of the text, in Seurat's hand, is in the Signac Archives. Curator, Orsay director, and Signac’s granddaughter Françoise Cachin-Signac established the fact that the original source is a manuscript by the Turkish poet Vehbi Mohamed Zunbul-Zadé (d. 1809). G. Kahn: “Au Temps du Pointillisme,” Mercure de France 171 (May 1924): 16, said that Seurat had copied an oriental text that Gauguin had lent him. Since Seurat was on very poor terms with Gauguin after May 1886, one can guess that he obtained the manuscript some time the preceding winter. It is on the basis of Cachin’s assertion that many contemporary sources seem to regard the Turkish aesthete as real.

64 “Chercher l’harmonie, et non l’opposition, l’accord et non le heurt.” Ibid., 216.

65 “L’indigo est la meilleure base. Il devient jaune, traité par l’esprit de nitre, et rouge, dans le vinaigre. Les droguistes en ont toujours. Tenez-vous en à ces trois colorations.” Ibid., 215. Indigo, known as the color of Impressionist shadows (because the sun was orange, its compliment), was also a pigment imported from the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), with the dyestuff as the colony’s chief export; Napoleon’s Grand
Armée imported 150 tons of indigo a year to dye uniforms blue, and, in the early 19th century, indigo as a pigment was largely associated with Central America and the French Caribbean Islands. Later, indigo dye as an import was associated with the British East India Company. Chemical indigo was not invented until 1904 by IG Farben; Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 144-47, 156.

Indigo specifically was produced by slave labor to uniform the working-class; Eaton writes, “It made subaltern bodies almost invisible or at least unwillingly camouflaged; labouring in indigo vats at night, or hidden in Western factories, barracks, gaols, shipped with bodies to imperial wars, its intense saturation disguised sweat, dirt and blood.” Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 36.

Simon Garfield, *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color that Changed the World* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2000), 81. Garfield tracks prices for imported colors dropping by one-half between 1858-1862 for madder dye, imported from Turkey and India, for example, and the market for madder was destroyed by 1876 (Garfield, *Mauve*, 90).


For a list of Gauguin’s palette in 1886 including his use of synthetic ultramarine, see Jirat-Wasiutyński, *Technique and Meaning*, 76.


“Il y a des eaux d’artifice, fontaines colorées à l’électricité, aux couleurs changeantes, merveilleuses, comme des fleurs de lumière. Chaque soir cent mille regards sur cette nouveauté là, et puis toutes sortes de choses exotiques qui font voyager en esprit, superficiellement.” Redon in a letter to his mother, 12 June 1889. In *Odilon Redon, Odilon Redon, 1878-1916, publiées par sa famille avec une préface de Marius-Ary*

74 Ibid., vol. 1, 124-130, and diagram on 130.

75 Ibid., I: 124.


78 Ibid., 354-377, 374-75.

79 The names reflected the commercial manufacture of the day and their penchant, still current today, for naming colors after objects like stones, places, and fruits. This list: Mellerio, Odilon Redon, peintre, dessinateur et graveur, 138. Also cited in Bacou, Odilon Redon, Vol. 2, 142. As noted in the first chapter, in Redon’s early sketchbooks we can see notes on his palette of 1864, as a student. His colors are: Lead White (Blanc d’argent), White Blond (Blanc d’blond), Brilliant Yellow (Jaune brillant), Yellow Ochre (Ocre Jaune), Natural Earth (Terre Naturelle), Chrome No.1, Chrome No.2, Vermillion, Red Ochre (Ocre Rouge), Carmine, Burnt Sienna (Sienne Brulée), Black Ivory (Noir d’Ivoire), Plum Blue (Bleu de prune), Ultramarine (Bleu d’outremer), Emerald Green (Vert Véronèse), and Iron Brown (Brun de Fer). Odilon Redon notebook, 1864 Louvre Cabinet des Dessins #RF40954.


82 Glissant, Poetics, 96-98. Édouard Glissant writes, “What I call Creole…is a language whose lexicon and syntax belong to two heterogenous linguistic masses: Creole is a compromise.” Glissant, Poetics, 118.

83 August Strindberg “Preface to Paul Gauguin Catalog, 18 February 1895,” reproduced in Granath, August Strindberg, 144.

84 “Le peintre a le droit de faire des lignes et des couleurs ce qu’il veut, pourvu qu’il ait le sens de l’harmonie générale et que sa volonté soit régie par une conception logique et individuelle. Il a le droit de déformer, pourvu qu’il ait le désir et la puissance de

85 “Un[e ?] terre rouge, un arbre bleu, de la lumière sans ombre…Gauguin a osé cela : on s’étonne.” Charles Morice, “Paul Gauguin,” 294.

86 “J’aime surtout en lui le somptueux et princier céramiste; là il créa des formes nouvelles. Je les compare à des fleurs d’une région première où chaque fleur serait le type d’un espèce, laissant à des artistes prochains le soin de pourvoir par affiliation à des variétés. Le sculpteur sur bois fut un raffiné sauvage, grandiose où délicat, et surtout libre de toute école. Peintre, il fut le chercheur volontaire très conscient de ses virtualités; il trouva cette forte originalité dont on peut suivre la répercussion chez d’autres. Tout ce qu’il a touché a sa griffe apparente, ce fut un maître. Il le fut dans l’acception la plus énergique du mot, si, du moins, la maîtrise consiste à commander par influence, à transmettre des rudiments nouveaux.” Redon, “Quelques Opinions sur Paul Gauguin,” 428-429.


88 “Combien de fois, ô bien sincère témoignage, ai-je pris le fusain d’une main brunie par la terre qu’en jardinant je venais de toucher! Sainte et silencieuse matière, source réparatrice et refuge, que je vous dois de doux apaisements! Quel baume eut jamais sur moi, sur mon esprit et même sur mes peines, une action plus subite, plus bienfaisante que la vue de l’herbe verte, ou la contact de tout autre élément inconscient.” Draft of a speech given on the occasion of a Dutch exhibition of Redon’s works in January 1913. Redon, À soi-même, 121.

89 Jean Dubuffet would, half a century later, produce the painting Yeux Clos, 1954, in his heavily textured signature technique.

90 See Archives Nationales, F/21/4336 Dossier Odilon Redon.


CHAPTER THREE

“Unconscious Nature”: Portraits of La Femme Nouvelle

Thought is a force: it can accumulate, grow, and agitate what we call matter, radiating around us.¹

— Jules Bois, Le Monde Invisible

The curious style of certain recent painters — 'impressionists,' 'stiplers,' or 'mosaists,' 'papilloteurs' or 'quiverers,' 'roaring' colourists, dyers in gray and faded tints — becomes at once intelligible to us if we keep in view the researches of the Charcot school into the visual derangements in degeneration and hysteria.²

— Max Nordau, Degeneration

Marie Escudier (fig. 3.1) is as engrossed in her work as any Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin bubble-blower or solitaire-player. She sits among blossoms that seem to be radiating around her, while she remains focused on the task at hand. Her features are obscured as if in a Seurat charcoal haze, and because she is vignetted all around she seems to be glowing from within. Her dress is a vivid yellow trimmed with ethereal lace, and she embroiders with thread the same chalky blue as the flowers behind her. Because the pastel is drawn on brown paper, the saturated hues of dress and flowers seem to float. The space she occupies is not a real environment—she seems to be posing indoors, but there is no believable background architecture, nor furniture on which she rests. The blue flowers have no obvious origin—although they have a blue trunk, they do not seem to be growing in a real garden. Where do they come from? It is as if her concentration has evoked the floral effusion blooming all around.

In Redon’s Portrait of Mademoiselle Chaine, 1903 (fig. 3.2), a woman sits in three-quarter profile to an unidentified source of light. Her salmon-pink blouse and
cobalt-blue skirt are sketched in vivid pastel; her bell-shaped sleeves expose elegantly articulated fingers. Like Marie Escudier she is a wan, dreamy figure lost in thought with a glowing effusion of flowers and flower-like forms behind her. The flowers here are abstract floral forms, again with neither stem, nor vase, nor obvious origin. While the light hits her face from the front, the upper-right of the indeterminate background is occupied by a profusion of yellow, periwinkle, and green floral forms that do not seem to follow the laws of light hitting real objects. Rather, they glow, seemingly lit from within, and yet they cast no shadow.

Redon’s extraordinary pastel color portraits, a genre he began around 1901, all feature women and children. In fact, with the exception of a couple of pastels of his son Ari, they are all of women and girls. His portraits of men, with the exception of those of Gauguin, are uniformly in black and white. His subjects are mainly the wives and daughters of clients. These often represented commissioned works; meant for private consumption, they were sometimes exhibited along with Redon’s paintings under titles like Profil de femme. Although they are among his most chromatically compelling and mysterious works, they are rarely studied because, as commissioned portraits, they are often considered mercenary “commercial” work. Yet by looking at Redon’s portraits of that most fin-de-siècle trope, the New Woman, we can see a striking iteration of color’s potential to represent the invisible unconscious. Redon’s use of color in portraiture challenged the critical associations of arbitrary color with, on the one hand, contemporary consumer culture, and, on the other hand, degeneration. His colorful, radiant halos of flowers and glowing use of color around figures suggest imaginative colors as occupying a normal, rather than pejoratively valanced, position in painting. They signal Redon’s
distinctly Theosophically inspired solution to a problem confronting artists of his time: how to depict the modern woman.

In 1899, Camille Mauclair wrote about the problem of how to paint the modern woman, the *femme nouvelle*, when he published, in *La Nouvelle Revue*, “La Femmes devant les peintres modernes.” Mauclair argued that the new representations of the modern woman would cease to take the form of a decorative tableaux, or a nude, and instead become the representation of a clothed person in action. Mauclair sees the new woman as increasingly public and mobile, indicating a change in the notion of female beauty from nude to fashionably dressed, from passive to active, and from interior to exterior—resulting in an image that was more like a traditional portrait of a man.  

Citing examples from Manet and Degas, but particularly the women of Jules Chéret (fig. 3.3), Mauclair painstakingly catalogs the costume and accessories of the modern woman—her love of richly patterned textiles, gems, ivory, pearls, perfume, and other consumer goods. Mauclair’s article is illustrated with drawings of fashionably dressed and purposeful New Women marching around town, some drawn from Chéret advertisements or Renoir’s paintings of modern young women at balls. Mauclair’s woman has emerged alongside the consumer culture of Paris, and she is defined in part by her visible consumption of the plethora of goods available for her purchase.

Gloria Groom has argued that Redon’s portraits, in failing to portray the *femme nouvelle* in her newly expanded social role, are reactionary depictions of women in an age of changing and threatening new gender roles. Groom writes, “In comparison these sober, monochromatic likenesses [to his portraits of men], which emphasize the sitters’ individuality and intelligence, Redon’s women are objects, idealized according to
nineteenth-century associations of women with organic beauty (nature) and decoration (artifice). Redon’s portraits in comparison to Mauclair’s notion about painting the modern woman certainly may seem regressive. They occupy interiors, not the exterior world; they seem passive, not active—in short, Redon’s seated, contemplative women are far from the engaged femme nouvelle, enamored of advertising, fashion, and even politics, that Mauclair describes. Yet Groom mentions a tension between the notion she presents of women as “showcases of opulence or beauty” and Redon’s ability to probe “inner life” in a way similar to, and yet distinct from, Mauclair’s description of the new woman.

While Groom does not investigate this tension, focusing instead on Redon’s relationship with his patrons and their social identities in and out of the portraits, “Marius Ary Leblond” (the pen name of George Athénas and Aimé Merlo, cousins, from Réunion), in an article Groom does not consider, proposes a quite different description of what it means to paint the New Woman, and one that has greater resonance with Redon’s project. Leblond would write about the pressing problem of how to depict modern women in “Les Peintres de la Femme Nouvelle,” a 1901 article for La Revue. He wrote that the “painters of the new woman” were facing two new kinds of subject: not only the woman in the salon or street, that fashionable subject of Mauclair’s article, but also the new woman as an intellectual and spiritual phenomenon. This woman was “silent, meditative, [and] reflective,” a figure who might even be “exhausted from too much thinking.” Frequently found indoors or in a salon, this well-educated lady “appreciates the silhouette of ideas, the toilette of subjects, the lace of psychologies, jewels of words” rather than the rich assortment of commercial goods available to the modern woman as Mauclair had described her. Like Mauclair’s women, portraits of Leblond’s femmes
nouvelles don’t focus on conventional external beauty so much as grace or even an “intelligent ugliness.” Yet to Leblond the new woman is most striking in that she possesses an unprecedented interiority—a subjectivity, a psychology, and an interest in ideas—that contemporary artists must learn to represent. He stressed the importance of capturing the “rapid passage of intimate preoccupations” on the face of such a femme nouvelle subject.

Leblond’s second category helps us reinterpret Redon’s fin-de-siècle portraits. Women like Mademoiselle Chaine and Marie Escudier are thoughtful, private figures. They are often absorbed in their work, or posed as if lost in deep thought. They are usually attractively dressed but not the dynamic clotheshorses Mauclair described. Their toilette is not for the public apprehension of the street or the ball. They instead inhabit vague, often dreamy, private interior environments. Not quite gardens, living rooms, libraries, or painting studios, they seem instead to occupy somewhere in-between—perhaps the space of the mind itself, replete with floating, arbitrary colors and imaginary flowers. Redon, in his color pastels, becomes the painter of the new subjectivity of la femme nouvelle.

The problem these images pose pictorially, then, is how to capture and represent the fluid passage of “intimate preoccupations” on the faces of the sitters—or, how to represent thoughts and the mind at work. Above all, unusually vivid or eccentrically assigned color is the signal of the paintings’ interest in interiority. It is significant and typical of these works that the face is a mimetic likeness executed in almost monochrome tones, and that the radiant and formless portion, often composed of effusions taking place around the head of the sitter, is executed in dreamily imaginative color. In fact, in
contrast to his *Yeux Clos* work, Redon in these portraits seems concerned with striking a balance between both the exterior likeness of the figure and the colored, fantastical interior spaces they inhabit—resulting in a novel form of the portrait. In these portraits, color is undoubtedly “moral” for Redon. The works surpass the traditional mimetic function of portraiture in their chromatic inventiveness, to propose color as having a unique relationship with femininity. In this way they echo Blanc’s assessment of color as inherently feminine, and line as masculine.

Redon’s *Portrait of the Baronne de Domecy*, 1900 (fig. 3.4) shows a pale woman lost in thought and absolutely made vivid by her deep blue jacket, glowing red shirt, and the sea of speckled blue flowers and cloud-like forms behind her. The composition shows a large swath of colorful atmospheric space behind and to the left of the sitter. This portrait, along with several others, was exhibited at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in his 1903 retrospective. The most striking part of the pastel is the contrast between the achromatic, mimetic portion of the portrait (her face, hair and neck), which is executed in simple graphite on tan paper, and the colorful, imaginative pastel floral background. Elaborate textures mark the blue, while her jacket and glowing shirt, potentially signifiers of a fashionable identity, have become instead subsumed into the color scheme of this likeness of her thoughts. The pastel and graphite portrait was executed for his patron, the Baron Robert de Domecy, whose home Redon also decorated. The piece, like many others, emphasizes the decorative nature of flowers. Redon makes occasional use of black lines to define the flowers’ edges, but he also shows some flowers with soft edges, which seem to blur, amorphously, into other quasi-floral forms. Some white and blue, daisy-like flowers float aloft in the air. *Domecy*’s blue, beyond merely decoration, is a quality that
can be associated with likeness, as proper to the sitter as her choice of blue jacket or red blouse, yet its immateriality challenges our sense of clothing as mere “stuff.” In creating this portrait of Domecy, Redon succeeds in Leblond’s call for portraits that capture the complex subjectivity of the *femme nouvelle*.

Redon’s painting and its relationship to color and portraiture draws much from, and yet works in a markedly different way than, Signac’s *Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Tints, Portrait of Félix Fénéon in 1890, Opus 217* *(Sur l’émail d’un fond rythmique de mesures et d’angles, de tons et de teintes, Portrait de M. Félix Fénéon en 1890, Opus 217)* (fig. 3.5). Signac’s portrait of Fénéon, like Redon’s portrait of Domecy, uses the background form and especially color to express the personality of the sitter. Signac paints the champion of neo-Impressionist painting in profile holding a small flower in his right hand. He is set against a background of stars and swirling stripes, patterns and geometric lines, which, as Françoise Cashin has shown, come from a Japanese print. Yet unlike Redon’s women, Fénéon is very much dressed for the street, in top hat, glove and cane in hand, which give the background the feeling of a circus backdrop or colorful printed poster, rather than an emanation from the mind of Fénéon. His eyes are open, not half-closed in reverie. Signac’s stippled blue and orange dots, signal of his rational technique, represent the *homme nouveau*. Unlike Signac’s critique of Redon’s *The Golden Cell*, in which Signac dismissed Redon’s use of color—“[Redon] seeks out what is unusual merely for the effect and to be free to handle color as he pleases”—Signac’s painting controls color and embraces its effects rationally, with great theory and control to the application of pigment. In 1902, Signac had made a careful study of the color of light during the various hours of the day,
painstakingly noting the difference between morning light (yellow), noon (yellow-white), 5 PM light (orange), gas light (orange and red), and shadow (at times grayish blue, at times violet, or greenish blue).²¹ In these experiments, the science of rational observation is in control of the irrational element of color, harnessing minute differences in the perception of color and using these for the purposes of knowledge. Redon’s portraits, in contrast, don’t assume that the scientific process of rational optical experimentation can create a framework for the use of color. They capture and elicit the affective, subjective reactions to color, instead of any particular time of day. Redon’s color application is messy and not based on close visual observation. It demonstrates a tactile engagement with the material—not the precise and premeditated mastery indicated by Pointillist paint application.

To the extent that Redon’s paintings evoke states of psychological interiority, they should be considered in relation to paintings by Edouard Vuillard, many featuring women and flowers, painted during this time. Susan Sidlauskas argues that the interior is often characterized as a metaphor for mental space in Vuillard’s paintings.²² While Redon’s pastels have much in common with Vuillard’s paintings of women and flowers (such as Vuillard’s Woman in a Striped Dress, of 1905, fig. 3.6), Redon’s efforts are explicitly portraits, while Vuillard’s capture believable vignettes of women arranging flowers, writing letters, or tending house in wildly decorative but architecturally believable interiors replete with oriental carpets, bookshelves, and patterned wallpaper. Vuillard’s colors are always naturalistic, while Redon’s creep decidedly towards the electric, aniline-tinged, and arbitrary. Both painters exhibit an interest in the decorative painting style popular among the Nabis painters. Yet Redon’s images stage a more explicit
confrontation with a contemplative, psychologically rich individual, while Vuillard’s women are props for patterns, as interesting as and thoughtless as other pretty objects such as a bouquet of chrysanthemums or a black-trimmed gingham dress. For Vuillard, woman is a part of an environment, while for Redon the colored surroundings are an emanation of her unique psychology. Woman in a Striped Dress inhabits an interior tailored to the individual like her choice of blouse or coat, but Redon’s women sit in entirely fantastical settings that are emanations of the spirit or likeness of the individual sitter.

If I invest the use of color in Redon’s portraits with an almost supernatural connection to the sitter, it would not be uncommon in the context of this late-nineteenth century fascination with the mystical qualities of resemblance conjured by the portrait. The notion that pictures themselves had souls is a not-infrequent plotline of criticism about portraiture and fiction about portraits of this era. For example, in 1885, critic George Auriol wrote in Le Chat Noir that “it would be mad…to deny the soul of portraits…one doesn’t need to have read the story by Poe to be perfectly convinced…portraits are something inert yet animated, like the wax dolls with an interior mechanism which moved their eyes and their mouth.” Auriol’s reference is to Poe’s story “The Oval Portrait,” in which a woman drops dead just as her portrait painter finishes the act of representing her on the canvas. Poe’s story inspired Oscar Wilde’s uncanny, aging painted double in The Portrait of Dorian Grey.

What is the role of color in Redon’s portraits of women? In his discussion of Symbolist art, which includes a consideration of Redon, critic Jules Bois frequently mentioned one model for thinking about the chromatic likenesses of the unconscious
mind as an emanation of color: the 1901 *Thought-Forms* of Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater. Prominent members of Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society, the duo posited that clairvoyant people could perceive colored and shaped emanations (“auras,” or cloudlike forms around physical bodies) around people resulting from their invisible emotions or thoughts. Their work, like many manuals on symbolic color, associated colors with emotions, for example linking the feeling of friendly affection with red, or selfishness with brown (fig. 3.7). The book is a sort of field guide to identifying the colorful shapes that correspond to certain moods and emotions. More sensitive, spiritual people will have brighter and more visually scintillating and colorful auras, but it also requires spiritually sensitive viewers to spot them. In Besant and Leadbeater’s work the relationship of color to form is constantly in flux. While most of the examples are amorphous blobs, a number of the book’s illustrations feature shaped thought-forms. Some of these resemble flowers that seem to float and glow; some even evoke Buddhist imagery such as a lotus blossom that symbolizes self-renunciation (fig. 3.8). All the thought-forms are illustrated on a dark brown or black background, perhaps because the images were plates meant for illustrated lectures; because they are set on dark ground, the thought-forms seem weightless and internally illuminated, an effect which would have been all the more pronounced if seeing them projected.

Redon didn’t necessarily read *Thought-Forms* before executing his first portraits of women, but it is demonstrable that his social context is rich with theosophical associations. Bois cites both Redon and Besant extensively in his criticism. In the 1890s Redon was associated with the Theosophical bookstore owner Edmond Bailly, who edited the journal *Le Lotus bleu*, to which Besant and Leadbeater contributed. Gustave
Fayet purchased Bailly’s library as a whole and later brought it to Fontfroide before 1908, as noted in Chapter 1, where copies of books, including Besant’s *Le Christianisme ésotérique ou les Mystères mineurs*,26 were placed around the Redon paintings, *Day* and *Night.*27 The presence of works by Besant and Blavatsky in the Fayet library indicates the widespread presence of propositions about colorful emanations of emotion and consciousness in the context in which Redon painted and created portraits, specifically among the clients who commissioned the portraits.

In fact, the interest in Theosophy and esoteric issues are so pronounced in Redon’s biographical context and the lives of his patrons, that it seems remarkable that these issues do not figure in the literature on the artist. Books prominently on display next to and on either side of the *Day and Night* painting by 1910 included numerous titles on subjects including telepathy, hypnotism, and the occult: S. de Guaita, *La Clef de la Magie noire* and *Le Temple de Satan*, A. de Rochas, *Les Etats superficiels de l’hypnose*, P. Flambart, *Influence astrale*, J.A. Dulaure, *Des Divinités génératrices ou du Culte du Phallus chez les Anciens et les Modernes*, A. Laugel, *Les Problèmes de l’Âme*, H. Corneille-Agrippa, *La Philosophie occulte ou la magie*, seven books by E. Levi including his *Histoire de la magie*, W. Crookes F.R.S., *Force psychique—Recherches sur les phénomènes du spiritualisme*, Sedir, *Les Plantes magiques*, H. Durville, *Psychologie expérimentale*, H. Borrus and P. Burot, *La Suggestion mentale et l’Action à distance*, and various books on the Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian religions.28 While it would by no means be accurate to suggest that Redon read all or even most of these books, some can also be found in his own bookshelf as documented by Bacou.29 Even further back, literature suggests that Redon’s parents and brother practiced spiritualism.30
Theosophy proposed a unique role for color in portraiture. Bois, in his 1890 essay on “Symbolist Unconscious,” makes reference to the mediumship of Madame Blavatsky. He describes her work as a project in which she made visible the invisible and indestructible “spirit-matter” surrounding people. Blavatsky described the consciousness that cycled through physical form and returned to the “astral soul,” in floral form, “the world in which blossom the transitory and evanescent flowers of personal lives is not the real and permanent world; but that one in which we find the root of consciousness, the root which is beyond illusion and swells in eternity.” Her work’s conception of nature, and flowers, loosely based on Buddhist and Hindu iconography, figured the flower as a metaphor for the brief and sudden blossoming of consciousness and mystical energy which accompanied life. In his book *Le Monde invisible* (1902), Bois described how nature, for the Theosophists, took on the role of the supernatural, and took the place of priests and other mystical apparatus as a way to communicate directly with the spiritual realm. Blavatsky was also inspired by modern, Darwinian notions, mainly to explain the supernatural ability of certain highly evolved figures to teleport or tele-psychically communicate over vast distances; her conflation of evolutionary theory and the theory of reincarnation classifies animals, minerals, matter, heat, electricity, and plants as being part of a series of sentient consciousnesses of which man represented one evolved state, and spiritual man yet a higher state.


Our world, the visible world, is for us all that which we really sense before us, therefore scarcely anything. The spectrum of colors that we see is but an
infinitesimal fragment. It is the same for sounds, textures, odors and tastes. These are our world, the Here-Below. In the other [world], the “au-delà,” we know nothing such that we have no sense to perceive. There exists a self-discipline that permits man to achieve a superior degree of evolution to develop the spectrum of reception of the senses. For these privileged few, our world is indefinitely expanded. 

Consequently, to many of the clients of Redon’s portraits, the ability to perceive special colors (as well as sounds, tastes, or smells) was a characteristic of a highly evolved being. By depicting women’s bodies as the site of such sensation, they were figured as “sensing” rather than sensible. A painter’s perceptual ability to engage with color demonstrated his spiritual evolution. In a conflation of Buddhist and Lamarckian notions of how evolutionary progress might be made (“There exists a self-discipline”), perceptual sensitivity to a widened spectrum of colors could be trained in an individual and demonstrates evolutionary progress. Thus, the paintings not only demonstrate the sensitivity of the artist (in perceiving imaginary or invisible colors) and the sitter (for exuding them), but also suggest that the viewer is participating in this privileged experience of visualizing the expanded spectrum of color perception.

Redon refers to colorful “floating fluids” arising from people’s emotions. This Theosophical notion was widely associated with occultist Franz Anton Mesmer; Redon may have derived the term from an English author whose books he illustrated, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who described phosphorescent lights in prismatic colors, blue on the right side and red on the left, which emanated from the human body. Redon illustrated Bulwer-Lytton’s book The Haunted House with monochromatic images of floating nodules of
energy in 1896, one of his last black-and-white commissions.39 The visions that the book’s narrator describes are of odic fluid (“there rose, as from the floor, sparks or globules like bubbles of light many-colored—green...yellow, fire-red, azure. Up and down, to and fro, hither, thither, as tiny will-o-the-wisps, the sparks moved”); such passages show Redon had at least closely read occult books describing spectral and visionary color prior to embarking on his portraits. In his lithographs for the book Redon illustrates the odic fluids as tiny bubbles. Subtitles invented by Redon for other print works, such as 1887 The Juror (Le Juré), a lithograph in five parts, show similar tiny floating bubbles, with subtitles which refer to the invisible world as animate: “Why should there not exist a world made up of invisible, odd, fantastic, embryonic beings?”

Popular thought also explored these colorful emanations: according to the magazine L’Etoile d’Orient, a periodical devoted to esoteric psychological studies published during the decade the portraits were created, “Od” was “an intelligent life fluid,”40 a colorful “psychic and human electricity,”41 emanating from thought. “Every human thought and sensation has fluid projection, which changes color and form along with the sentiments which animate it,”42 the journal explained at around the era Redon was making his portraits. This logic extended by the late 1890s to the realm of photographic portraiture, with Hippolyte Baraduc photographing people in red light to observe the emanation of their odic fluids, creating abstracted portraits of celebrities in which a sensitized photographic plate “captured” invisible emanations. In Baraduc’s portrait of the famous inventor and portrait photographer Nadar, he notes the “well-marked circle of peripheric Od” which halos the sitter (fig. 3.9). The image is a constellation of sparkling psychic emanations. In Redon’s portraits, no chemistry is
necessary: the artist is the sensitive plate recording the colorful emanations from the sitters. Baraduc’s image of Nadar suggests a redefinition of the portrait—no actual likeness is necessary for the plate to have “captured” the essence of the sitter. Redon’s portraits synthesize traditional portraiture—in which the subject’s likeness is conveyed through line and mimesis—and this redefined portraiture, in which likeness is conveyed through more invisible and ineffable qualities.

Color is the first among these qualities. The notion that the glowing colors might be electric, or self-illuminating, emphasizes that to glow from the interior was a significant distinction from Impressionist color (which resulted from light hitting an object). Symbolist color is described as “glowing” countless times. Critics connected Redon’s pastels to unnatural sources of light; Pascal Forthuny called his works “spirit-flowers or pastels with electric vibrations, with flashes of mercury vapor,” emphasizing the connections between the new and modern technology of electricity, the vivid and bold vibratory effect of Redon’s palette, and the aura-restoring reassurance provided by spiritualist thought.43 The connection to new technologies like electricity illustrate the contemporary connotations of what often look like radiant halos. Bois wrote about the exteriorization of thought in his book Le Monde Invisible, stating that thought radiated around us.44 Such electric radiance was conflated with the halo in Christian art.

Other, more obscure, models exist for the role of sensation to depiction in Redon’s self-presentation: Jules Bois, in his 1897 essay on Symbolist painting entitled “L’Esthétique des esprits et celle des symbolistes,” addresses the link between the generative techniques behind the Symbolist visual arts and the what he called the “mediumistic” drawings executed by mental patients and the genre of nineteenth-century
photography distinguished by the claim that the photographer had captured a spirit or ghost on the photographic plate. An occultist critic, Bois would underscore that the role of nature in the work of Symbolist art was often to spark automatic image-making, writing “It’s the supernormal or underdeveloped man, the abnormal, in short, the supernatural who…reduces the individual to return into nature, subservient to tree, flowers, to go into the unconscious, from where these troubles and interesting images emerge.” For Bois the artist here acts as a kind of medium whose body translates the expressive images of the unconscious. The artist’s own connection to Bois is socially well established: Redon thanked the critic for sending him a book on the occult in 1891. A member of the temple of the Golden Dawn in Paris along with Ricardo Viñes, the colorful Bois was also socially connected to friends Redon shared with his collectors the Fayets. Bois, a scholar of pagan religion in Paris, and editor (along with Antoine de la Rochefoucauld) of the occult journal Le Coeur, had devoted an issue of his magazine to Redon, who he saw as a prime example of a “mediumistic” artist. Redon could easily have borrowed the critic’s descriptions of his process as a model for his own descriptions in To Myself. In Redon’s “mediumistic drawing,” looking at nature leads to the “mental ebullience” which bubbles up and is released as fantastical, quasi-abstract art or long-remembered colors. In their interest in accident and the unconscious, the process recalls the shadowy, rubbed and scraped pen-and-ink drawings of Victor Hugo, and August Strindberg’s rapid execution of abstract forms created from the unconscious mind. For Bois, the key elements of the resulting “mediumnique” artworks are: asymmetry, a penchant for detail, and the use of precise line. Redon’s color work is an extension of such a method, in which the artist acts as a medium in a quasi-hypnotized state. The
paintings and pastels add fantastical and arbitrary color to the forms “mediumnique” drawing can take, extending the form usually associated with monochrome drawing to color painting and pastel.

Do Redon’s portraits of women correspond in a meaningful way with Theosophical color and shape schemes such as Besant and Leadbeater’s, for example, in which the yellow and green amorphous blobs represent “Vague Intellectual Pleasure” (fig. 3.10)? Besant and Leadbeater attempt, as did Portal and Humbert de Superville, to find absolute associations between color and emotion, so that a viewer might know something coded about a subject indicated, for example, by the color green.

In Redon’s color, in contrast, symbols do not denote directly as much as signal indirectly; colors connote. If certain kinds of floral structures recur across the portraits—the tropical elephant-ear plant, the floating blue flower—others seem to be particular to the sitter, and they rarely correspond to actual flowers. Mimetic meaning has given way to suggestive meaning; symbolic meaning has transformed into individual subjectivity. Redon’s uses of color are contemporaneous with and intimately related to Huysmans’ protagonist des Esseintes’ desire for a literature in which adjectives possess meanings “both precise and multiple.” Rather than the one-to-one equivalences and lexical precision of the color to unconscious states being proposed in the figures of Besant and Leadbeater’s book, in which “intellectual curiosity” or “fear” have specific universal color cues, Redon’s colors condense multiple, disparate, and hidden suggestions of meaning into a single hue. Their innovation derives from their turn to harness new visual systems of popular representation (spirit portraits, “thought forms”) to push academic distinctions, such as the hierarchy of color and form, which had long dogged painting, to
the point of reversal. As such, Redon’s portraits need not adhere to Theosophical color symbolism directly; they seem more open-ended in their connections between color and subject and do not programmatically replicate any pictorially or chromatically symbolic scheme. Rather, they meld an eclectic variety of visual influences drawn from psychological, esoteric, scientific, and artistic traditions with the practice of creating portrait likenesses from observation, both in the “here-now” and in the “au-delà,” to create affective portraits in which color creates newly immersive roles for the sitter, artist, and viewer of the portrait.

The Portrait of Violette Heymann, 1910 (fig. 3.11), is a dual portrait of the subject through her form and her mental effusions. The floral profusion engulfs the young sitter—niece of the collector Marcel Kapferer—in an enormous, flat, decorative plane of color, while the pale, pretty profile is rendered with a certain degree of pastel precision. Redon exploits the contrast of naturalistic color and forms—brown hair, chestnut velvet ribbon, gold-trimmed cerulean dress—and wildly non-mimetic, pink-bloom, and blue-leafed imaginary floral motifs. The work’s color is not merely local, but a combination of imaginative blues and oranges, greens and pinks. Vividly contrasting complementary tones swirling around her create a strong affective experience of restful, dreamy reverie for the viewer; her lost-in-thought pose is echoed in the cobalt blues of the leaves, scribbled pink flowers, and pink squiggles emanating from the top of the sitter’s head. (The profile view, recommended by Gauguin, was common among Symbolist painters. It was believed to elicit a more truthful and essential portrait of the sitter. The profile view also avoided the overt confrontation of a viewer being regarded by a posing subject,
maintaining the fiction that the work of art evoked unseen states of being, not a common social regard.)

The widespread association of interiority with floating colored floral forms, possible during the fin-de-siècle, has largely disappeared, and therefore it is hard for us to even perceive its particularity and implications today. In this sense we might think of color as socially visible to a certain Theosophical group during this moment. Specifically, the form of Redon’s portraiture during this moment allows us, and his intended viewers, to see this kind of “social” content, and as such belongs to a moment in the history of color and the history of portraiture that is highly specific, deeply influential, and largely forgotten. As such the portraits allow us to glimpse into a specific construction of the human subject—the aural, clairvoyant, mediumistic woman—as a model of fin-de-siècle female subjectivity. By looking at the criticism of Leblond and Bois, we can see that Redon’s pastels of women lend themselves to readings of la femme nouvelle, which illuminate her politics as well as her psychology.

Consideration of the historical roles played by women in Theosophical circles—women occupied a disproportionate number of leadership roles—lets us speculate that Redon’s paintings do actually grant his female sitters considerable agency and subjectivity. Besant and Blavatsky were both proto-feminist advocates for women’s rights and women who achieved considerable social standing. However, this was not by appealing to arguments based on equality with male competencies, but by harnessing traditionally secondary aptitudes such as knowledge of Indian esoteric tradition, the ability to see colors not perceptible to ordinary people, and access to a spirituality lost to modern people, to argue for unique competencies entirely separate from those
traditionally associated with men—a strategy also adopted by fin-de-siècle women’s rights pioneers like Emma Goldman and Anna Kingsford.\textsuperscript{52} What’s more, in Redon taking the Theosophical pictorial innovation as his own, he developed a use of color in painting and pastel, which originated in female, and Eastern, figures, rather than male Western scientists of color such as the ones Signac espoused (Chevreul, Rood, Henry, etc.). While recognizing that this notion of gender-specific competencies and gender separateness rather than parity as the basis of women’s rights might be distasteful to twentieth-century feminists, I would argue that a consideration of the esoteric context of Redon’s portraits of women suggests that such images are not reactionary representations of passive or decorative women, but rather that they evoke the new notion of a second \textit{femme nouvelle}, one intimately involved in political causes not limited to, but including, the rights of women and children.

“The Art of Suggestion”

Redon describes his art with the medically specific term “suggestion.” Yet the artist sought to counter the characterization of his art as symptomatic of alienated mental states. He used the term “suggestion” without the pathological valance of that term as it was used in Parisian art criticism and psychiatric literature around 1900, which sought to connect the term with the decadent, degenerate, or diseased. The proposition that his was the art of “suggestion” is central to his 1909 “Confessions of an Artist,” and feels like a manifesto. Redon writes:

The art of suggestion is like an irradiation of the world by dreams from which thought has not been excluded. Decadence or not, that is how it is. Or let us say,
rather, that it is a growth...of art toward the ultimate liberation of our lives, a
development that will enable us to achieve our ultimate possibilities of expansion
and open up to us the highest realms of moral being, providing us with that
exaltation of spirit which is our deepest need.

This art of suggestion exists more freely, more radiantly in the excitations
of music, where it reaches its fullest power. But, by transposing and changing
forms, by combining diverse elements and creating wholes that have an organic
logic of their own, although they do not obey the laws of the naturalistic world, I
have made this art mine too. All the mistakes the critics made about my work in
the beginning were the result of their inability to see that it was useless to define,
to understand, to limit, to outline anything, because anything that is sincerely and
simply new contains—like beauty itself—its own meaning within itself.... Remy
de Gourmont, who sets them apart from all geometric art, says they are a sort of
metaphor. He sees only an imaginative logic in them. And in my opinion, this
critic has said in a few lines more than all the pages written about my early works
put together.\(^{53}\)

In a language which borrows both from Darwinian notions of evolution and from
Buddhist notions of spiritual reincarnation, Redon frames art that accounts for the human
capacity he calls “suggestion.” He sees such work as part of a teleological trajectory that
will result in “ultimate liberation” towards “the highest realms of moral being.” This
liberation is not economic or social, but spiritual, part of an “exaltation of spirit” to which
Redon sees art as striving. Redon’s work pushes back against the hegemonic neo-
Impressionist scientific model for the representation of perceptual experience; it models a
shift in the nature of and valence of the unconscious, imagining the unconscious as a capacity, and not pathology. Redon in 1908 even rejects the term “symbolic” for “suggestive,” saying “Hasn’t my art been said to be symbolical? I don’t know what that means. I prefer to suggest.”

The word *suggestion* in some form had long been used describe Romantic art: Baudelaire, writing on Delacroix, called his art “the most *suggestive* of all painters,” evoking “sentiments which, although once known, one had believed to be for ever buried in the dark night of the past.”

Here, suggestive art dredges up an unconscious storehouse of memories. The notion of an art of “suggestion” was a particularly common motif in art writing during the mid-1880s. Critic Charles Vignier in 1885 listed numerous modern artists, including Redon, who made paintings that “use suggestion,” a group he pitted against “descriptive painting.” Critics used the term in Téodor de Wyzewa’s *La Revue Wagnérienne* to describe why music was superior to fine art or literature, making a case for the eventual progression of all arts towards musical abstraction rather than visual mimesis. Albert Faucheux’s obscure but fascinating text *The Art of Tomorrow (L'Art de demain: La peinture autrefois et aujourd'hui)*, of 1897, specifically refers to Redon as an artist of suggestion, defining the term as an artist who materializes the ideal, the invisible, and involuntary thoughts. The critic Jules Bois in 1902 wrote on Symbolist art, including Redon’s, describing it as the art of suggestion.

This critical term’s relationship with Parisian psychiatric vocabulary has not been explored. Contemporary analyses of Redon’s work and the emergent science of the unconscious, such as the 2011 Rapetti catalog, persist in relating his work to hysterical female subjects and Charcot, a very different model for the unconscious mind and its
relationship to *suggestion* than the one Redon and some of his critics proffered. By employing the term “unconscious,” I don’t mean to suggest that there is any set notion of what this might consist of during the 1880s and 90s, but rather to point to a contested and constantly evolving term within the medical community describing the mind and its capacities. While discussions of *suggestion, mesmerism, and magnétism animal* substantially predate Redon, I will work with definitions deriving from French medical science during the late 1880s and early 1890s, especially those articulated by Hippolyte Bernheim in Nancy and Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris and their students and collaborators Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, as well as definitions from art criticism of the period (especially those articulated by Max Nordau and Émile Bernard). Henri F. Ellenberger’s classic study *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* is my major historical reference for the development of this notion. With important distinctions, I largely argue for continuity between Baudelaire’s notion of the “imagination,” Schopenhauer and Von Hartmann’s “will,” Redon’s notion of his work as “*venue de l’inconscient,*” coming from the unconscious, and depicting “*le monde intérieure,*” the interior world. Much of this work focuses on notions of artistic agency and looks at the way critics and Redon understood and responded to theories of alienism, hysteria, and the mind as it perceived color.

Early criticism of Redon represented his art as the art of the unconscious, yet followed quite a different historical trajectory from Redon’s own thinking about an art of “suggestion,” giving this characterization the pejorative valance of something aberrant or pathological. In 1882, after Elémir Bourges had arranged an exhibit for his friend Redon in the offices of *Le Gaulois,* the daily newspaper on the Boulevard des Italiens that had
printed work by Émile Zola and Baudelaire. Émile Hennequin, that March, published a positive review of Redon’s twenty-two charcoal drawings in the *Revue littéraire et artistique*. The young translator of Poe’s short stories enthusiastically described Redon’s work as “bizarre” and his subjects as consisting of “human perversities” and “deformations.” The same show came to the attention of Huysmans (then an elegantly whiskered 34-year-old government employee and novice novelist whose mature style was just emerging from the juvenilia of his Zola-esque realism). Ary Leblond, the pseudonymic duo of critics from Réunion, related in an interview with Redon posthumously published in *Arts* in 1956 that Huysmans contacted Redon shortly after the *Le Gaulois* exhibition: “[In 1882, just after the exhibition at the Gaulois], I received a letter with the stationery of the ministry of the Interior signed J.-K. Huysmans…he said kindly that he wished to inform me of his desire to acquire some of my works.”

Huysmans wrote briefly about Redon in criticism published in the volume, *L’Art moderne* (1883). Focusing on the stylistically eccentric and relatively obscure Redon was a marked change from Huysmans’ previous writings about better-known artists like Pissarro, Manet, and Morisot. Echoing Hennequin, Huysmans described Redon’s work as consisting of “agitated” plates of “hallucinatory visions,” of “strange,” “deformed” figures from “nightmares.” Huysmans connected Redon to Poe’s American gothic visions (an observation which underscores the extent to which Redon’s own American identity colored his early French reception). Huysmans and Hennequin both put forward Redon’s work as a grotesque challenge to Naturalism.

In 1884, Huysmans published *À Rebours*. The novel was not only responsible for bringing Redon’s name to a wider audience, but also Redon’s charcoal drawings in turn
precipitated the crystallization of Huysmans’ mature literary style. Along with paintings by Gustave Moreau and prints by Rodolphe Bresdin, Redon’s charcoal drawings hang in the protagonist Jean Floressas des Esseintes’ famous red hallway, an ornate and rarefied space “divorced from the modern world and modern society,” in many ways itself an exteriorization of a mental space. Redon’s images are foremost among the “erudite fantasies, complicated nightmares, [and] suave and sinister visions” to be found there. Given the significance of this passage to Redon’s reception, it is worth quoting Huysmans on Redon at length:

[Des Esseintes] paused more often in front of the other pictures that decorated the room. These were all signed Odilon Redon. In their narrow gold-rimmed frames of unpainted pear-wood, they contained the most fantastic of visions: A Merovingian head balanced on a cup [Head of a Martyr]; a beaded man with something of the bonze about him and something of the typical speaker at public meetings, touching a colossal cannon-ball with one finger [The Metal Ball]; a horrible spider with a human face lodged in the middle of its body. There were other drawings which plunged even deeper into the horrific realms of bad dreams and fevered visions. Here there was an enormous dice blinking a mournful eye; there, studies of bleak and arid landscapes, of burnt-up plains, of earth heaving and erupting into fiery clouds, into livid and stagnant skies. Sometimes Redon’s subjects actually seemed to be borrowed from the nightmares of science… there were some of these faces, dominated by great wild eyes, and some of these bodies, magnified beyond measure or
distorted as if seen through a carafe of water, that evoked in Des Esseintes’s mind recollections of typhoid fever, memories which had somehow stayed with him of the feverish nights and frightful nightmares of his childhood.

Overcome by an indefinable malaise at the sight of these drawings—the same sort of malaise he experienced when he looked at certain rather similar Proverbs by Goya, or read some of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories, whose terrifying or hallucinating effects Odilon Redon seemed to have transposed into a different art—he would rub his eyes.71

Huysmans here further associates Redon with “fevered visions,” “nightmares,” and hallucinations, extending the valence of his earlier review. These are the “nightmares of science,” produced in relation to the modern positivist achievements of the era. The terms he uses to present Redon’s work have a deeply pathological connotation; the effect of the adjectives “fevered,” “nightmare,” “typhoid,” and “malaise” are those of disease and the clinic. Redon’s work springs from a troubled mind. Even viewing his art results in optical pathologies: hallucinations and the need to “rub his eyes.” Needless to say, Huysmans chose to write about the Redon works most evocative of madness. While a number of charcoal drawings (Béatrix, Satyre, Centaure, Femme Étrusque) from the Gaulois exhibit were cheerful fantasies with a more classical or mythological, rather than medical, valence, Huysmans focused on images of “wild eyes” and “hallucinations,” emphasizing their strangeness with florid language.

Even Huysmans’ descriptions of Redon’s color work done in 1880-83 in Brittany—landscape paintings, often oil on paper, of rocks and trees, which he may have seen
privately, in Redon’s studio—are described as “heaving and erupting,” as if they were infected pustules. Yet the early, color Breton images Huysmans describes, primitivising scenes such as *Village by the Sea in Brittany (Breton village)*, c. 1880, or *Landscape with Farm Buildings (Brittany)*, c. 1875-1884 (fig. 3.12), are careful smears depicting picturesque painted seaside towns and cottages replete with pink houses, blue and purple skies, and sunny flower-strewn landscapes based more on Corot than on Charcot. That the paintings date from his honeymoon after his marriage with Camille Antoinette Falte, of Saint Paul, Réunion, perhaps lends credence to the notion that they were not such troubling visions.

Des Esseintes was, of course, also depicted as an unwell character. His neurotic symptoms become the driving reasons for his desire to live inside his exotic home, and Huysmans is widely credited with having consulted the latest advances in medical neurology in preparing the book. Huysmans drew on Alexander Axenfeld's 1883 text *Traité des neuroses (Treatment of Neurosis)* when writing *À Rebours*. As Huysmans describes des Esseintes:

The excesses of his bachelor days and the abnormal strains put on his brain had aggravated his neurosis to an astonishing degree and still further diluted the impoverished blood of his race. In Paris he had been obliged to have hydropathic treatment for trembling of the hands and for atrocious neuralgic pains that seemed to cut his face in two, hammered away at his temples, stabbed at his eyelids and bought on fits of nausea he could only overcome by lying flat on his back in the dark.
While Huysmans’ idol, the writer Émile Zola, penned characters in the Rougon-Macquart novels with forms of madness resulting from a hereditary strain of mental illness, des Essientes’ neurotic etiology was more ambiguous. The character at times is described as having “impoverished” blood, but the jarring modern world and a decadent lifestyle also aggravate and sometimes seem to cause his condition. Zola, in a letter to Huysmans, questioned this ambiguity of des Esseintes’ character, asking, “Is it the character’s neurosis that makes him lead such a life, or is it the life that makes him neurotic?”

From the 1880s to 1890s, the madness in art that Huysmans references can only be understood in relation to the research of neurologist and alienist Jean-Martin Charcot. During the mid-to-late 1880s, Charcot’s students also mixed in Parisian cafés with painters and critics. Between 1884-1886, for example, one might find sitting at one table at the Brasserie Gambrinus by the Luxembourg Gardens not only cultural critics like Félix Fénéon, Edouard Dujardin, and Jules Laforgue, but also painters Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, scientists like Charles Henry, and the foreign students of Charcot. Henry, a co-founder of the magazine La Vogue with Félix Fénéon, where they published Rimbaud’s Illuminations in 1886, would have been no stranger to the most advanced art in Paris (one interview called him “a des Esseintes both reasonable and wise”), but he was also studying for a doctorate in science at the Sorbonne, with a particular emphasis on the relationship of color and sensation. The conversations would have mixed the voices of authorities in medical science, mathematics, art, theater, literature, and the occult on subjects including synaesthetia and audition colorée. Aurier wrote that the nineteenth century had succeeded in introducing “science everywhere, especially in those things where it has the least business,” and surely by this he meant the proliferation of
scientific theories in art criticism and literature. Huysmans refers to Charcot’s work on color perception when he described the blues, lilacs, and violet colors of Monet’s paintings: “Most, finally, can be used to support the experiments of Dr. Charcot on the changes in the perception of colors which he had noted in many of the hysterics at the Salpêtrière and in a number of those who suffer from nervous system ailments.”

It’s easy to imagine Max Nordau, then a medical student attending his hero Charcot’s Tuesday lectures (during the winter of 1885-6), mingling with this Symbolist group or perhaps discussing his ideas with Sigmund Freud, a 29-year-old student who studied with Charcot in this same year (1886). In fact, journalists, critics, poets, authors, artists, and actors attended the neurologist’s Salpêtrière lectures regularly. It was a time in which the contents of an art magazine like La Revue blanche or the conversation at a café table might relate to anarchism, aesthetics, psychiatry (or its predecessor, the medical field of aliénisme, or the study of the mentally ill), poetry, and fiction, and La Revue indépendante published scientific work by Henry next to criticism by Fénéon and Gustave Kahn and poetry by Mallarmé. In Le Chat Noir in 1892 a review by Fénéon mentioned Chevreul, Rood, and Charles Henry alongside Delacroix, Pissarro, and Monet, and announced one of Henry’s talks.

In 1892, the Italian physician and former Charcot pupil Max Nordau would write on both Huysmans and his protagonist. He diagnosed Huysmans as “the classical type of the hysterical mind without originality,” and des Esseintes as “an unspeakable idiot who passes his whole time choosing the colors and stuffs which are to drape his room artistically, in observing the movements of mechanical fishes, in sniffing perfumes and sipping liqueurs.” The pejorative connotations associated with an overt preoccupation
with color have surpassed Blanc’s characterization of color as feminine, or even Locke’s notion of color as secondary, to signify decadence resulting in simple-mindedness, and mental degeneration tied with the art of home decoration. An intense preoccupation with “choosing…colors” was merely another pathological symptom.

Medical cases in which non-visual stimuli spontaneously produced the experience of colored vision abounded in psychological literature, and these theories contributed to readings of modern art as early as Huysmans’ pejorative 1883 characterization of the 1881 Impressionists’ exhibition and its “indigomania”—the almost pathological use of color as style. In one famous experiment undertaken by Charcot in 1889, the hysterical subject with the evocative name Blanche was hypnotized and told that everything in the room was red. She claimed to see green. The same reversal of complementary colors would happen with purple and yellow. Charcot’s patient Augustine was found to be color-blind in one eye and “dyschromatopic,” confusing “red and blue, orange and green;” these symptoms were interpreted by Charcot as resulting from her hysteria.

Students mentored by Charles Henry and Charcot carried out experiments to determine responses to colored stimuli. Charcot’s journals published research noting that hysterical women had trouble with color perception, visual abnormalities that returned to normal once they were cured. Charles Féré, a researcher in perception at the Salpêtrière hospital, noted the prominence of the colorful “scintillating scotoma” which obscured vision during epileptic attacks and migraine headaches (fig. 3.13) and were termed indications of hysteria. Curious about the relationship between color and mental illness, Féré’s work established what might be “normal” and “abnormal” responses to colors. He wrote about the confusion of red and white in hypnotized subjects and their
tendency to imagine colors that were not present, a phenomenon he called “imaginary color.” Many of these examples read now like descriptions of perfectly normal optical phenomena: for example, one patient “spoke of scintillations when he looked at an object for a long time, and the subjective ghost of various colors, particularly during the attacks, when he would see serpentine lines of beautiful colors: reds, greens, blues, passing sometimes from right to left, sometimes from left to right.” Féré deemed this effect abnormal. Féré also examined extreme physical and mental conditions, which related to color, beginning with his doctoral thesis, Troubles fonctionnels de la vision par lesions cérébrales (1882). Colors were constantly seen as symptoms of mental abnormalities as well as triggers of hysterical or abnormal mental states. “Dyschromatopy” (a defective perception of colors) and “achromatopsy” (the failure to see color) were common problems vision associated with epilepsy, according to Féré.

Between 1887 and 1889, scientists working under Charcot investigated color as a means to treat hysterical patients, bathing them in yellow or red light. Charcot’s theories about color would inspire his student Féré to work on the effects on respiration of colored lights on the individual with eyes open and closed, imaginary colors, and color hallucination in the color blind. At stake in these experiments was the culpability of criminals in cases where color experiences may have compelled the subject to act in an unprovoked violent manner. Féré’s earliest work, like the book Les hypnotiques hystériques considérées comme sujets d’expérience en médecine mentale; illusions, hallucinations, impulsions irrésistibles provoquées; leur importance au point de vue medico—légal, 1883 (Hysterical Hypnotics Considered as Subjects in Mental Heath; The Provocation of Illusions, Hallucinations and Irresistible Compulsions; Their Importance
from a Medical and Legal Standpoint) sought to demonstrate that the mentally unwell experience fundamentally different reactions to visual stimuli than the sane, and that such experiences could lead to the compulsion to commit criminal acts. In Féré’s book, *Dégénérescence et criminalité* (*Degeneration and Crime*), published in 1888, the scientist records the muscular and respiratory reactions of subjects under red, green, blue, and yellow lights (fig. 3.14). These involuntary physical reactions were supposed to reveal unconscious mental states being evoked by the colored lighting—work that extends the suppositions of early nineteenth-century theorists of color and perception to the legal realm. In Paris notions of what color might bring to the city were at the forefront of a new way to view urban space—posters, synthetic dyes in paint, and electric stage lights and illuminated fountains were the omnipresent new technologies which made consideration of the role of color on urban subjects so pressing.

Féré describes the earliest of these experiments being done on ants (these are attracted to the color red) and on frog eggs (they pulse under sunlight), implying that the basis for color response in human subjects is physiological and evolutionary (rather than cultural). But as the title implies, Féré soon turned to the *alienées* (insane women): hysterical women, alcoholics, and murderers. While yellow and red lights evoke higher respiratory rates than blue lights in all subjects, hysterics and criminals alone experienced greater involuntary emotions under colors than the sane, leading Féré to the conclusion that in the newly colorful Paris, full of posters and electric lights, it would be possible to argue for lessened moral culpability for perpetrators of crimes due to “the psychological conditions of emotions,” underscoring the link between color, madness, and involuntary behavior. These theories would be echoed in the popular depictions of drunken
overindulgence in absinthe, or *absinthism*, the state of poisoning by the “green fairy” of a liquor which colored vision and created hallucinations, *delirium tremens*, and addiction in the user, and often resulted in violent crime such as the death of a wife, boss, or mistress, for which the perpetrator could be acquitted for reason of insanity. 

A combination of arbitrary coloration and flowers were precisely the signs understood by *aliénistes* of Redon’s era as common elements of the hysterical hallucinations mainly experienced by women. The neurologist Charcot and the photographer Paul Richter in *Les Démoniaques dans l’art* wrote of a hysterical episode, “[a] patient thinks she has been transported into a magnificent garden, a sort of Eden, where flowers are red and the inhabitants dressed in red.” While the experience of non-mimetic color was considered a symptom of the hysterical women by research being done at the Salpêtrière hospital, Redon’s portraits are of upper middle class art patrons, while the hysterical patients of Charcot’s were urban working-class women, *femme galantes* or *filles publiques*. Redon’s sitters are precisely members of the well-to-do, urban bourgeoisie that Mark Micale would identify as noticeably absent from representation within Charcot’s hysterical populations, and exactly the group Freud would theorize about shortly thereafter in Vienna. The sitters don’t exhibit the symptoms associated with hysteria: their poses are not that kaleidoscopic medley of voluptuous ecstasies or coquettishly seductive *attitudes passionnelles, poses plastiques*, or erotic *extase* associated with the illness. These were elegant mothers, wives, and mothers-to-be (bourgeois daughters and obedient children, and *jeunes filles bien élevées*, not *vierges folles*), and most of all art collectors. These women are eminently not the subject of study by *aliénistes*. They embroider, or sit placidly lost in thought—they don’t
engage in the dangerous and lascivious past-times of political pamphleting, bicycling, or worse.

The term “suggestion,” which Redon used to describe his art in 1909, was certainly derived from the new psychological literature, but it is entirely in conflict with Charcot’s notion of the unconscious mind. Instead, it aligns well with the theories of his rival. Images and colors unconsciously penetrated the mind from the external world, according to Hippolyte Bernheim’s theories of suggestion. Bernheim, the French neurologist who ran the hypnosis-centered Nancy school, an early center for psychotherapy theoretically antagonistic to Charcot’s Parisian school, believed that suggestion—the susceptibility to hypnosis, or the power to succumb to hypnosis or exterior influence with compliance verging on automatism—was a general feature of the human psyche. For Bernheim, obtaining a hypnotic state from a patient was not indicative of mental illness. This was explicitly at odds with Charcot, who characterized the predisposition to suggestion as a symptom of hysteria in men and women. In Bernheim’s book De la suggestion dans l’état hypnotique et dans l’état de veille (On Suggestion in the Hypnotic State and in the State of Wakefulness), he argues that in fact most people are able to be hypnotized. His 1880 data demonstrating that of 1,011 people, 987 could be hypnotized, could be seen as a foundational receipt for the modern notion of the unconscious. With only 27 resistant or “refractory” cases out of 1,011 subjects, Bernheim claims that the ability of most people to experience hypnosis was indicative that most healthy people were open to “suggestion,” which is to say that they had an unconscious mind receptive to outside influence. This describes a split between what were termed the “Paris” and the “Nancy” schools of medical thought. At
stake in this split between French schools of psychiatry was the question, “Does having an unconscious, and the peculiarities of memory, perception, and color vision which are its consequences, make you physiologically, chemically or mentally abnormal or unwell?” The answer Redon proposed, through his writing, his rejection of the pathological valence of his criticism, and through his artwork was, “No.” Such an answer works against the grain of the dominant aesthetic theories influenced of Nordau and Charcot.

For Huysmans, Bernard, and other critics, Charcot’s hysterics and the neuropathologies of the unconscious — somnambulism, clownism, epilepsy, and attitudes passionelles — are the symptoms with which Redon’s color work is paired. Reading Redon’s rejection of his critical association with mental pathology in the context of the dichotomy between Binet and Charcot, which is present in the French field of aliénisme tells us about his reception and his ideas about artistic agency. By placing color at the center of the new unconscious, his painting constituted a refusal. Thus, we might understand Redon’s color work as aligned with the theories of Nancy’s Bernheim, and psychiatrists like Janet and Binet, and resistant to those of Charcot and Féré. Indeed, Redon’s work anticipates the Parisian scientific embrace of Bernheim’s notion of the unconscious.

What was the social threat fueling the application of the language of neuropathology to describe the new color in painting? Charcot pupil Max Nordau’s criticism of Symbolist painting in his best-selling book, *Degeneration* (1892), draws parallels between the fin-de-siècle and the decadent end of the Roman Empire, and discusses the new art, with its formlessness and seemingly arbitrary colors, as
sympathetic of a culture in decline. Nordau links contemporary painting with this
decline, in which the body’s degradation was indicative of the failure of the social body:

The curious style of certain recent painters — 'impressionists,' 'stipplers,' or
'mosaists,' 'papilloteurs' or 'quiverers,' 'roaring' colourists, dyers in gray and
faded tints — becomes at once intelligible to us if we keep in view the researches
of the Charcot school into the visual derangements in degeneration and hysteria.
The painters who assure us that they are sincere, and reproduce nature as they see
it, speak the truth. The degenerate artist who suffers from nystagmus, or trembling
of the eyeball, will, in fact, perceive the phenomena of nature trembling, restless,
devoid of firm outline.¹⁰⁹

Nordau’s critique of avant-garde painting is aligned with Huysmans’s and Aurier’s
criticism. Degeneration has dissolved line and left nothing but mad color. Rather than
focusing on the subject matter depicted in visual art, Nordau probes the nature of
perception itself. Choices of color and ways of depicting forms become indications of
mental disturbances quite directly: “[T]his predilection for violet is simply an expression
of the nervous debility of the painter.”¹¹⁰ Nordau’s proposition is that certain painters
can’t help but depict nature with unusual colors, with a trembling brush stroke, unstable
relation of ground to figure, and unresolved figural contours because they suffer from
nystagmus, involuntary eye movements.

Artistic agency is at issue in Nordau’s characterization of the use of non-mimetic
colors. In Nordau’s description, the artist is helpless—he can’t help but transcribe color
in a non-mimetic fashion. For example, for Nordau it is the disorder of the eyeball, the
trembling of the ocular globe, which causes the representation of nature to diverge from
the tenets of academic painting. To Nordau, artists are in essence trying to use mimetic color, but the perceptual apparatus that registers them is faulty. In this explanation, pathology trumps agency, and symptom trumps style. Artists are a subcategory of the *alienés*; what’s more, their art-making is a symptom of their lack of control. He writes:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.\footnote{Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.\footref{111}}

Painting is an involuntary activity on the same level as theft, prostitution, murder and madness. Degeneracy demonstrates "a morbid deviation from an original type."\footnote{Painting is an involuntary activity on the same level as theft, prostitution, murder and madness. Degeneracy demonstrates "a morbid deviation from an original type."\footref{112}}

In fact, artists are not just among the unwell, they also influence or corrupt other members of society:

Books and works of art exercise a powerful suggestion on the masses. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation…especially the impressionable youth, easily excited to enthusiasm for all that is strange and seemingly new…the tendencies of the fashions in art and literature; of proving that they have their source in the degeneracy of their authors, and that the enthusiasm of their admirers is for manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia.\footnote{Books and works of art exercise a powerful suggestion on the masses. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation…especially the impressionable youth, easily excited to enthusiasm for all that is strange and seemingly new…the tendencies of the fashions in art and literature; of proving that they have their source in the degeneracy of their authors, and that the enthusiasm of their admirers is for manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia.\footref{113}}
Degeneration stems from the social pathology of the collective unconscious, the social mind; it coalesces to form infectious pustules of works of art, which spread to further transmit the infection to other populations or generations. In Nordau, the Symbolist painting with its highly visible use of color is a potential pathogen, an object that can further infect and “corrupt” the masses.

Nordau’s criticism of art is really a diagnosis: "We have now seen that Symbolism…is nothing else than a form of the mysticism of weak-minded and morbidly emotional degeneration,” he writes, then (quoting journalist Hugues Le Roux), "[the Symbolists demonstrate] … only juxtapositions of loud-sounding musical words; teams of strange rhymes, groupings of unexpected colors and tones, swaying cadences, hurlings, hallucinations and evoked sensations.” If Redon’s work was explicitly interested in the synaesthetic connections between touch and sight, or music and meaning, and often demonstrated seemingly non-mimetic uses of color, it is no wonder that he would be defensive about such interests and their correlation with insanity and degeneracy. Nordau’s propositions about the relation of art to society, and the artist to illness, were echoed in the language of Parisian art critics.

In an 1895 essay entitled “Des Lys! Des Lys!” in Le Journal, playwright and aesthetically conservative critic Octave Mirbeau, who had written disparagingly of Redon in 1886, invents a fictional character named Kariste, a “painter of symbols,” a dandy with a thin and tormented face and penchant for the discussion of “vague, breathless and exciting” things. Kariste (whose name sounds foreign, perhaps North African or Eastern European) is in poor health when the author encounters him:
I had never seen him so thin, so horribly emaciated. His raised shoulder blades seemed to pierce like nails the wrinkled stuff of his jacket. His dented black hat, his poorly cut beard and his too-long hair gave him the look of a beggar or of those sad bohemians of whom he took so much pleasure, formerly, of mocking, he, always correct in his bourgeois outfits and formerly nearly elegant.\textsuperscript{117}

Kariste is the sartorial and physical caricature of the down-at-heel bohemian artist. Yet it is not only lack of money to buy clothes which troubles Kariste, but also lack of health: he is hopelessly in decline. He is not in control of his visual appearance, and neither is he the master of the representations he creates. For Kariste, and artists like him, art is a symptom of physical and above all mental ailments. He says of a painting of a pre-Raphaelite woman by the English artist Burne-Jones: “Please notice the quality of the hematoma around the eyes...One cannot tell whether it is occasioned by self-abuse or lesbian practices, by natural love or by tuberculosis…!”\textsuperscript{118} Abnormal ocular physiology—often having roots in various sexually “deviant” practices—is seen as typical of the fin-de-siècle artist, such that the artist helplessly represents a visually altered reality; this diagnosis follows from Nordau’s discussion of art, and helped compose the view of Redon in the popular press. Colors in Kariste’s art are described as a visual abnormality linked to of his mental illness:

[His] paintings were the work of a madman. They consisted of yellows swirls on a blue surface; of knock-kneed Christs whose arms on the cross ended in bloody fleurs-de-lis; of wingless birds pecking in a red sky; of strange stars which resembled the eyes of prostitutes; of mysterious forests
where the tree trunks seemed to have human form and the branches were covered with leaves which looked like multi-colored carnival streamers. Mirbeau conflates aesthetic criticism of Kariste’s paintings with psychiatric diagnosis. The colors, the unstable “swirl” of the surfaces, the macabre subjects (“knock-kneed Christs,” “wingless birds”) and vague forms whose shapes resemble or elide into other things all act as visual etiology of the *maladie nerveuses* to which Kariste is prey, a “madman” who is in the thrall of his illness. Most importantly, the artist is a helpless conduit in Mirbeau’s notion of the relation of perception and representation, effectively convinced that he is transcribing reality faithfully when he paints his fantastically colored subject. While Kariste is a fictional character, his paintings seem to correlate to well-known works by famous Symbolist artists. His “mysterious forests where the tree trunks seemed to have human form” evokes Baudelaire’s 1857 poem “Correspondences,” in which man explores a “forests of symbols/that observe him with familiar glances.” In Gauguin’s 1888 *Yellow Christ (Le Christ jaune)* we might make out the “knock-kneed Christs whose arms on the cross ended in bloody fleurs-de-lis.” In the “strange stars which resembled the eyes of prostitutes;” we might imagine Van Gogh’s *Starry Night (Nuit étoilée)*, 1888. Paintings and poems on display in Paris were components of the composite character Mirbeau created. The fictional Kariste accosts the narrator Mirbeau, challenging him about the nature of the supposed illness: “I disgust you, is that it? You believe me to be mad…? Me too, I disgust myself… You see, in art, there is only one great and beautiful thing: health. Me, I am a sick man, and my sickness is terrible, because, now, I am too old to heal myself.”

The notion of a charlatan artist whose non-mimetic colors indicate that he can’t
paint also entertained the almost certainly pseudonymic critic Raphael Schoomard, who wrote an imaginary dialogue in *Le Chat Noir* in 1890 between a pedestrian Salon viewer and a painter entitled "Un peu de peinture:"

"Painting professor? You want to pull a fast one on me, my son. Painting, this purée of vegetables?" “Alas, yes…I teach painting, but I can swear to you I don’t know how to paint or draw. One makes a blue or grey sky, with or without clouds; for the rest, one spatters at random multiple colors separated by chunks of bitumen, and then passes the brush like crazy over it five or six times.”

If the artists aren’t insane, they are confidence men tricking the public. Arbitrary coloration and the apparent deskilling of the fine arts are linked, with the technique of rapidly applying random colors to the canvas’ sunset reminiscent of the much-publicized trials over the “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face” which took place in London between James McNeil Whistler and the critic John Ruskin. While in Whistler v. Ruskin what was at issue was the defamation of the artist, in the French criticism of arbitrary or symbolic color the mental condition of the artist as reflective of the degeneration of society is critical. Critics imply that the deterioration of the academic system of fine art training (and the discontinuity of tradition and stability of social order it implied) can be seen in the Symbolists’ anarchic arbitrary color.

If the unconscious confounded the public because it constituted by definition that which could only be represented indirectly, emerging through neurosis or repression, the issue of the representation of an unconscious in art was, naturally, a delicate matter. Stories of “mad” artists seemed to exploit this anxiety about agency and control in the arts, representing artists as hijacked by the unconscious mind, not agents of their art but
victims of their own psyches, of *folies héréditaires*, which caused degeneration, feeble-mindedness, or insanity. The free use of color was the most visible sign on this upended relationship between artist and artistic agency, a sign that what should be repressed had taken threatening center stage beyond the responsibility of the artist. The Synthetist and Nabi emphasis on “decoration” and “design,” and the deliberate choice inherent in these terms, stand in sharp distinction to this characterizations of “mad” artists—idiots and imbeciles, neurasthenics and criminal personalities—following “degenerate,” instinctive impulses.

While Nordau and his rhetoric of painting as illness has been written about widely, a little-studied figure in the Parisian psychological avant-garde, Alfred Binet, researched the unconscious mind’s relationship to drawing and mark-making, while at the same time de-pathologizing the subordinate relationship of the conscious mind to the unconscious, describing a theoretical model of vision and the unconscious mind of children which resonates with Redon’s model for the unconscious mind’s central role in the creative process. Binet’s early work focused on hypnotism and color suggestion. He would go on to pioneer child development studies and his later work, the Stanford-Binet scale, is synonymous with the IQ test; he saw the unconscious mind as a universal capacity with quantifiable characteristics.124

While it is unlikely that Redon knew about Binet’s work, Redon also created pastels of children. Among Redon’s portraits of female sitters are a number of girls, one of his young son, Arï, and another portrait of a young boy.125 *Portrait of Mademoiselle de Gonet as a Child* (fig. 3.15) (1907), shows a pensive, pale girl dressed in a pinkish-white frock. Her face is a washed-out pale scribble over the support’s bare tan. The background
combines verdant green and blues, with indications of vegetal leaves. Redon notes this as “Mlle de Gonet, enfant, son portrait, fond de fantaisie méandres comme illusion d’un vitrail,” as though the little girl were set in front of a fantastical pane of glowing stained glass. Directly above her head floats a pinkish-peach blob in a cloud of peach pastel. Redon’s portrait of his son *Portrait of Arï Redon (Portrait d’Arï Redon en buste, de face)* (fig. 3.16), executed almost decade earlier, shows greater deference to naturalism (or at least the laws of optical reflection). Arï sits facing the viewer; his right side is illuminated with sunshine, which hits the wall behind him and creates a believable space in which the area behind his right shoulder is illuminated in a golden glow. The shadows on his face fall in a way what corresponds to this lighting scenario. A few flowers, of the same pronounced blue as his sweater, materialize, seemingly from nowhere, behind and above him.

The *Portrait of Yseult Fayet* (fig. 3.17), from 1908, confirms the formula these pastel portraits would follow for over a decade: the seated girl facing left, in profile. The sitter was the daughter of Redon’s collector, Gustave Fayet. Her hair is drawn back with a bow or ribbon, and she wears a demure, girlish white dress featuring puffed sleeves and fashionable black piping. Flowers float behind her head, and suggestive color has replaced perspectival space or the relative hierarchical depiction of shapes. The blooms are unidentifiable, largely composed of odd complimentary color combinations—yellow and purple, blue and orange—rather than a recognizable form. Because dark shapes are silhouetted in front of pale backgrounds, much like in Delacroix’s *Apollo* ceiling, the works seem to glow. Once again, in front of the girl’s face, and with no obvious referent, a pink blob set off in an orange background seems to float.
Binet took Charcot’s work on neurology and used it to test and identify the workings of normal unconscious behavior in the minds of children. In Binet’s *Suggestibilité*, automatic writing is used to show the normal workings of the unconscious mind. In one experiment, scientists put a pen in the right hand of the student subject, and hid his hand from him with a screen. Then, to the sound of a ticking metronome, they took his right hand in theirs and they wrote "e"s 1.5 cm high, writing each letter rhythmically to the beat of the metronome. They then let go of the hand of the student to see what unconscious registration happened with the student’s hand and pen on paper when there was no mechanical compulsion on the hand to write. Binet divided the study results into four types: In the first, the students didn’t repeat any movement after their hands are let go: these are not susceptible to automatic motion. Those in the second group trace a letter or portion of a letter and then stop, while those in the third group trace a short series of letters. Those in the fourth group trace a series of letters for an indefinite period of time (fig. 3.18). The last result interested Binet because it suggested that an endless stream of information can emerge from the unconscious of the experimental subject that can be monitored through writing. To Binet, the scrawled loops of a fourteen-year-old schoolboy demonstrated automatism in writing, the action of the pure unconscious mind on mark-making. By deforming the movement suggested by the guiding hand and making a series of loops, independently, when his hand was no longer guided, the subject resisted suggestion and exhibited spontaneous movement. “Obre” drew until he had to stop because he ran into the edge of his paper (figs. 3.18-19). “Hub” said he was drawing "letters without meaning." The subjects were then rated on scales ranging from blocked to complete automatism; the student named Delans’ scrawl (fig.
3.19) is rated as complete automatism, as is Obre; so is Hub, while Sagaire demonstrates relatively little automatism.\textsuperscript{128} There is, however, no value judgment placed on those figures more, rather than less, susceptible to automatic writing. The experiments are performed on students (not mental patients or criminals), and the results are not judged to be indicative of pathology; the use of these schoolboy names rather than diagnostic or criminal titles is indicative of the different tone Binet’s experiments have than those of Charcot or Féré’s studies of women and inmates.

Binet’s book \textit{Suggestibilité}, following sociologist Émile Durkheim, argues that such individual, unconscious acts which seem capricious or without pattern can be predicted. Binet writes that “each individual, placed in certain conditions, and believing himself to act freely, comports himself in reality in a manner very much like other individuals.”\textsuperscript{129} Subjects "believing themselves free, carry themselves in reality in the same manner as other individuals; what they have in common is unconscious automatic activity."\textsuperscript{130} In another experiment, Binet demonstrates that the source for the choice to put a dot on a grid in a similar location or create similar drawings of multiply bisected squares is united by cultural norms that dictate unconscious proclivities (fig. 3.20).\textsuperscript{131} Normal individuals, believing they have free will, will make predictable marks, even when drawing hypnotized, and hypnosis is a means to uncover their unconscious proclivities. Binet’s notion of what it means to be human and have an unconscious demonstrates the opposition of free will and what Durkheim would, in 1893, term “organic solidarity.” Binet seeks to establish the range of normal unconscious reactions to certain tasks as a way to demonstrate underlying patterns in social behavior.
Binet also worked extensively with children on tests of vision and memory, on the theory that there are demonstrable, innate, and non-pathological relationships between language and visual memories. These were demonstrations of “suggestion.” In one study, Binet set up a box containing ordinary objects: a department store label, a button, a photographic portrait, a print from an illustrated journal, and a stamp (fig. 3.21). These objects are quotidian enough to be familiar to his school-age subjects, yet contain enough detail to be susceptible to uncertainty at a high level of interrogation.

In the first part of the two-part experiment, students were asked to list and draw the objects viewed in the box after the carton was hidden again behind a screen; most children forgot one or more objects. Binet noted that the portrait and print are the least forgotten objects, perhaps because they are more interesting and the button, the stamp, and the bill from the department store Bon Marché the most forgotten (fig. 3.22); thus, he hypothesizes, interest affects vision and memory, such that the least interesting, least curious and most familiar objects are forgotten, such that a ticket from the department store slips the mind of these schoolboy subjects; they render it a mere square or rectangle without significant legible markings.

In the second part of the experiment, the experimenters reminded the students of each object, then asked deliberately misleading questions about the objects before asking the student to draw them in detail and recall their color. This portion was designed to provoke errors in memory and to demonstrate the power of verbal suggestion in creating errors in remembered visual experience. The experimenters asked questions such as:

The button…what color is it? Is this color unified or a mix of two colors? Is the button in cloth or another substance?...What color are the threads?
The portrait...what is its color? What does it represent? Is the individual seen in his entirety? Up to what part of the body is seen? What is he doing? What does his right hand do? What color is his jacket? What color is his cardigan?

The label: from what store is it? What color is it? What shape is it? Is it a regular shaped rectangle? Draw it. Does it have writing on it? Say all of the inscription that you have read. How was it attached to the box? What is the direction of the pin or thread? That color is the thread?

The stamp: What country is it? What is its worth? What color is it? It is new or is it used?

The print: What shape is it? What color is it? What does it represent? How are the individuals dressed? Are there women and children among them? What do you see in the house?132

The questions, often about color and memory, hoped to elicit responses influenced by such leading phrasing.133 Children remembered seeing the glue on the back of the stamp when it was glued to the box, or they could specifically see the letters "RIS" for Paris on the stamp; such facts had been suggested verbally but not seen visually. The students then draw the remembered objects. Binet is amazed by the specificity of the errors committed, and the extent to which detailed visual memory of an event may be false: "He drew with precision a thread which he had not seen,"134 the experimenter recalls of his obedient subject. Binet calls these "mistakes which are neither logical, nor the product of routine."135 They are the errors of invention. Subjects mistook the most fundamental details of their visual experience: one remembered and then drew a diamond in the center of the button when there was none,136 while others remembered more or fewer holes (fig.
3.23). The children remembered the engraving of the strike as forty seated men, or a scene of a military burial.

Binet relates the experience of one particular student having remembered seeing “a tiny image, a portrait of a young girl; her head and shoulders in profile, without a hat, an oval portrait in white and grey…at our request, Poite [the subject] drew this imaginary portrait.”137 The experimenter’s incredulity is apparent in the language he uses to describe these results. The colors of the stamp were the most often mistaken of any detail, and memories of colors are determined to be deeply unreliable and the most prone to suggestion of any quality of an object. Binet’s experiment had profound consequences for the legal system in France: lawyers could no longer interrogate witnesses in a manner which might plant false memories in witnesses, a premise which assumes that even sane subjects might demonstrate unreliable memories under suggestive or leading questioning. In terms of practices of representation, much like the Symbolists Binet displaces vision and places the mind and the word—not the eye—at the helm of images drawn or painted from memory. Such an experiment reflects a shift in the visual arts from a mimetic record or trace of sensation, to an act often without referent. This shift has manifest consequences for Redon’s work. Critics like Bois who wrote about Symbolism as the art of suggestion would characterize Redon’s work as the art of this movement.

The experimenters’ incredulity when looking on as a child draws an imaginary, oval portrait of a young, hatless girl might seem absurd. Yet in establishing the notion of a normal unconscious mind, Binet’s investigation of visual memory is a powerful metaphor for the kind of creativity Redon and his Theosophical collectors championed in a critical context, which often denigrated the simplest forms of non-mimetic art.
Especially remembering Redon’s colorful portraits of Gauguin done from memory, it is worth considering the role of imagination—and the distortions inherent in visual memories—in Redon’s portraiture against this backdrop of scientists amazed at such a simple moment of ordinary creation.

A dramatic example of Redon’s sympathy with what we might characterize as a Binet-like notion of the normativity of the unconscious mind can be seen in Redon’s handwritten notes from 1904 on his private copy of a lengthy review of his work by Émile Bernard. Bernard had become by the middle of the 1890s a vocal advocate of “spiritual art,” a nostalgic position claiming a lineage with Gothic art. He wrote that: “to copy nature is not art,” and “the art of the exterior is a profane art.” As such, he was sympathetic to Redon’s work. In addition to “Ce que c'est que l'Art mystique,” in 1904 Bernard wrote a lengthy article about Redon for the journal, L’Occident. In the review, published in May, well over a decade after the death of Charcot, Émile Bernard’s discussion still explicitly associates Redon with ill, tortured, and neurologically abnormal states. Redon’s work is yet again “agonized,” it is a “nightmare” produced by a “black soul.” In a way that is almost comical, given the positive valence of the essay, Redon’s subjects are associated with illness and bad dreams: his swamps are nauseating, his plains denuded and mournful, “men carry hideous chimeras on their backs.” This review followed a year after an article Denis wrote on Redon for L’Occident, in which he described Redon’s “violently exotic” art in which the individual is delivered to the “caprices of the unconscious.” Redon criticism had taken on this partisan bent, with Redon and the Leblonds, along with Gauguin, Jeanne Dion, and Jules Bois, defending
Redon’s art against the descriptions of Bernard, Denis, Huysmans, and effectively most of the rest of the Parisian press.

Redon’s personal notes on Bernard’s essay are illuminating in their fervor. In Bernard’s critique, in asking how Redon can make art about the invisible, he concludes that Redon is able to “trace the contours of his dreams, of his hallucinations, and of his nightmares.” Bernard’s Redon is characterized as “a madman in a sad landscape.” In response to this, Redon writes: “I only contemplate the interior world and life,” describing his inspiration as arising from the “unconscious,” yet rejecting all allegations of perversity or mental or spiritual illness. Above Bernard’s description “an anxiety already assailed the painter without him being conscious of it, erasing the appearance, betraying the irrevocable destiny of the end which creates and then reclaims. The shadow, the shadow which finally will make everything its prey, reigns there, heavy, weighing, depressing, imperious,” Redon scribbles in heavy handwriting: “All of this is false.” Below the phrase “black soul,” is written: “my soul isn’t black because I [illegible] life which loves the sun, the flowers, and all the splendors of the exterior world.” By rejecting Bernard’s indications that he should be associated with unhealthy hallucinations and miasmas, Redon is rejecting the neurological etiology of the Charcot-based valence of criticism that followed his work since Huysmans hung the first noirs in des Esseintes’ hallway. Whereas Bernard writes in glowing terms of Huysmans’ criticism of Redon, Redon indignantly responds, “Huysmans has only incompletely understood me.” By explicitly stating that Huysmans—who popularized the work with descriptions equating Redon with neurological and psychiatric ailments—had an inadequate notion of his work,
Redon is disavowing his first critical champion not just socially (as mentioned, the two had split in the mid-1880s when Redon befriended Mallarmé), but also intellectually.\textsuperscript{148}

Color, to some in Redon’s circle, was seen as key to rehabilitating the artist’s work. The same year of Bernard’s essay, 1904, young critic Gustave Babin wrote a review of the Salon d’Automne exhibition which began, “Forget everything you’ve read about the apocalyptic satanic Redon, all literature, even those insidious pages by J.-K. Huysmans, and see here only painting by a refined retina, a wonderfully firm hand—[art by] one of the most prestigious artists of our time.”\textsuperscript{149} Redon responded in a letter with the message, “At last! I read and reread [your words] with enchantment, and hasten to tell you so. They redress the error concerning me that has been committed by all the criticism of my past…. I thank you very sincerely.”\textsuperscript{150} (Redon was in the habit of writing letters congratulating or correcting his critics,\textsuperscript{151} and even fantasized to Bonger about correcting the criticism with his own writing about himself, saying “Wait until I write my own article!”\textsuperscript{152}) Babin’s reaction indicates that a popular audience—not just Redon’s intimate friends—was beginning to see Redon’s color work as distinct from the shadow of Huysmans’s strong characterizations, echoing Blanc and Nordau, about the degenerate and feminine nature of color.

Redon’s colorful portraits of women and girls appear as a counterargument to the emerging consensus articulated by Charcot and his students about the nature of the newly discovered unconscious mind. Redon’s Portrait of Madame Gustave Fayet, 1907 (fig. 3.24) wife of the patron, shows her as a confident, thoughtful femme nouvelle. She sits facing the viewer. Dressed in a modest black dress and simple gold necklace, her main adornment is the enormous blue flower pinned to—or growing out of—the front of her
garment. Electric-blue, the flower’s color is echoed in the light blue glowing aura surrounding her shoulders and playing to the left of her head. The flower is nothing that can be found in a store or hothouse—it seems to represent an internal quality visually manifested. Redon describes the work as “son portrait au pastel, vue de face, corsage noir dans le fond, légère, une fleur imaginée.” The portraits emphasize her capacity for thought, for spiritual engagement, and most of all for a capacity as a woman that goes beyond the commercial to the intellectual and even spiritual. Her electric-blue flower and its auratic glow is a sign of color’s spiritual potential to escape commodification—exceeding as it does the world of forms—a potential Redon implies is linked to his female sitters. The description confirms the fantastical nature of the flowers and their relationship to the imagination—are we imagining the flower? Is the artist? Is she?

To the extent that today we widely believe in the presence of an unconscious mind which is not de facto unhealthy and are willing to concede that both artistic intentionality and the unconscious can be constituent elements of modern art-making, we have internalized a notion which could be seen as closer to the model proposed by Redon than the one promulgated by his critics. Redon’s views vis-à-vis the unconscious and art, and his defenses of suggestion as a notion proper to his project, are deeply present in his paintings and pastels representing women’s minds at work. Redon’s work from within Paris, parallel to Bernheim’s views from without, question the etiology by which diagnoses were made by critics based on seemingly arbitrary, non-mimetic color in works of art. Such a project interrogates the power relations between artist and critic, as well as the notion of the agency that an artist and viewer have in relation to the work of art. Redon’s use of color speaks to another role for color in the life of the femme nouvelle
than the one proposed by Camille Mauclair, or the hysterical color proposed by Charcot. The colors in Redon’s portraits were not descriptive of the commercial goods and fashionable clothing available for sale in modern Paris, nor the hallucinations of the asylum. Instead, they posit a femme nouvelle with an interest in ideas and an unprecedented right to interiority and subjectivity.


3 Curiously, yet in keeping with the gender division of color and line, a series of portraits he made of men—which also included Juliette Dodou, the politically radical, labor-organizing sister of his wife—are all made as line drawings, as if masculinity and political zeal were best represented in line, not color, and as if women and children were closer to nature and more in touch with color than men.

4 The listing for the painting in his 1894 Durand-Ruel exhibition notes that it was borrowed from “M. le comte A. de la Rochfoucauld.” André Mellerio, *Exposition Odilon Redon* (Paris: Galeries Durand-Ruel, 1894), 19.

5 These portraits commanded relatively high prices among Redon’s works. We know, for example, that these two images were labeled “Portrait de Madame Fontaine,” and “Portrait de M. Chaine, au pastel” in Redon’s account books, and sold for 500 francs each the year that they were made. Odilon Redon, “Livre du Raison,” MS 42820, AMA, Series XIV-Box FF 17.19.


7 Ibid., 192-93.


9 Ibid.
In contrast, Suzy Lévy has written that Redon’s depictions of allegorical women reflects a Theosophical theory of the “feminine messiah,” and argues that his repeated motif of the mythical or historical heroine—Joan of Arc, Virgins, Venuses, druidesses—in his lithographs and pastels grants women agency through empowering representations of archetypal female figures. Of course, Lévy is talking about Redon’s idealized images of women, and not his portraits per se. See Suzy Lévy, Odilon Redon et le messie féminin (Paris: Editions Cercle d’Art, 2007). Her book is noteworthy, especially in its expanded consideration of Redon’s occultist social context, and brings considerable new archival material, especially private letters, to bear on Redon’s work.

Formerly La Revue des Revues, the journal, edited by the philosopher Jean Finot (the pseudonym of Polish-born Jean Finckelhaus), was known for its progressive views.


“[F]atiguée de trop de pensée.” Ibid., 277.

“Elles apprécient la silhouette des idées, la toilette des propos, la dentelle des psychologies, les bijoux des mots, le beau ligne de l’amitié et de la simplicité.” Ibid., 285.

“[L]aideur intelligente.” Ibid., 289.

“[R]apide passage ou se convulsent d’intimes préoccupations.” Ibid., 290.

Redon criticized Fantin-Latour’s portraits of women as being too realistic. See, for example, Redon, À soi-même, 148-51, text dated November 1882.


For a discussion of the notion of the psychology of interiority in Vuillard’s paintings, see Susan Sidlauskas, Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93-123.
“Ce serait folie...de nier l’âme des portraits...il n’est pas besoin d’avoir lu le conte de Poë pour en être parfaitement convaincu...les portraits sont des choses inertes et animées, comme ces poupées de cire dont un mécanisme intérieur fait mouvoir les yeux et la bouche...ils possèdent...cette vertu inappréciable: la Ressemblance.” George Auriol, “L’Âme des portraits,” Le Chat Noir, no. 165 (March 7, 1885): 452.


Besant and Leadbeater, Thought-Forms, 79-82.


“Sachant que les parents de Redon, eux aussi, pratiquèrent le spiritisme,” writes Suzy Lévy of the Fayet circle, “[s]erait-ce une des raisons pour lesquelles leur fils, Odilon, mit tant d’application à le refuser?” Lévy, Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes : Odilon Redon et le milieu occultiste, 50. Though Redon’s context or milieu is very spiritualist and (later) interested in the occult, he consistently distances himself from these beliefs in his writing. This distance or insistence on his lack of interest is echoed by his friends’ accounts. Redon also characterizes his older brother as “very spiritualist.” (“Mon frère aîné était l’homme le plus spiritualiste que j’aie connu.”) Charles Terrasse, Conversations avec Odilon Redon (1914; reprint, Paris: L’Echoppe, 1993), 13.

Bois, Le Monde invisible, 407.

Ibid., 167. Her theories were loosely based on Buddhist notions of karmic return.

Ibid., 180.


Ibid., 81-83 and 149.


“Fluides suspendus.” Redon quoted in Viñes, 16.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Haunted House and the Haunters* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., 1925), 38. The author was a prominent figure in the English world of Rosicrucian thought. The novel described the existence of “mesmerism or electro-biology”: “The mind of the person operated on is affected through a material living agent. Now, supposing it true that a mesmerized patient can respond to the will or passes of a mesmerizer a hundred miles distant, is the response less occasioned by a material being; it may be through a material fluid—call it Electric, call it Odic, call it what you will—which has the power of traversing space and passing obstacles, that the material effect is communicated from one to the other.”


“Une espèce d’électricité psychique.” Ibid., 22.

“Toutes les pensées et toutes les sensations des êtres humains ont des projections fluidiques, qui changent de couleur et de forme, suivant les sentiments qui les animent.” Ibid., 22.


Bois, *Le Monde invisible*, 344-45. See also the work of Linda Dalrymple Henderson, who has written extensively on the question of “ether” and early twentieth-century art;


46 Getty Research Library Special Collections, call #850274, object #87-A556.

47 See Lévy, Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes, introduction, for the history of the social relationships of figures interested in the occult around Viñes at this time.

48 Jules Bois and Antoine de la Rochefoucauld, eds., Le Coeur, no. 6-7 (September-October, 1893).


50 Other authors have differing ways of accounting for the role of the unconscious in Redon’s work. Dario Gamboni sees in Redon’s black-and-white lithography the artist “exploring two aspects of his personality and negotiating through them an identity that was neither individual nor stable but was nourished from collective representations and

51 These politics extended to the importance of rights for other undervalued or marginalized groups; Besant, for example, was also an advocate of self-governance for India, and children’s educational reform.

52 For more on the nineteenth-century links between European Theosophy, Eastern tradition and feminism, see Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 277-332.


57 Charles Bartlett, *L’Art de demain: La peinture autrefois et aujourd’hui* (Paris: Chaumel, 1897), 148. Bartlett was the nom de plume of Albert Faucheux, the Parisian occultist, who, in 1887, with Joséphin Peladan, Paul Stanislas de Guaita, and others founded the *Groupe indépendant des études ésotériques* (GIDEE).


59 Ellenberger’s work has been updated in important ways by scholars including Jan Goldstein (in relation to the politics of hysteria), Janet Beizer (on fiction and hereditary madness), Jann Matlock, Ruth Harris, Georges Didi-Huerman (on Charcot and the Salpêtrière), and Mark Micale (on male hysteria).

60 I largely do not deal with Sigmund Freud’s notion of the unconscious or psychological mechanisms, which, although he was briefly a student in Paris, are geographically and
theoretically distinct from those models unique to and operating from within Redon’s Parisian context in art criticism, aesthetic theory, and medical science; for the same reason I ignore the Viennese Josef Breuer.


71 Ibid., 59-60.

72 Ibid., 60.

73 Even an iconic image like *The Crying Spider*, 1880, does little more than combine an insect with the crying face of a man. What is rarely commented upon is that his face looks not French but non-white. If the spider is sad, this might be a state seemingly derived from its otherness—not the “bad dreams and fevered visions” which Huysmans promulgates. The appearance of such a being might rather come from the conflations of person and animal which slavery and colonialism spawned.


77 See Jules Christophe, “Le Symbolisme,” in *La Cravache* (June 16, 1888) quoted in Sven Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971), 81. Redon would not have been part of this group socially—by 1886 he attended Mallarmé’s Tuesdays across the city in the 17th on the Rue de Rome—but he was undoubtedly aware of their articles in publications like *La Revue blanche*, in which he also published lithographs.


80 “La critique du siècle a eu la prétention d’être scientifique. C’aura été le propre du XIXe siècle de vouloir introduire la science partout, même dans les choses où elle a le moins affaire.” Aurier, *Oeuvres Posthumes*, 175.


85 Nordau, *Degeneration*, 309.


88 Ibid., 169.


93 “Il parlait de scintillements lorsqu’il fixait un objet un peu longtemps et de spectres subjectifs de couleurs diverses, particulièrement durant les attaques, il voyait des lignes serpentine de très belles couleurs, rouges, vertes, bleues, passaient tantôt de droite à gauche, tantôt de gauche à droite.” Ibid., 184-85.


96 Charles Féré, *Dégénérescence et criminalité* (Paris: Baillière et Cie., 1888), 78. He also notes that violet is the most calming color, even when experienced with eyes closed.


Hippolyte Bernheim would write, "We are all suggestible and can experience hallucinations by our own or other people's impressions." Bernheim, *De la suggestion dans l'état hypnotique et dans l'état de veille*, (Paris: Doin, 1884), 10. See also Ellenberger: “In 1886, Bernheim published his textbook, which was a great success and made him the leader of the Nancy School. In opposition to Charcot, he proclaimed that hypnosis was not a pathological condition found only in hysterics, but it was the effect of ‘suggestion.’ He defined suggestibility as ‘the aptitude to transform an idea into an act,’ a feature that every human being possessed to a different degree.” Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, 87.

See Bernheim, *De la suggestion dans l'état hypnotique et dans l'état de veille*, 4.


As an anonymous Bibliothèque Nationale reader noticed on the original document, the balance correctly adds up to 1014.


By “aligned,” I do not mean that Redon read Bernheim. His quirky unconscious might be seen as closer to the work of Fechner, von Hartmann, and Schopenhauer, who not only saw the unconscious or a “will” as universal among humans, but even proposed to explore its existence in plants. Druick claims that Redon “seems to have been familiar” with von Hartmann’s text, see Druick, *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams*, 93. Burham finds that the work was incorporated into the French lycée curriculum by 1880—too late for Redon to have read it in school, but a sign of its popularity; Filiz Eda Burham,


109 Nordau, *Degeneration*, 27.

110 Ibid., 29.

111 Ibid., vii.

112 Ibid., 16.

113 Ibid., viii.

114 Ibid., 144.


116 “Son visage maigre et tourmenté, une tristesse infinie et grimaçante.” “Choses vagues, haletantes, trépidantes.” Ibid.

117 “Jamais je ne l'avais vu aussi maigre, aussi affreusement décharné. Ses omoplates remontées semblaient trouver, comme des clous, l'étoffe fripée de son veston. Son chapeau noir bossué, sa barbe mal taillée et ses cheveux trop longs lui donnaient l'aspect d'un mendiant ou de ces tristes bohémiens qu'il prenait tant de plaisir, jadis, à railler, lui, toujours correct dans sa tenue bourgeoise et presque élégante.” Mirbeau, “Le peintre de symboles,” in *Combats*, 82.


119 “Je constatai, avec une véritable affliction, que ces tableaux étaient l’œuvre d’un fou. C'étaient des volutes jaunes sur des surfaces bleues; des Chrétiens cagneux dont les bras en croix finissaient en fleur de lys sanglants; des oiseaux aptères picorant dans des ciels rouges; de bizarres étoiles qui ressemblaient à des yeux de prostituées; des forêts mystiques où le tronc des arbres figurait de vagues apparences humaines et les rameaux se couvraient de feuillages pareils aux serpentins multicolores du carnaval. Tous offraient des imaginations identiques où se révélait l’état d’esprit singulièrement morbide de mon âme.” Mirbeau, “Le peintre de symboles,” in *Combats*, 81.

121 Henri Dorra has associated Kariste with the painter Meissonier, who had died in 1891, five years before Mirbeau’s first article featuring Kariste appeared. See Dorra, ed. *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, 277. Contrary to Dorra’s suggestion, though, I find it improbable that Kariste is Meissonier, given the description of the paintings in this article.

122 “Je te dégoûte! ne mens pas... je te dégoûte...en art, il n'y a qu'une chose belle et grande: la santé. Moi, je suis un malade, et ma maladie est terrible, parce que, maintenant, je suis trop vieux pour m'en guérir. C'est l'ignorance! Oui, je ne sais pas un mot de mon métier, et jamais, jamais je n'en saurai un mot! Je ne suis pas un fou, comme tu pourrais croire. Je suis un impuissant, ce qui est bien différent. Ou, si tu aimes mieux, un raté, ce qui est pire...je ne sais pas dessiner...je ne sais pas ce que c'est qu'une valeur! Alors, je remplace ça par des fioritures, des arabesques, par un tas de perversions de formes qui ne donnent de l'illusion qu'aux imbéciles.” Mirbeau, “Le peintre de symboles,” in *Combats*, 82-83.

124 “Professeur de peinture? Tu veux m'en glisser, mon garçon; peinture, cette purée de légumes?" "Hélas, oui...je professe la peinture, mais je puis vous jurer que je ne sais dessiner ni peindre." "On fait donc un ciel bleu ou gris, avec ou sans nuages; pour le reste, on pose au hasard des couleurs multiples habilement séparés par des [aplats] de bitume, et puis, on passe cinq ou six fois devant comme la foudre.” Raphael Shoomard, "Un peu de peinture," *Chat Noir*, no. 458 (October 25, 1890): 162.


126 Redon’s portraits of women and girls include: Juliette Dodu Madame Bonger, Marie Botkin, Jeanne Chaine, Ysault and Simone Fayet, Madame Arthur Fontane, Violette Heymann, Redon’s wife, and Madame Henry Normant. Those of men include Gustave Fayet, Bresdin, Emile Bernard, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Maurice Fabre, Gauguin, and Ricardo Viñes.


“Tout individu placé dans certaines conditions, et croyant agir librement, se comporte en réalité de la même manière que les autres individus.” Ibid., 82.

As the example with the squares shows, Binet does credit the habitual style of writing—a cultural element—to the choice of most participants to place the dot on the left half of the page.

Binet, La Suggestibilité, 256-257.

In French: "N'est-il pas?"

“Il dessinera avec précision un fil qu'il n'a pas vu,” Ibid., 283.

“Erreurs qui ne sont ni logiques, ni produites par la routine,” Ibid., 281.

In French: "N'est-il pas?" "Copier la nature n'est pas l'art.” Émile Bernard, "Ce que c'est que l'art mystique," Mercure de France XIII (1895): 33, 39.


“Tracer les contours de ses rêves, de ses hallucinations, de ses cauchemars,” Ibid., 229.

“Un fou, dans un morne paysage,” Ibid.

“La surnaturel ne m'inspire pas. Je ne fais que contempler le monde intérieure et la vie,” Reproduced in John Rewald, “Quelques notes et documents sur Odilon Redon,” in Gazette des Beaux Arts, 111.

“Une angoisse assaille déjà le peintre sans qu’il en soit conscient, effaçant l’apparence, trahissant la destinée irrévocable du fini qui les engendre et les réclame. L’ombre, l’ombre qui finalement fera sa proie de tout, règne là, pesante, lourde, affligeante, impérieusement” ; “tout ceci est faux.” Redon on Bernard, illustrated in John Rewald,

145 “Âme noir,” Ibid., 81-124.

146 “Mon âme n’est par noire car je [unclear] la vie qui aimait le soleil, les fleurs et toutes les splendeurs du monde extrême.” Reproduced in Ibid. The English translation of this article, published in 1986, curiously does not reproduce the entire document annotated by Redon, which can be found in its entirety reproduced as images of the handwritten text in the 1956 French original publication by Rewald.

147 “Huysmans ne me comprit qu’incomplètement.” Text in image reproduced in Ibid.

148 If his first letters with Mallarmé date 2 February 1885, his friendship with Mallarmé goes quickly: they collaborate on illustrating Mallarmé’s writing. By 1889 Redon is sending Mallarmé copies of his prints, entire volumes of the album *To Gustave Flaubert*, and by 1890 Mallarmé addresses him as “mon angélique Redon.” Mallarmé lives at 89 rue de Rome, not too far from Redon’s house near the Parc Monceau, in a calm, bourgeois area close to but quite different in tone from Montmartre. Redon spends his summers in Samois, not far from Valcins, where Mallarmé spends his summers. See Ari Redon and Roseline Bacou, *Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren à Odilon Redon*, (Paris: José Corti, 1960), 132-146.


151 Ibid., Chapter 10, especially 278-85.


CHAPTER FOUR

From “Mental Ebulience” to “Plastic Equivalents”: The Paradox of Redon’s Still Lifes

Of an apple by some commonplace painter one says: I should like to eat it. Of an apple by Cézanne one says: How beautiful! One would not peel it; one would copy it.¹

— Maurice Denis, “Cézanne”

Flowers at the confluence of two river banks, that of representation, and that of memory.²

— Odilon Redon, À soi-même

Flowers after Cézanne

According to Arî Redon, his father’s still life works—the heart of Redon’s color practice, with dozens upon dozens of iterations—began with an encounter with a Cézanne still life painting. In 1896, Redon kept a Cézanne belonging to the Dutch collector Andries Bonger, Vase of Flowers (Vase de fleurs), 1880-81 (fig. 4.1), in Paris while Bonger was travelling. Redon copied the Cézanne in his Bouquet of Flowers after Cézanne (Vase de fleurs, d’après Cézanne) (fig. 4.2), creating a replica faithful to the size, materials, and composition of the original. John Rewald recounts the story of the painting:

The artist's son stated in a letter to the author under what circumstances this copy was made: one day M Bonger [brother-in-law of Theo van Gogh and great admirer of Redon] was passing through Paris. He had bought a canvas by Cézanne, and since he had to go to London before returning to Amsterdam he left the canvas at our house. In his absence, my father amused himself by copying it,
and when Bonger returned to Paris, probably sooner than he had thought, he
found the copy on the easel. Never thinking that it could be any canvas but his
own, he exclaimed, ‘you are really too kind, Monsieur Redon, to have cleaned
this painting that was very dirty; one now finds some colors which were
completely dulled.’ My father laughed heartily and showed Bonger the original,
which was nearby.\textsuperscript{3}

In the story, Redon has improved upon the Cézanne: his copy “cleaned” the
surface and brightened “dulled” colors. Redon supposedly even succeeded in deceiving
the collector Bonger, a \textit{trompe l’oeil} tale of color and connoisseurship. It is actually fairly
unlikely that Bonger actually mistook Redon's copy for the original Cézanne when he
returned from his travels, however. That the story was retold by Redon’s son, who was
six or seven years old at the time, suggests that it originates with Redon himself and
reveals more about Redon's desires for his own work in relation to Cézanne than anything
about Bonger's inability to tell one painting from another. Our understanding of such a
desire can be seen in the context of the tradition of academic copies as claiming lineage
or presenting a legacy between one artist and another. Yet it also suggests that Redon
wished his relatively new color painting practice to be seen as an improvement on the use
of color by the increasingly influential still life painter, Cézanne. What was the basis for
Redon’s claims for “improvement”—and the nature of his rivalry with Cézanne? What
might these tell us about Redon as a colorist?

The Cézanne painting shows a clay pot full of pink peonies arranged with purple,
hyacinth-like, and orange, freesia-like blossoms at the top of the bouquet, and lush,
glossy, dark green leaves—peony leaves—at the bottom. Color and form here are
balanced so that colored strokes of paint define masses. There is a single white rose-like bud at the top center of the arrangement, and two more buds seem to emerge from the neck of the clay pot itself. The vase is set against a backdrop of wallpaper bearing a floral motif reminiscent of a fleur-de-lys, but composed of four petals of even size—this wallpaper often served as the background to paintings dating from Cézanne's time living on the rue de l’Ouest in Paris. This pattern explicitly echoes the floral profusion of the painted bouquet, creating a visual echo between the wallpaper pattern and the flowers.

The volumes of both flat wallpaper flower and “real” flower are rendered on flat canvas such that the wallpaper becomes a visual metaphor for the illusionistic surface on which it is presented. Spatial relationships are suggested with subtle swells of contrasting-colored paint patches: the vase of flowers rests on a brown and green ledge; the purplish wallpaper is shaded with hatched green strokes of paint, the vase appears a solid clay thing through strokes of brown and terra-cotta, the clenched pink flowers’ swell is defined by purplish and bluish petals. From the vase’s art nouveau double-bud motif to the relationship of wallpaper to flower, the painting plays with the decorative as the backdrop to the real, and color as the illusionistic basis to rendering volumes.

Redon's painting is a true replica of the still life in terms of scale and execution. On his canvas, he even tries to copy the direction of many of Cézanne's slashing, diagonal strokes, ironically giving his version of the flowers a dutiful rather than spontaneous feel. He modulates pink tones with whites or with lilac strokes. The colors are mixed on the palette (rather than remaining discrete strokes on the canvas) to a greater degree in Redon, however, making Redon’s painting much more pink than Cézanne’s. Because of this it seems to appear flatter. His greens lack the touches of new-
grass green and milky-white that form glossy highlights and define volume in the peony leaves; his peonies are masses of crimson and white without the froth of form’s depth conjured in Cézanne’s blues and purples. To the modern eye, at least, Redon’s is not a particularly cleaner-looking painting, although it is a more densely pinkish-red one. Instead, Cézanne’s colors, in comparison to Redon’s, seem bluer-toned and less homogenous, alternating greens with reds, and blues with pinks, while Redon’s palette keys warm and stays there. Redon’s wallpaper is an even, if brushy, beige-olive notably lacking the green/pink transitions of Cézanne: the trim of the wallpaper matches the red of the peonies, and even Redon’s olive-tinged leaves appear to have been cut with crimson. It is as if in Redon we were seeing Cézanne’s painting through rose-tinted glasses. Perhaps Redon is fighting the notion that proximate complimentary colors produce more vivid paintings through optical mixture, and choosing to proffer a palette based on smoother chromatic transitions.

More to the point than comparing the two paintings and their palettes today, since the two canvases and their pigment tones may have aged somewhat differently (particularly when it comes to the notoriously fragile red-hued pigments), is to consider what Redon might have hoped to achieve by copying a Cézanne still life in 1896. At the time, Cézanne was just beginning to rise to prominence. Even if we can’t be sure of the direction Redon’s colors would take based on this painting, we can see in this painting, and particularly in the story Redon told about it, an attempt to take on an emerging master in that painter’s chosen genre. Redon would make an astonishing quantity of still life paintings and pastels starting about four years after this copy—over a hundred, a
huge number in the context of the rest of his body of work. He was, as we can see from this early instance, aware of the example of Cézanne from the start.

To claim to “clean” the “dull” colors suggests an intention to both purify and enliven Cézanne’s palette. Where might this desire come from, and how does it play out in Redon’s work? Arî Redon’s story stages a confrontation between the two fin-de-siècle painters and implies that while perhaps Cézanne was the acknowledged master of form, Redon was the better and more innovative colorist—a story which replicates the famous rivalry between the sculptural mastery of Ingres and the colorist Delacroix. Thus, the story of the paintings is not just the story of a copy, but also a continued statement of Redon’s artistic affiliation with Delacroix and his identification as a colorist.

Yet to copy a still life painting also presents a kind of paradox. Still life is perhaps above all else the genre of close and diligent observation of the subject. One chooses a vase of flowers, or a pile of fruit, in part because they do not move and are not subject to changes in weather—they are objects available for intense and extended visual scrutiny (though they do decompose, in the order of things). To copy a still life painting is, in itself, essentially a perverse act. For Redon, the copy of the still life as a gesture is, I would wager, his real addition to Cézanne’s painting: his act opens up the possibility of still lifes rooted in premises other than visual observation—and of colors chosen on bases other than observation of the external world. Even if flowers, more than other still life objects such as fruits, lend themselves to certain chromatic liberties—a tulip might naturally be white-gold, purple-black, or flame-red—Redon’s still lifes would test the notion that he was looking at flowers at all, or challenge the viewer to wonder what was being observed, and what relationship lay between painting and representation.
Berger’s Taxonomy

Still life didn’t define Redon’s first few years as an artist using color. His first tentative steps into inhabiting the public persona of a colorist were made in the mid-1890s (in 1895, Redon wrote to Bernard, “I am now letting go of black increasingly—how different color is; I am making pastels right now.”)\(^6\) The Nabis painters organized an exhibition of Redon’s color work at Durand-Ruel Gallery in 1899. The small exhibition, entitled “Hommage à Odilon Redon,” put on view seven pastels, three drawings and a painting; of these only one was a still life, while other color work, like the pastel *Sita* (1893), featured figures in profile floating on fields of blue, in the manner of *The Golden Cell*. The 1899 show situated Redon between two surveys of important modern styles, a neo-Impressionist and a Nabis room; the show included work by Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Denis, Louis Valtat, Georges-Daniel de Monfried, Georges d’Espagnat, Paul Séruisier, Paul Signac, Maximilien Luce, and Émile Bernard, and framed Redon as the figure leading a group of young innovative colorists.\(^7\) Redon began making still life pastels in earnest after this show, around 1900, as he became exclusively interested in working in color. Redon launched into a career as a painter and pastel artist, exhibiting his color works at some of the most influential galleries of the Parisian fin-de-siècle.\(^8\) By 1902, Redon wrote to Maurice Fabre that he would no longer work in black and white at all. He appeared prolific in the genre of still life in subsequent exhibitions: in a 1906 show at Durand-Ruel, he showed twenty-nine floral still lifes, to critical acclaim.\(^9\) In a 1907 sale of his work, twenty of the thirty-three pieces sold were still life pastels and paintings.\(^10\)
Because they are not typically dated, assigning dates to Redon’s 1900-1910 still life paintings and pastels has long posed problems. Klaus Berger proposes that the more realistically rendered color works from 1900-1901, and chromatically innovative scenes like his *Bouquet sur fond noir* (*Black Bouquet*), 1905-09 and the undated *Composition: Flowers*, represent divergent aims within Redon’s artistic project, the former representing bids for commercial success that transform, over time, into a radical style which anticipates the painterly abstraction of American postwar artists.

I am instead interested in what examining Redon’s fantastically colored still life paintings beside Cézanne’s work in the same genre lets us see about the relationships between painting color from observation and from fantasy, memory, or the imagination. By seeing Redon’s relationship to color through the lens of what Berger characterizes as a teleological move from representation based on observation to abstraction, we miss the important role that imagined color plays in his still life practice from the very start. This is important because the relationship between color and its seeming referent has been unhinged in Redon’s work as early as 1894—and this earliest work would not only inspire the famous color experiments of the Fauve painters, but also signal the continuity of certain psychophysical notions of sensation and causation between the 1890s and Redon’s early twentieth-century color practice. The work’s colors are furthermore seen in criticism of the time as evoking specific referents in viewers, an often-ignored response that complicates our notion of the origins of twentieth-century chromatic abstraction.

We know Redon painted some of his still lifes from observation. Photographs of his studio at this time often feature vases full of flowers from Camille Redon’s gardens (fig. 4.3). She even bragged of her role in his painting process: “If he paints a bouquet, it
is always I who must arrange the flowers for him; no one else can do it.”¹¹ Some of Redon’s still lifes, like the pastel *Flowers in a Pot (Bouquet dans un petit vase de grès)*, 1900 (fig. 4.4), exhibit a seemingly straightforward relationship between color, form, and vision: *Flowers in a Pot* depicts the color of the geraniums in a manner that represents the local color of their surfaces. The red and white, taxonomically identifiable blossoms sit in a small clay jug against a bare paper ground. The progression of pastel on the vessel’s convex face is highlighted according to observation; the color of the flowers is entirely believable, their modeling minimal and largely conventional. The works in their style and choice of geraniums and clay pots evoke some of Redon’s earliest color paintings, his still lifes of 1867—relatively straightforward studies of blooms in raking light (fig. 4.5). When it was shown at the Salon d’Automne in 1904, a critic in *Petit Parisien*, Valensol, lauded Redon’s realistic *Flowers in a Pot* as “obviously a tiny thing, but truly vast through the perfection brought to its execution!”¹²

The painting *Pepper and Lemon on a White Tablecloth (Poivre et citron sur une nappe blanche)*, 1901 (fig. 4.6), also appears to be an exercise in close observation. There is a muscular realism to the way light gleams off the skin of the green vegetable’s surface and casts purple shadows from the yellow lemon against the white cotton napkin lined with three red stripes. *Peach (Pêche)* (fig. 4.7), a gift to Mme. Bonger of the same year, depicts a single glowing orb of fruit. Its shadow slides from purple to blue to green with almost ostentatious fidelity to the observed complementary tones of the cast shadow.

Redon shades with color in the studies *Bouquet dans un petit vase de grès (Flowers in a Pot)*, 1900, and especially in *Pêche (Peach)*, 1901, in which volume is expressed through hue. Objects in these paintings appear as though based on close observation, even if the
intensity of the palette that gives them form is high-keyed—particularly in *Peach*, with its magenta-toned shadow extending to the left of the orange-skinned fruit.

Yet the still life works Redon is best known for are explorations of flowers in which color is not tied so closely to the role of describing form, and the subject most likely does not exist in physical reality. In the work *Vase étrusque (Etruscan Vase)* (fig. 4.8), dated 1900-1910, the large frosty periwinkle blue and terra-cotta orange flowers emerging from the vase are floral fictions. Flatly front-facing, they do not seem to correspond to observation. The dusty color, rather than describing any local form, instead is evocative—perhaps of the quality of *Etruscan-ness*, which describes the vase but also seems to emanate around it to permeate every other aspect of the picture. Redon’s use of tempera paint adds a chalky feel to the painting, which aids in its evocation of painted clay, or perhaps Italian primitivism. Milky, hazy layers of color vignette the vase and flowers with points of paint, which stir the air yet seem tied to no form. While black lines lie below some of the central forms, defining shapes, the painting’s most important meanings are without the armature of line, conveyed instead through color that describes improbable orange and blue blossoms.

In the pastel *Vase vert sur fond bleu (Green Vase on a Blue Ground)*, c. 1909 (fig. 4.9), an arrangement of blue-on-blue flowers explodes from a vase. The blue nasturtium leaves on the blue ground mix with the blue hydrangeas to create an optically blue-on-blue painting—a monochrome effect suggestive of the independence of color and form. The plants fail to provide any hint of a relationship to local color. The flowers, leaves, and ground are blue. Red and white flowers unbounded by line, and pure black flowers—both of which seem imaginary—accompany the blue leaves and blossoms. Elements
describing volumes are rendered in black and white. The pedestal on which the flower vase rests is monochrome, in contrast to the flat and colorfully experimental vase and flowers.

While the rough dating of Redon’s still lifes by Klaus Berger places the more “abstract” paintings and pastels later, Redon’s Livre du raison, his account book from painting sales which appeared after Berger’s account was published, demonstrates that the more lucidly observational still life paintings were being made and sold simultaneous to the more explicitly fantastical work, complicating Berger’s characterization of his style as evolving steadily from observed to fantastical. One entry from 1899 records the sale of A Rose in a Brown Vase (Une Rose dans un vase brun) and Flowers in a Vase (Fleurs dans un vase), to “Mr. le Prince Bibesco,” while Orpheus, Abbey Reading the Ramayana (Abbé lisant le Ramayana), and Creole Profile before Flowers (Profil créole devant des fleurs), are all sold the same year. In the same “Livre,” he describes the works in his exhibition at Durand-Ruel: “Radiant Flower (pastel): Mysterious radiant red flower, [which] a woman’s blue profile examines… Death of Buddha (pastel): Under a tree where lunar flowers fall, the Buddha has fallen, these flowers come to him like a confetti of shining flowers.”\textsuperscript{13} Some paintings are entitiled Dream Flowers (Fleurs du Rêve), indicating that they may have been painted from the imagination, while others of the same year are Flowers in a Cup (Fleurs dans une coupe). The painting Flowers, Poppies and Roses (Fleurs, coquelicots et roses) is mentioned on the same page as an untitled pastel, “A woman’s head, red, surrounded by a blossoming of flowers.”\textsuperscript{14} In the same notes, Redon describes flowers as real, imaginary, or a mixture of both. In January 1904 (indicating that the sold work was made some time before), he describes one flower as
“mi- réel, mi- imaginaire,” and Flowers in a Blue Vase (Fleurs dans un vase bleu) as
“fleurs presqu’imaginaires.” Others from later that same year are, however, just Flowers,
Black Vase, Pastel (Fleurs, vase noir, pastel).

Such dating goes against the longstanding sense of teleological progression from
“realistic” to “abstract” works established by Klaus Berger in his examination of Redon’s
color paintings and pastels. Berger noted three distinct styles in Redon’s flower paintings.
He calls the first the “spatial” (up to 1904), the second the “decorative” (1904-1910), and
the third a mixture of the two (1910-1916):

The first up to 1904 takes tangible forms and local color as its starting-point,
summing up as it were the flowers and their species, the leaves, the outline of the
case, a stand or table, and indicating space by cast shadows that create depth; this
stage could be described as objective, if imagination had not cast over the
composition a shower of improbable turquoise blue, orange, pink, violet, bottle-
green.

The second stage up to 1909/10 no longer starts from the object but from
the decorative organization of the surface. Carrying on the style of the late
lithographs and charcoal drawings…space has been reduced to a flat surface. Top
and bottom also lose their importance, even when looked at from the side or stood
on its head, the work retains its unity, which relies upon the interplay of textures,
graphics, arabesques. Choice flowers of fantasy that no gardener ever saw,
abstract forms, underwater landscapes are combined with the ordinary flora into a
fabric in which sharply outlined cloisonné shapes, structured stalks and the like
determine the arrangement. The vases seem to be floating, the central axis is
frequently abandoned, the shadows disappear, the juxtaposition of moist, opalescent patches of color, all this suggests a fresh wave of Eastern Asian influence. Japanese colored woodcuts helped Redon to gain his freedom. The great bunches of wild flowers of these years display simultaneously a degree of symphonic richness and harmonic purity never seen before in his work.¹⁶

Berger sees the first phase of Redon’s still life work as relatively traditional, objective painting colored with a bit of arbitrary color, and the second as a flattened, decorative version of the first. Rather dialectically the third is a fusion of the first two: a return to realism combined with compositional asymmetry:

The last phase constitutes a kind of synthesis between the first and second, the spatial and the decorative. He moved into a summer residence in the Paris suburb of Bièvres. Every morning he found the fragrant plants of the Ile de France on his table, this time they were cultivated garden flowers. A new realism may be perceived in his approach to his subject matter, but the painterly, shimmering vagueness and even the bold “Japanese” asymmetry vanish from his treatment.

…. These works are comparatively more designed (abstract) and more object-related (concrete) than earlier ones. Here the artistic transformation no longer leads away from the object, but straight to it; these are no longer ‘ordinary’ objects, however, but are at the same time magically enchanted. With the imagination of the artist, we see these flowers as if we had never perceived them before, they are here revealed to us in their reality and introduced to us in their essence as colors, as forms, as order, as organisms.¹⁷
Thus, in Berger’s taxonomy, the works that are most “realistic” are the pre-1904 “spatial” paintings. While Berger provides a complete taxonomy of the different pots that appear in Redon’s still life painting, he refrains from giving an analysis of the different styles. Why is one phase “spatial” and the next “decorative”? Can his stylistic transitions really be explained by a move from Paris to Bièvres, or from growing his own flowers at home? Why did “Japanese asymmetry” follow this move? What is the role of “abstraction” here? Are these paintings and their stylistic concerns and development really as removed from conversation with other artists as their academic treatment implies? And what did this return to painting nature mean for Redon’s art of closed eyes? Could Redon’s pre-1904 still lifes be the exception to his role as the painter of the unconscious?  

Mental Ebullience

It is significant that most of Redon’s more “realistic” still lifes look like studies. A telling, if cryptic, description of Redon’s painting process as recounted by Redon to Charles Terrasse in 1914 emphasizes the role of the unconscious mind in relation to the process of drawing from nature:

And here is something else, something which pleases me well enough. I had started with the flowers. They emerged from a broken vase, and raised bright flowers: see how they meld at the peak, in a fog, and a white smoke, and a standing woman emerges, tall and very straight, looks at them. It’s an incantation. But the woman is poorly made and I don’t know how to recuperate her. The torso is too long, the movement of the arms scarcely proportional. And I have no model.
And I paint after my idea, in truth, confused. Perhaps in several months, maybe longer, the painting will resemble something, but a picture such as this one is never finished.¹⁹

This strange drawing process, which begins with the rendering of flowers, results in the torso of an imaginary woman. “I have no model,” Redon recounts, indicating that she was not drawn from observation. Where does she come from? The accidents involved in making art create a “white smoke” on the page from which a human figure emerges. The method is described as an “incantation,” as if it were a magic spell or ritual. For Redon, still life is the starting-point for this kind of reverie—one might start with copying flowers, and end up painting an imaginary figure. The work upends the typical relationship of artist to observed subject.

How does Redon envision the relationship between representation and the unconscious as staged in still life painting? While undoubtedly borrowing much from the interest in the exotic which he shared with Gauguin, rather than pitting representations of nature against the remembered or imagined scene, as Gauguin did, Redon advertised a process of “mental ebullience,” casting the close observation of nature as something that, like adding sugar to dormant yeast, activates the unconscious and allows it to spring to life. He wrote in his Confessions of an Artist on his technique:

My most fertile system, the one most necessary for my expansion has been, I have said it often, to directly copy the real while attentively reproducing objects from external nature, what it contains of the most minute, the most particular and accidental. After the endeavor of minutely copying a pebble, a blade of grass, a hand, a profile or an entirely different thing from living or organic life, I feel a
It is a compositional process in which the unconscious mind seems to control the artist’s body, and which assumes the possibility of forms without external referent emerging from the unconscious mind. Redon describes his process in two stages: first copy nature (often in the form of a still life); then, work freely from the imagination. Redon’s method used the study of the natural world as a path to the more fantastical works which draw upon the unconscious. In describing the effect of the “ebullience forming,” it is almost as though the artist were entering a passive state of hypnosis. *Bouquet sur fond noir (Black Bouquet)*, 1905-09 (fig. 4.10), renders a fantastical set of flowers seemingly emerging from no referent. They glow yellow and white, orange and green, on a black ground. The dynamism of the application of paint suggests the release of the “ebullience” Redon speaks of, the pressure formed in the unconscious mind by, as he pictures it, the growth of imaginative power precipitated by the close observation of nature. Such works have a seemingly explosive and dynamic application of material, and focus on forms rendered in color and rarely traced with line. In fact, their forms seem deliberately vague and indistinct, reminiscent of his earliest monochrome entries into the 1886 exhibition for their ambiguity and visual indeterminacy.

In these works, Redon’s use of color in still life goes well beyond the mere “secondary quality of an object” defined by Locke to become a primary evocative principal feature. The blobs of color are emphatically material, seemingly exploding
through the pent-up force of imaginative ferment. In 1908, Redon in a letter described the choice of colors in his painting to Andries Bonger using phrases that evoke the functions of latent memory, writing: “There are some cold grays and tinges of blue that I have never used and that I undoubtedly brought back from my travels in Switzerland, stored in my unconscious. Nothing comes from nothing.”

Where might Redon’s language for the mysterious drawings that emerge from the mind after closely observing nature, and the unconscious source of colors, originate? From Charcot’s research at the Salpêtrière (fig. 4.11) to the experiments conducted by Charles Henry at the Sorbonne, giving attention to the role of the unconscious mind in responding to and translating external stimuli was a widely conducted investigation during the 1890s. In the same journals where Redon’s lithographic work had appeared, such as *La Revue blanche*, articles were published about the new medical science that concerned itself with mental capacities like hypnosis, automatism, and mesmerism. Clinical demonstrations focused on the mysterious, newly discovered mental unconscious. The use of hypnotism had long suggested that the body’s response to external stimuli could be controlled by controlling the mind, and the history of hypnotism from Mesmer to Salpêtrière often focused on the disjuncture between sensation and reaction. Charcot’s study of hysteria focused on involuntary behavior, including sudden muscular contortions or fits of narcolepsy. “Petit hypnotism,” wrote Dr. Foveau de Courmelles, “vice-president of the International Magnetic Congress of 1889” and author of *Hypnotism* (1890) is characterized by heavy eyelids, but in “grand hypnotism” the eyelids are closed, the subject is insensitive to the world: “it’s the period where one can prick the subject, torture him, cross his arms in front of his body, and submit him to all possible operations.”
Such studies complicated a positivist notion of how experience can be recorded, introducing the possibilities of delay or the lack of a response to sensation, and the optical distortion of experience through memory. Memory of the hypnotic state by the subject is often veiled, nebulous “with imprecise contours,” as if in hypnotism, line has disappeared. In the work of Charles Henry, so great was the belief in the possibility of visual experience without an external referent that the Laboratory of the Physiology of Sensations designed experiments by which Henry tested the visual acuity of subjects experiencing mental vision (fig. 4.12). One popular magazine wrote, “the scene of very interesting experiments in the measurement of bodily sensations,” in which Henry tested “the acuteness of mental vision…in other words, [that] he has proved that the pupil can dilate under the influence of the brain.” In this experiment (fig. 4.13), the subject moves a “simple diagram” on a card very close to the eye. Henry then measured the diameter of the pupil. Then the card slid far away so as to be indistinguishable, and the pupil was measured again. The experiment was repeated with the eyes closed. This showed the pupil adjusting to the idea of distance rather than to the perceived fact of distance. Such experiments show Henry’s fascination with quantifying optical reactions without perceived referents, and his firm faith in the possibility of actual physiological response to mental stimuli. Such experiments had manifest consequences for still life, a genre with the representation of the experience of close observation as its premise—consequences Redon exploited in his ample body of still life paintings.

The pastel and oil paint group Vase with Japanese Warrior (Le Vase au guerrier Japonais) (figs. 4.14 – 4.16) makes explicit the experimental processes that Redon brought to the still life. In the first, c. 1905, one sprig of leaves is bright turquoise,
another dusty ultramarine blue, another entirely white, while flowers are blue limned with pink and turquoise lined with powder-blue. While the colors on the paper are eccentric, the forms they sketch out seem possible renderings of observed flowers. In the second iteration, the vase’s male figure, with its blue, yellow, and orange colors on the warrior’s kimono, is echoed in the fantastical flowers above (represented as blue squiggles, orange lines, pink stains, and yellow wedges, among other forms). The colorful and exuberant shapes seem entirely divorced from the act of observation. The relatively large scale of the work allows for a wide assortment of imaginative marks being used.

*Vase with Japanese Warrior,* like many of Redon’s pastels, is also repeated around 1906 in a copy: Redon painted it after he drew it as a pastel. Just as he repeated many of his charcoal drawings as lithographs, Redon loosely recreated a number of his pastel still lifes as oil paintings—often varying the colors and creating increasingly fantastical flowers in the resulting canvases. While research curator Kevin Sharp hypothesizes that the purpose of these copies, including *Vase with Japanese Warrior,* was to “relieve the boredom of reinventing the same basic composition,” the technique is suggestive of a continuing attempt by the artist to distance himself from a direct relationship to the referent of the work of art, and to explore more deeply the effects of the echo chamber of representation set up by his particular take on the still life as a genre. While the *Prince of Dreams* catalog and the Wildenstein catalog only make this work available in black-and-white reproduction, making it difficult to speculate on the shifts in color between the still life pastel and its copy, an examination of the oil painting reveals significant chromatic experimentation going on—sprays of flowers and their leaves have turned entirely green, white, or pink. The colors associated with the warrior’s sleeves
have changed, as has the color of the background. In fact, although these paintings after
the pastels are often referred to as copies, they seem like entirely new works in many
ways, the colors and the shape of the flowers bearing little resemblance to the “original”
works.

Ultimately, Redon’s still life painting is not interested in rendering an object close
at hand, but rather in extrapolating and experimenting based on an ever-more-distant
original encounter with a referent. These works aim to amplify qualities related to the
experience of an object. They ask: What is evoked by a pastel of flowers, when it is
repeated, repainted later? What is Cézanne’s encounter with a vase of flowers when
painted by Redon? Colors emerge from possibilities discovered in the moment of
composition, and distance from the object ostensibly depicted adds another element of
distortion to color choices in compositions.

Homage to Cézanne

Redon’s 1896 encounter with Cézanne can be updated in relation to two works by
Maurice Denis. Beginning in 1890, when he was just 20, with the publication of his essay
“Définition du Neo-Traditionalisme,” Denis had became a spokesperson for the new
generation of innovative painters. Denis’s Homage to Cézanne, 1900-01 (fig. 4.17), a
massive, manifesto-like painting, can be seen dramatizing Redon’s relationship with a
Cézanne still life painting. Later, in 1907, Denis would write an essay explicitly
contrasting the stance Cézanne and Redon took in relation to still life.

In Homage to Cézanne, figures facing Redon gather around Cézanne’s 1879-80
Still Life with Fruit Dish (Nature mort au compotier). Surrounding Redon are nine
figures, each identifiable: Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Ambrose Vollard, Denis, Sérusier, Paul Ranson, André Mellerio, Bonnard, and Denis’ wife Marthe. Sérusier faces Redon across the Cézanne painting, stretching his arms out as if to clasp Redon’s hand. Redon is wiping his eyeglasses, perhaps a sly signal of the painter’s connection to “sightless,” non-optical painting practices. A ring of paintings surrounds this group, with works recognizable on the walls by Gauguin, Renoir, and other artists. For this reason, when the work was exhibited in the Salon of 1901, the critic Gustave Geffroy compared Homage to Cézanne to Courbet’s Studio, indicating its precedent as a fantastical social portrait demonstrating a painter’s affiliation with other painters and writers.25

In short, Homage presents a paradox. While the group gathers around Redon, the painting they pay tribute to is a Cézanne. John Rewald has pointed out that even in the work, such was “the reverential attitude of the others” in the scene, that the Homage “seems directed [towards Redon],” who stands at the head of the group, “as much as toward the painting.” Those who did not know Cézanne could easily, concludes Rewald, have thought that it was Redon being fêté by his young admirers.26

So how did we get from the 1899 exhibition “Homage à Redon” at Durand-Ruel to the 1900 painting Homage à Cézanne? And how would this shift inform Redon’s still life work? While the Homage is typically described as the now elderly Redon standing at the head of a group of adoring young painters in Ambroise Vollard’s gallery on the rue Lafitte, the title and the still life painting at its center seem in contrast with this notion. Art historian Katherine Kuenzli’s recent assessment of Denis’ preparatory sketches suggests that the preparatory drawings for the painting can be seen as a real-time confrontation between the reputations of Redon and Cézanne. Kuenzli shows that the
very early sketches by Denis show the men turned toward Redon as if for his approval. In these initial sketches, the Cézanne still life has not yet been introduced to the composition (fig. 4.18), demonstrating, she claims, that Denis had originally conceived of the Homage as a painting featuring Redon. Yet in the final image, the emphasis has dramatically shifted. Kuenzli writes, of the muddled composition that betrays the origins of the painting, “[S]urprisingly, the late addition of Cézanne’s painting does not change the original disposition of Denis’s composition, which had granted Redon such unrivaled importance. Denis’s decision to keep the original arrangement seems counterintuitive given that Redon harbored serious reservations about Cézanne and his influence.”27

Letters by Redon have long indicated that he had understood the painting as it was being painted as a homage to himself, as much as, if not more than, to Cézanne, and that he was distraught by the change that shifted the focus of the painting to another artist. He wrote in 1910 to Elie Faure (who, based on the title, had written an article interpreting the painting, including Redon’s presence, as a tribute to Cézanne):

> Have you seen this work? *I do not appear there as a disciple; believe me, that was not what the author [sic] of this painting intended.* The great dramatist in Delacroix strongly impressed my adolescence and my youth; if something of this passionate master remained in my eyes or mind, I would not try to deny it, but would be proud of it. On the contrary, the aridity of Cézanne’s imagination, the impassive tranquility of his work, from which the soul is absent, have always left me cold.28

The letter testifies to Redon’s desire not to be seen as a follower of Cézanne in his painting practice, but rather as his rival. The grounds of Redon’s critique of Cézanne—
his dry imagination and the absence of “soul”—were familiar Baudelaireian terms linked for Redon to Delacroix’s rejection of local color. Redon implicitly compared Delacroix (favorably), to Cézanne (unfavorably). Redon concludes, “You cite me, in a list of certain artists much younger than I, as having recognized the influence of Cézanne and even of having ‘submitted’ to it. Monsieur, I protest… Your assertion is without proof.”

“Plastic Equivalents” and the Role of the Spectator

In a 1907 article in L’Occident, a year after Cézanne’s death, Maurice Denis articulates what he saw as the essential differences between Cézanne and Redon in terms of their work in color and still life. To Denis, Cézanne and Redon work in the same mode—they both copy nature, yet rather than reproduce the object under scrutiny, they represent it. In a fairly typical set of observations about Symbolist painting, he writes: “Redon’s subject is more subjective, while that of Cézanne is more objective, but both express with the means they have the goal of creating a concrete object at once aesthetic and representative of a sensibility.” He goes on:

The preceding remarks allow us to explain how Cézanne is related to Symbolism…. [Symbolism] implies the belief in a correspondence between external forms and subjective states. Instead of evoking our moods by means of the subject represented, it is the work of art itself that must transmit the initial sensation and perpetuate its emotions. Every work of art is a transposition, an emotional equivalent, a caricature of a received sensation, or, more generally, of a psychological fact.
To Denis, Cézanne’s art distorts sensation received by the artist and evokes (“perpetuate[s]”) emotion in the viewer. It is an “emotional equivalent” (“équivalent passionné”), an intermediary thing. It is a stand-in between inside and outside, object and experience. The work of art is completed in the experience of the viewer, where it finds a site to generate further feeling.

Denis goes on to describe the importance of color. It is within this discussion of what Denis calls “plastic equivalents”—those physical characteristics of an artwork which elicit emotion in a viewer—that he introduces Redon:

‘Nature,’ said Cézanne, ‘I wished to copy it, I could not. But I was satisfied when I had discovered that the sun, for example, could not by reproduced, but that it must be represented by something else… by color.’ Here is the definition of Symbolism such as we understood it about 1890[….] Odilon Redon also sought outside the reproduction of nature and sensation, for the plastic equivalents of his emotions and his dreams.”

Denis invokes color as the element of a painting that solves the problem of how to depict the unrepresentable. Not only the sun, but also any “psychological fact”—emotions, or dreams—might be stored in the work of art in color itself. Such ideas echo Delacroix’s “moral color,” that affective use of color with the aim to evoke certain emotional reactions in the viewer. Denis sees Redon as a peer of Cézanne and another figure exploring this relationship between, as he puts it, “plastic equivalents”—“équivalents plastiques”—which explore the relationship “of nature and sensation”—“de la nature copiée et de la sensation.” Color, to Denis, is a material archive for emotional experience. Color might store emotion, and it might evoke it in a viewer.
In the article of 1907, Denis seems to place equal stress on Cézanne and Redon as pioneers of Symbolist painting:

If I have insisted on speaking of Odilon Redon here it is not merely to render the homage due to this artist and to acquit the gratitude of a generation to him, but to draw from the comparison of these two masters a still further precision in the definition of Cézanne. Yes, Redon is at the origin of Symbolism so far as the plastic expression of the ideal is concerned; and on the other hand the example of Cézanne teaches us to transpose the data of sensation into the elements of a work of art. Redon’s subject is rather subjective, Cézanne’s rather objective, but both express themselves by means of a method which has the goal of creating a concrete object, at once beautiful and representative of a response to sensation.”

While young painters like Maurice Denis might have seen Cézanne and Redon as equally possible figures for homage, history would not be so kind to Redon. The year 1900 represents a turning point in Redon’s art and in his self-presentation, during which he began to see his own legacy as a colorist put in direct opposition to the reputation of Cézanne, through paintings like Denis’ and through essays like Signac’s “From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism.” In 1912 Denis writes of the relationship of the young artists to Redon and Cézanne as one of subsequent, progressive influences, in which Cézanne eclipses Redon: “Before the influence of Cézanne, it was the thought of Redon—via Gauguin and Bernard—who…[was] at the origin of all the aesthetic innovations or renovations, of all the revolutions of taste that we have since witnessed.”

The statement makes clear that one artist has overshadowed the other. Yet it also is
superlative in its praise for Redon, that artist “at the origin of all the aesthetic innovations or renovations, of all the revolutions of taste that we have since witnessed.”

Still life—the heart of Denis’ painting Homage to Cézanne—is central to the quest to respond to sensation and render sensation physical. As Denis’ article intimates, Redon’s colorful still lifes could be described as creating what Redon termed ebullience in the spectator’s mind, by embodying what Denis called an “emotional equivalent” to sensation. Redon’s glowing bouquets were seen by viewers in galleries or private homes; the artist describes how, in those relatively intimate settings, the delicate ambiguities and the “traces of aspects (images within images), forms that are about to come into being or will take their being from the onlooker’s state of mind.”35 The spectator unveils or unpacks the “images within images,” mirroring the artist’s process of creative observation.

Critics responded positively to Redon’s still life paintings and pastels with prose describing the experience of seeing fantastical subjects and evoked forms in the paintings and pastels. The more wild the hues employed, the more varied the metaphors harnessed to describe the colors. In the belabored analogies made between color descriptions and nouns describing colorful objects in the discussion of the work, it is as if Redon’s critics were searching to preserve the presence of a subject in the face of paintings which threatened to dissolve form into pure color, and which used aniline pigments whose chemical composition divorced age-old relationships between colors and referents. Louis Vauxcelles wrote of the October Salon d’Automne of 1905:

Odilon Redon, formerly hermetic ideologue, possessed of a soul mellow and singing. His bouquets of wildflowers, daisies, roses, hollyhocks, dahlias, clusters
of soft wisteria and laburnum, arrange themselves in a delicious and fragrant clutter. Mr. Redon, ex-demoniac, is transformed into a bucolic poet. From the same, a boat which sails in a setting of purple and gold, very second act of Tristan, and an adolescent made ecstatic by the reflections of the stony coral and of the blue enamel breast of the peacock. And his screen, where, on a field of indefinable pink-orange, amethyst and ruby dust flutters, pollen of unimaginable flowers! And, if you object that all this is a fairy tale, not a drawing, consider the neighboring red chalk drawing, the sweet and expressive profile of one of the most refined amateurs in Paris, M. Olivier Sainsère."

Color in the review is created by precious stones, by the pollen of flowers, or peacocks themselves; the seemingly arbitrary color of objects is actually materially linked to another object, therefore not representing but embodying a certain meaning in its tone. It does not exist in a one-to-one representative relationship with a local tone through optical color, but rather has a homeopathic relationship with the power to evoke a world of nouns, so that reds seem drawn from “ruby dust,” “stony coral,” or shimmering blue plucked from a peacock’s chest. In Vauxcelles’ review, Redon’s work is synaesthetic to an extreme: singing, scented, ecstatic, and transporting (the Tristan reference would have been familiar to his audience as a reference to Wagner’s synaesthetic operas), with colors evoking an aviary and treasure-chest of references.

Henri Hertz, in his review of the same show, writes:

[Redon’s] color, of a vibrating and manifold sumptuosity, traverses the entire gamut of light, going from the brightest gleams to the dullest tones of dead leaves, withering heather, parasitic vegetation, rust and mold. Poisonous mushrooms; the
fire which burns red and gold; the gas flame, violet at the root, orange at the tip; the azure flame of alcohol; the perfidious and cold splendor of moonlight; blizzards in yellow ochre and ultramarine; stormy skies where all the colors darken to a minor scale,—all these real forms of color, Odilon Redon utilizes and manipulates to express the unrealities which he projects upon his canvases, at the beck of an extraordinary inward impressionism.\textsuperscript{38}

Heinz describes Redon’s color as luminous—not conveying the effect of light hitting a flat colored surface, but light itself—vibrant, eloquent, color like a flame or moonlight, or the glowing color of the sky, deriving its luminosity from an interior source. If the mushrooms are “poisonous,” it is perhaps because poisonous plants often announce their presence with bright and seemingly unnatural colors. The phrase “inward impressionism” implies that the coloristic spontaneity of Impressionist painting has been turned in Redon’s work to the representation of the invisible unconscious. Hertz’s impressive array of earthy nouns—“dead leaves, heather, vegetation, rust…mold” and “mushrooms”—attempts to tie Redon’s color to the names of organic ‘things,’ as if, again, their slightly uncertain relationship with signification unsettled him.

Another viewer, the critic Claude Roger-Marx, recalled the striking chromatic effect of these paintings, writing: “his immaterial canvases [made] us wonder what medium he used, whether it was the dust of butterflies’ wings or the pollen of flowers.”\textsuperscript{39} Roger-Marx concludes that they look as though they were made by “grinding up the most precious metals.”\textsuperscript{40} As in many descriptions of Redon’s color, Roger-Marx comments on the paintings’ and pastels’ unearthly glow.
The appraisals deliberately confuse the paintings’ subjects (flowers, butterflies, metals, and gems) with the colorful medium from which they are composed, as if the colors were materially linked to the objects they depicted. In a moment when chemical pigments were rapidly transforming the spectrum of available commercial colors, such a description evokes paintings from before the twentieth century that were sometimes made from grinding precious stones, crushing insects, and roasting bones for color; Mellerio evocatively describes Redon’s “seductive” color as looking as though it were made from “butterfly’s wings.” The criticism produced in response to Redon’s color work evinces an anxiety and fascination about color’s role as non-mimetic, as representing imaginary and perhaps multiple or enigmatically evocative feelings or non-objects, as engineered and no longer tied to a referent, and perhaps most of all as painted or drawn with synthetic chemical pigments which no longer had any obvious relationship to the found colors of the natural world. The descriptions try to link the synthetic colors to a world of natural, organic things, and try to tie formless color to noun-like meaning, even as color exceeds or escapes these descriptions.

The criticism also repeatedly refers to Redon’s color as “glowing.” This effect—achieved by means of placing saturated colors over a black background, or silhouetting dark objects against light backgrounds—was sometimes linked to gems, or to the favorite Nabis theme of stained glass windows. But the sense that the drawings “glow” underscores the modernity of Redon’s use of pastel, and the novel effect of the glowing electric lights around Paris—electric-lit colored fountains, and even the early hand-colored aniline-dye tinted films by Pathé or Gaumont that played around Paris during the
1890s-1910s. These film tints were themselves made of the same chemical dyes as the pastel and paint pigments.

Yet even the most abstract still lifes are very different from the exercises in “pure” color in which subjects are jettisoned entirely. Redon himself never saw his color experiments as necessitating the disappearance of the subject, or representing the pure exploration of a medium; his art to the end maintains both forms and subjects. The paintings exploit slippery relationships between signifier and signified: the colors of flowers evoke peacocks, coral, mushrooms and rust.

Although it is not a still life but a decorative panel, a letter he wrote about the commission of *Flowers—Red Panel (Fleurs, panneau rouge)* (fig. 4.19) for the 1903-06 commission for the Princess of Cystria, sheds light directly on how Redon characterized his relationship between color and subject. The panting is an explosion of red in which the shape of nasturtiums—blossoms and leaves—are just visible across the flat expanse of the picture plane. “I’ve had a commission for another decoration for the Parisian home of the Princess of Cystria, a much larger panel for which she requests nothing representative, no flowers and no figures!” he wrote in a letter to Bonger in 1903, “What remains?” To Redon, evidently nonplussed by the idea of jettisoning the subject altogether, the subject of the decorative panels was still “flowers,” or “dream flowers.” Even if colors were non-local, a subject remained, and, as letters demonstrate, the push for greater abstraction seemed to come from clients, not from the artist. As Redon’s letter indicates, these are not “non-objective” paintings, but paintings (or, here, decorative panels) in which the order of the relationship of meaning to color and form has been reversed: color is primary, but the invocation of subjects remains, and the works were
almost certainly made by starting with some observation of natural forms, however distant. Redon’s color thus defies the notion of abstraction traditionally understood as a teleological project by which observed reality drops away over time to yield an increasingly subjectless painting—instead, the pastels and painting multiply subjects, and evoke an almost promiscuous number of references.

In Composition: Flowers, an undated painting (fig. 4.20), a rainbow of distemper blobs explodes across a painting surface, yet referents lurk. There is a clear separation of sky and ground. The ground is comprised of vegetation, even if it appears to be imaginary, suggesting a primordial landscape. The colors have decidedly exceeded any form, however—they are a swirl of murky aniline purple and periwinkles. The force of rendering in the sky and ground indicates the pressure of the unconscious mind and its explosive powers; the painting’s dynamism is a metaphor for the source and origin of such color, that “mental ebullience” of which Redon frequently wrote. Color reigns here—electric and primitive, exotic and primary—at play against a nearly flat ground. With few obvious referents, the associative function germinates and objects begin to suggest themselves based on colors or accidents of form.

In 1909 Redon and his wife inherited a small country house in Bièvres from Camille’s sister, Juliette Dodu.43 André Gide, Francis Jammes, Arthur Fontaine, Gustave Fayet, and Édouard Vuillard came to paint and play tennis with Redon.44 Arí Redon remembers, of this summer home, “The walls of [my father’s] studio were covered with pastels and paintings of flowers: the large, whitewashed room had become a real greenhouse with luxuriant vegetation.”45 Still life was frequently described as being at the center of the artist’s project during this most social period of his life. Redon recalled,
“The young writers once came to my home, admired my flowers… And I listened to what they had to say.”

Gide had seen the *Homage* in Brussels and again in Paris at the 23rd Salon of the Société National des Beaux-Arts (April 22- June 30, 1901). He eventually purchased the work, which hung above the staircase in his Paris apartment between 1906-1928. He wrote about Redon rather than Cézanne in his memories of the painting, reminiscing, “When I was young, we disciples of Mallarmé were violently opposed to realism, regarding Redon as a master, a sort of skillful diviner,” associating the style of Redon with Mallarmé, and pitting them both against the literary realism of Zola. His purchase of the Denis painting affirms his commitment to Redon and to his style. Gide’s use of the term “diviner,” or *thaumaturge* in French, associates him with men with an almost mystical power to find precious underground water by reading subtle signs from above ground. Redon, in this remembrance, seems a figure who connects the viewer to what is effectively invisible to the eye, like a man digging a well. Cézanne, for his part, never painted an obvious still life reference to Redon, but late in his life linked Redon with Delacroix in an interview, with whom we began this study, and approved of the artist’s desire to associate himself with the Romantic painter: “I have already told you, Redon’s talent pleases me very much, and I have sympathy for him for his sensitivity and admiration for Delacroix.”

In Redon’s still lifes, color negotiates mimetic representation with emergent notions of the unconscious. Their referent-driven yet non-local colors, filtered through eccentric experiments in the relationships between the artist, the object, sensation, and the viewer, often seem to have been forgotten by art historians but were of critical
importance in their era. In examining Redon’s still life paintings and their reception, we can see the very moment in which his Romantic and esoteric vision of color and its role crystalized, and was subsequently written out of a narrative about the relationship of color to form in French painting.


2 “Fleurs venus au confluent de deux rivages, celui de la représentation, celui su souvenir.” Redon, À soi-même, 120.


4 See, for example, Cézanne’s painting of the same era, Pommes, Serviette et boîte à lait, 1880-81. For more on this pattern, see John Rewald, The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné (New York: Abrams, 1996), I: 318.


8 Vollard, 1898; Durand-Ruel, 1899-1900; Vollard, 1901; Durand-Ruel, 1903 and 1906.


“Une tête de femme rouge, entourée d’une germination de fleurs,” *Livre de Raison: Manuscrits conservés à la Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet*, appendix to *ibid*.


Ibid.

Rather than address such questions, Berger has documented over thirty-six distinct vase shapes in Redon’s paintings and pastels, including a vase with a Japanese samurai figure, an Etruscan vase, and many others. See *ibid.*, 180. See also Gloria Groom, “The Late Work,” in Druick, *Prince of Dreams*, 321-22, for information about Marie Botkin, the potter who made the vases.


“Mon régime le plus fécond, le plus nécessaire à mon expansion a été, je l’ai dit souvent, de copier directement le réel en reproduisant attentivement des objets de la nature extérieure en ce qu’elle a de plus menu, de plus particulier et accidentel. Après un effort pour copier minutieusement un caillou, un brin d’herbe, une main, un profil ou tout autre chose de la vie vivante ou inorganique, je sens une ébullition mentale venir; j’ai alors besoin de créer, de me laisser aller à la représentation de l’imaginaire. La nature ainsi dosée et infusée devient ma source, ma levure, mon ferment. De cette origine, je crois mes invention vraies.” Redon, “Confidences d’Artiste,” in *À soi-même*, 30.
21 “Il y a quelques gris froids et bleutés que je ne fis jamais, auquel j’ai sans doute apportés de mon passage a Suisse et dans récoltes de l’inconscient. Rien ne vient de rien.” Redon in a letter to Bonger, 3 March, 1908, RPK.

22 While accounts of hypnotism substantially predate Charcot, there are over 50 titles devoted to hypnotism published during the years 1889-90 alone listed in the Bibliothèque Nationale, from Gilles de la Tourette’s *L’Hypnotisme et les états analogues* (*Hypnotism and Analogous States*), to Janet’s *L’Automatisme psychologique* (*Psychological Automatism*), to H. Bernheim’s *De la Suggestion* (*On Suggestion*), to Charles Féré and Alfred Binet’s *Le Magnétisme Animal* (*Animal Magnetism*). They take up the challenge to define or diagnose, quantify and often graphically depict states of unconsciousness, hypnosis, or automatism using the tools of experimental psychiatry.


30 “Le sujet de Redon est plus subjectif, le sujet de Cézanne plus objectif, mais tous deux s’expriment au moyen d’une méthode qui a pour but de créer un objet concret, à la fois esthétique et représentatif d’une sensibilité.” Maurice Denis, “Cézanne,” *L’Occident* 12 (September 1907): 126.

31 “Les réflexions précédentes nous permettent d’expliquer en quoi il se rattache au Symbolisme. [Symbolisme] impliquait cependant la croyance à une correspondance entre les formes extérieures et les états subjectifs. Au lieu d’évoquer nos états d’âme au moyen du sujet représenté, c’est l’œuvre elle-même qui devait transmettre la sensation initiale, en perpétuer l’émotion. Toute œuvre d’art est une transposition, un équivalent passionné,
une caricature d’une sensation reçue, ou plus généralement d’un fait psychologique.”
Denis, ibid., 125-26.

32 “La nature, disait Cézanne, j’ai voulu la copier, je n’arrivai pas. Mais j’ai été content de moi lorsque j’a découvert que le soleil, par exemple, ne se pouvait pas reproduire, mais qu’il fallait le représenter par autre chose... par de la couleur.’ Voilà la définition du Symbolisme tel que nous l’entendons vers 1890 [...] Odilon Redon avait cherché lui aussi, en-dehors de la nature copiée et de la sensation, les équivalents plastiques de ses émotions et de ses rêves.” Denis, ibid., 126.

33 “Si j’ai tenu à parler ici d’Odilon Redon ce n’est pas seulement pour rendre à cet artiste un hommage mérité et tenter d’acquitter envers lui la reconnaissance de toute une génération, mais nous tirerons de la comparaison de ces deux maîtres un précision de plus dans la définition de Cézanne. Out, Redon est à l’origine du Symbolisme, en tant qu’expression plastique de l’idéal, et d’autre part l’exemple de Cézanne nous enseignait à transposer les donnés de la sensation en éléments d’œuvre d’art. Le sujet de Redon est plus subjectif, le sujet de Cézanne plus objectif, mais tous deux s’expriment au moyen d’une méthode qui a pour but créer un objet concret, à la fois beau et représentatif d’une sensibilité.” Denis, ibid., 126.

34 Maurice Denis, “Homage à Redon,” La Vie (November 30, 1912). Italics mine.

35 “L’équivoque…des soupçons d’aspect (images dans images), formes qui vont être, ou qui le seront selon l’état d’esprit du regardeur.” Ibid., 100.

36 Wagner’s opera Tristan und Isolde, inspired by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, particularly his sense of noumenon and phenomenon, was known for its use of color, and its second act was famously an exhausting composition notable for its use of climactic dissonance, metaphor, and “musical color.”

37 “Odilon Redon, idéologue jadis hermétique, possède une âme suave et chantante. Ses bouquets de fleurs des champs, marguerites, roses-trémières, dahlias, grappes de molle glycine et de faux ébénier, s’arrangent en fouillis délicieux et odoriférant. M. Redon, ex-démoniaque, s’est mué en poète bucolique. Du même, un bateau qui vogue dans un décor de pourpre et d’or, très second acte de Tristan, et une adolescente extasiée parmi des reflets de madrépores et d’émaux bleus poitrail de paon. Et son paravent, où, sur un fonds d’un indéfinissable rose orangé, voltigent des poussières d’améthyste et de rubis, des pollens de fleurettes imaginées ! Et, si vous objectez que cela est une féerie, non du dessin, considérez donc la sanguine voisine, l’expressif et doux profil d’un des amateurs d’art les plus raffinés de Paris, M. Oliver Sainsère.” Louis Vauxcelles, Gil Blas, no. 9500, (October 17, 1905): 5.


40 Ibid.


42 “J’en ai la commande d’un autre [room mural] pour l’hôtel de la Princesse de Cystria, panneaux beaucoup plus grand, pour lesquels on ne désire y voir représentés, ni fleurs, ni figures!... Que me restera-t-il?” Rijksmuseum Research Library, Andries Bonger archives, Rijksprentenkabinett, letter 145 (April 24, 1903).

43 Ashton and Rewald, Redon, Moreau, Bresdin, 44.

44 Ibid., 41.

45 “A la fin de la saison les murs de son atelier sont tapissés de pastels et de peintures de fleurs: la grande pièce toute blanche est devenue une véritable serre à la végétation luxuriante.” Arî Redon, introduction to Lettres de Gauguin, Gide, Huysmans, Jammes, Mallarmé, Verhaeren... à Odilon Redon, by Arî Redon and Roseline Bacou (Paris: J. Corti, 1960), 19.

46 Terrasse, Conversations avec Odilon Redon, 18.


48 The work was purchased earlier but did not initially fit in Gide’s apartment, until he moved in 1906. See ibid., 162, n. 1. Gide would give the Homage to the Musée du Luxembourg towards the end of his life. See ibid., 32.

49 “Du temps de ma jeunesse, nous, disciples de Mallarmé et violemment dressés contre le réalisme, regardions Redon comme un maître, une sorte de thaumaturge habile.” André Gide, quoted in ibid., 9.

50 Gide had seen the work of Gauguin and Sérusier as early as 1889, in Pouldu, where he wrote of this encounter in his journal, “Rentré à l’hôtel, je m’installe devant un litre de gazeuse et regarde jusqu’au dîner les œuvres de ‘ces messieurs.’ Une demi-douzaine de tableaux et autant de cartons, tous tournés du côté du mur: Manet aurait rougi; toiles d’impuissants qui sous prétexte d’impressionnisme plaquent côte à côte des teintes tapageuses; des jaunes serin surtout, maries à des bleu-indigo, des violettes de bruyère et des roses comme je n’en avais encore vu nulle part.” The wild colors which Gide mistook
for “impressionism” were indicative of the painting style developed by Gauguin and Sérusier in Brittany, and the novelist’s relationship with the painters of his generation was later cemented by the purchase of this defining painting. André Gide, *Journal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), I: 88, quoted in ibid., 8. See also Maurice Denis, “L'Époque du Symbolisme,” *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 6, no. 11 (March 1934): 165-79, for an account of this era.

CONCLUSION

Redon’s Heritage and the Invention of Modernism

To say that color has once again become expressive is to write its history.¹

—Henri Matisse, “The Role and Modalities of Color”

Just as Delacroix’s uses of color had provided a basis for Redon’s early experiments with color, Redon’s use of non-local color and non-optical painting strategies would inspire their own opportunities for the creative misapprehension of the next generation. Although much has been said about Cézanne’s importance in Picasso’s development of his Cubist style, less attention has been paid to the influence Redon’s color had on Matisse and his experiments with Fauve color, and on subsequent experiments with color and abstraction including those by Kupka and Delaunay. Redon, along with Gauguin and to a lesser extent van Gogh, championed and developed a non-retinal use of color that would move art away from naturalistic representation. His puzzling and innovative use of non-mimetic color is enormously significant to the development of early twentieth-century painting, both in France and in America.

Simply by outliving a number of his peers, and thanks to an attitude of accommodation towards young artists, Redon gained new significance and centrality for the generation of painters coming of age after 1900. John Rewald writes, “[Painters such as] Gauguin, Pissarro, Cézanne had died, and before them van Gogh, Seurat and Lautrec. Renoir lived in the South confined to his wheelchair… Monet, in Giverny, only saw a few old friends; Degas was irascible and avoided new acquaintances. But Redon’s door remained always open.”² Walter Pach recalled evenings at Redon’s home at which the
talk centered on Mallarmé: “[s]omeone would sit down at the piano and play a composition by Brahms,” and the young artists would talk about French painting and poetry.³ Pach added that “the whole splendid group, including Matisse, Bonnard, Vuillard, and the gifted but unhappy Sérusier were deeply influenced by Redon, particularly in the field of color.”⁴ Redon had been an honorary member of the inaugural Salon d’Automne exhibition held in the Petit Palais in 1903,⁵ a tribute also bestowed upon Roger Marx and Huysmans, among others,⁶ where eight works by Paul Gauguin were exhibited in the place of honor.⁷ The 1903 exhibition was hailed as a success by reviews in La Plume, Le Journal, and La Libre-Parole.⁸ The same year, Redon was awarded the Legion of Honor. The next year, a solo room was dedicated to Redon’s work at the new independent exhibition, the Salon d’Automne, alongside rooms of paintings by Paul Cézanne, Puvis de Chavannes, Renoir, and Toulouse-Lautrec.⁹ Redon was listed as an active society member.¹⁰ These inclusions indicate that Redon cannot truly be considered an outsider after around 1900, if he ever was, and speak to his growing centrality to the new generation of painter-colorists.

The presentation in 1904 was of Redon as a colorist. Of the substantial 1904 Salon d’Automne Redons, a mere 17 were black-and-white lithographs, while 34 were pastels and 9 were oil and distemper. Among the color works were a number entitled in the catalogue “Flowers,” or “Vision,”¹¹ and the large painting Buddha in his Youth, (c. 1904) (fig. 5.1), showing the Buddha as a young man meditating under a tree surrounded by vivid, radiant dream-flowers.¹² Redon, in the same catalogue, was described as “a great Romantic gone astray among us,”¹³ a characterization which explicitly tied him with the vanished past of French art, particularly with the painting of Delacroix. To the
extent that Baudelaire had defined Romanticism as “modern art—that is to say, intimacy, spirituality, color, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by all the means which the arts contain,” Redon’s neo-Romantic reification was explicit in this exhibition.

Critical reactions to Redon’s color in 1904 were mixed. Gustave Babin, writing on the front page of *L’Echo de Paris*, characterized Redon as a great colorist and dismissed Huysmans’ early characterizations of Redon as an obscure prince of grotesque nightmares. His prose is typical of the poetic or effusively literary writing which marks much criticism of Redon’s color work:

If you are sensitive to the charms of color, you will be transported, from the start, by the shimmering petals, the reflections of fantastical fabrics, the shimmering wet stony corals. Let the potion work. Approach. Analyze these small still lifes laid by a sure touch in the midst of grey paper, the dream visions, this gold and silver boat on an opaque sea, under a sky seemingly strewn with flowers… Forget everything you’ve read about the apocalyptic satanic Redon, all literature, even those insidious pages by J.-K. Huysmans, and see here only painting by a refined retina, a wonderfully firm hand—[art by] one of the most prestigious artists of our time.¹⁵

His description suggests that the mentally evocative quality of color will “transport” the viewer, like a potion or psychotropic drug or even a means of teleportation, to other worlds.¹⁶ This echoes the very definition of moral color, to create an emotional response that exceeds the subject matter and directly acts on the viewer’s mind, using the immaterial to carry the body into a new realm. Redon has exceeded his early reputation
as satanic and literary; color has made him a true painter, no longer too literary or too monochromatic for that label.

In *Gil Blas*, Louis Vauxcelles, the critic who later gave names to Cubism and Fauvism, noted the role of Redon’s color work in bridging the gap between “realism” and fantasy:

At times, discoveries of miraculous colors: look where a formidable centaur rears on his screen, amid the flight of angels’ heads, unreal flowers and translucent stony corals…. Then, oh charming surprise, next to the dreams of the opium drinker, here wallflowers, carnations, geraniums, in pastel, with a sweet simplicity, portraits of young women, of drawings, a red chalk drawing, of wonderful psychology….singular cohabitation, in the brain of the painter, of mysterious chimeras and realism.17

Vauxcelles provides an apt description of Redon’s “mental ebullience” to work between the worlds of “dreams” and observation and to depict the “psychology” of sitters, to be the artist of both “chimeras and realism,” differing from Symbolist critics’ insistence on Redon as solely an artist of dreams or the imagination. Comparisons sometimes set Redon’s work off against that of Paul Cézanne; Arsène Alexandre of *Le Figaro* wrote of “[o]ne more room where you encounter the rough and gauche and often great manner of Paul Cézanne, and one where the fantasies of M. Odilon Redon take one side of painting through their richness of color and frequent discoveries, the other by literature with their unreal motifs, making of this curious painter a sort of Mallarmé of art.”18

General discussions of color in 1904 were also haunted by references to the new city and the new age. Amid articles reporting on developments in the Sino-Japanese war,
the Moroccan border, views of America and sports, we find descriptions of Carrière’s blurry, nearly monochrome work compared to rising factory fumes by the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche. In the same review, Vuillard’s painting was compared to “banal Parisian daily life with its discolored atmosphere: the ugly five-story houses, the street or the boulevard.”

No longer just a way to transport the viewer to a distant land like Morocco, color was a way to take the viewer away from drab, monochrome modern Paris.

By 1904, Matisse had been a collector of Redon’s paintings for five years (in his letters, Matisse writes that in 1899 that he bought two of Redon’s colorful pastels). The chromatic possibilities inspired by Matisse’s encounter with Redon’s color in the Salon d’Automne are evident in his two versions of *Still Life with Purro I* and *Still Life with Purro II* (fig. 5.2 and 5.3), executed late in 1904 and in 1904-05, respectively. Although he had been largely ignorant of Seurat’s neo-Impressionist experiments, the 34-year-old painter had certainly read Signac’s “From Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism” in *La Revue Blanche*, probably when it had appeared in 1899. Matisse, keeping his aesthetic options open, was experimenting in Saint-Tropez with Neo-Impressionist style. Although he would work alongside Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross, artists also painting in the area that summer, and would often paint in a decidedly Neo-Impressionist style, Matisse was not a stylistic purist like those two other painters. When seen in comparison, the two paintings demonstrate that Matisse was instead open to experimentation, and had his suspicions about the viability of Signac’s style.

Matisse describes his own paintings of the time as rapidly assimilating and then rejecting the neo-Impressionist use of color:
I was [in St. Tropez] near Signac’s and saw him while I was there. That’s where I encountered the palette of the neoimpressionists, which is based on optical mixing, complementaries, and the luminosity of colors. There’s where I did [*Luxe, calme, et volupté (Luxe, Calm, and Pleasure)*]…It was exhibited at the Indépendants. I thought it was in line with neoimpressionist theory, so I was a bit disillusioned when I asked [Henri-Edmond] Cross what he thought of it, and he said ‘I don’t think you’ll stick to these principles.’ I couldn’t at the time see why he said it. Long after, I understood that, in neoimpressionist theory, all pictures are made up of dominants supported by complementaries, but the complementaries are subordinate to the dominant [hues] and therefore less important. In my picture, I’d made the secondary colors as important as the main ones.”

In this interview, Matisse recalls having profound differences with Signac over the constitution and rules that governed his painting palette. We can see Matisse wavering between different systems in the work produced during this summer: he chooses the same still life subject—a plate of apples, a water beaker, a cloth—and paints these things both in vivid greens, purples, and reds, and in Signac-inspired short stipples.

The two paintings take the same subject and paint these things on the one hand in vivid and Redonesque greens, purples, and reds, and then in Signac’s abbreviated brushstrokes in bright, saturated colors. In *Still Life with Purro I*, the rustic wine-beakers, cups, green melon, plate of red turnips and simple tablecloth are rendered with an angular brushstroke defining the objects’ volumes in flat turquoise, light blue, and brown planes. The brown
wall’s color is broken by scumbled brushwork in which transitions between blue, purple, white, and pink seem to follow no coherent color theory; darker colors generally radiate out from objects, yet they do not follow the logic of shadows. Although Claudine Grammont ascribes Matisse’s position in this painting as influenced by Cézanne’s,27 the palette looks like a combination of Cézanne and Redon’s influence. The hot and cool colors in proximity—bright red objects on the turquoise and periwinkle table’s surface, and the purple halo to objects—create an experience of color application different from Cézanne’s cool and even palette; it bears traces both of the expressive secondary and tertiary colors and radiant rings or halos of Redon. Still Life with Purro II is the same scene done explicitly in the style of Signac: a flurry of complementary red, blue, and green groupings of warm- and cold-toned tâches of paint on a visible white ground. For example, the lozenge strokes (they are not dots but the larger, divided strokes characteristic of Signac’s later Saint-Tropez paintings) around the vase on the left are pink, brick-red, and orange: they form a complementary color aura around the vase, which is blue, green, aqua—with yellow in both areas. Thus, he reconceives Seurat’s system: there is no optical mixture within forms, no use of cool tones for shadows nor integration of reflected color, but there is a great emphasis on the power of contrasting colors to create optical intensity. A pink, purple, lilac, and red area forms a half-circle under the table, where wedge-like strokes start to whirl and move as if they are masses of air. The array of colors under the table and on the wall seems to conjure floating shapes from the atmosphere, indicating areas of shadow or reflected light.

The debt Matisse owes to Redon can best be seen in his painting of the same year, Vase, Bottle and Fruit (1904) (fig. 5.4), in which color is far from Cézanne’s placid tones
or Signac’s lozenge-stroke application of paint. In the *Still Life*, a vivid pink, white and blue tablecloth set with glowing, aniline-bright peaches sits in front of a flat black wall. There is more fruit: each banana is haloed with orange, the oranges sit in a dish of red. The painting’s luminous colors, haloed forms, and energetic facture don’t conjure Cézanne’s subdued atmospheres, but instead evoke Redon’s glowing pastels, in which bright tone is often placed on top of dark color to create a luminous effect. In many ways Redon’s colors anticipate effects of projected colored lights, or other effects in which electric color glows from a screen.

Ultimately, Matisse would reject schematic Pointillist color for what he termed “expressive” color. He would write shortly after the Saint-Tropez experiments: “[T]he primary function of color should be to serve expression as well as possible. I apply my tones without a preconceived ‘plan.’” In his 1908 “Notes of a Painter,” Matisse wrote about his affiliation with this more intuitive approach to color:

> The choice of my colors doesn’t rest on any scientific theory: it is based on observation, on feeling, on the experience of my sensibility. Inspired by certain pages from Delacroix, an artist like Signac preoccupies himself with complementary colors, and their theoretical knowledge comes to be used, here or there, in this or that tone. But I look only to put down colors that represent my sensation.

This statement directly contradicts Signac’s pronouncements about the importance of Delacroix as being those Chevreul-inspired “dots.” By rejecting Signac’s scientific theory about color and prioritizing “observation” and “feeling” instead, Matisse’s use of color becomes partisan; he rejects Signac and Signac’s apprehension of Delacroix. Doing so is
to make a decision about what artistic lineage of color made a better painting. While his style would loop between neo-Impressionist mark-making and expressive color for several more years, the primacy for Matisse of expressive color over Signac’s theory of color was decisive.

Perhaps Matisse’s decision was aided by his training with his teacher, Gustave Moreau. Moreau had long been a proponent of “imaginative” color, telling a pupil, “Remember one thing: to think color, one must have the imagination for it. If you don’t have the imagination, you will never make beautiful color. Copy nature with the imagination, that’s what makes the artist. Color must be thought, dreamed, imagined…”

Moreau’s quote about imaginative color, extending Baudelaire’s language about the role of imagination and its relation to color, shows that Redon was by no means alone in his interest. By 1908, Matisse explicitly states:

In reality, I think that even the theory of complementary colors is not absolute. In studying the works of painters for whom the knowledge of color depends upon instinct and feeling, on a constant analogy with their sensations, one could be more specific about certain points of the color laws, pushing back the boundaries of the theory of colors such as it is currently defined.”

His skepticism about the established theories of complementary color and interest in “instinct and feeling” and their relationship with sensation ultimately didn’t just broaden the scope of color theory, as Matisse would suggest. It would reimagine the role of art itself. If, to Matisse in 1908, “the primary function of color should be to serve expression as well as possible,” then the relationship between color and the interior truth of the artist was paramount. Color’s ability to express interiority—and the evocative painting of
the Fauve and later German Expressionist painters—is one vital legacy for Redon’s luminous “moral color,” a move in sharp contrast to color’s role as makeup or mimetic of the external, visible world. Matisse’s interest in depicting the human figure in non-mimetic colors expresses a direct lineage with Redon’s apprehension of Delacroix’s use of “moral color” in history painting.33

The shock that followed as a legacy of this decision is well known. In the 1905 Salon d’Automne (fig. 5.5), the brilliant color of paintings made the previous summer in Collioure, like *The Green Stripe* (*La Raie verte*), and *Woman with a Hat* (*Femme Au Chapeau*) (fig 5.6), was the most enthusiastically discussed element of the exhibition. Like generations before them, critics of the 1905 Salon d’Automne predictably focused on the “madness” of color in Matisse’s *Woman with a Hat* (*Femme au chapeau*) with its “apple-color” female figure a centerpiece of this criticism’s echo of the legacy of experimental psychology.34 The painting’s “eccentricities of color” and Matisse’s lack of “concern for form” were both faulted, a derision harkening back to the policing party line of Charles Blanc.35

Gertrude Stein remembers of *Femme au chapeau* (writing in her inimitable third person): “It infuriated the public, they tried to scratch off the paint…. [the painting] was very strange in its color…people were roaring with laughter at the picture and scratching at it. Gertrude Stein could not understand why, the picture to her seemed perfectly natural.”36 Color is once again the central issue of painting, both in execution and in the discussion of the work. Stein’s description of its “naturalness” is reminiscent of fin-de-siècle artists describing themselves as color synaesthetes as a way of demonstrating their
refined sensibilities—as if understanding color conveys an individual’s special relationship to aesthetic perception.

Others were stumped by the work, however. In June 1905, reviewing the Salon des Indépendants, M. Nicolle from the *Le Journal de Rouen* captured the prevailing feeling towards the use of color in the new painting:

Here, all description, all summary, like all criticism, becomes equally impossible, because what is presented has—apart from the materials employed—no relation to painting; *informe* mixtures of color; some blue, some red, some yellow, some green, patches of crude coloration juxtaposed at random; the barbaric and naïve games of a child who amuses himself with a box of colors that he receives as a gift for the New Year or for his pleasure [...] MM. Camoin, Derain, A. Marquet, Manguin, Henri Matisse.\(^{37}\)

Color has made a move so radical, so “crude,” and *informe* that language itself can no longer be used to create its equivalent. It is as if, to the critic, that which has always been external and supplementary to form has lost the structure that supported it, like a jellyfish with no interior skeleton. Criticism is unprepared to function and has become “impossible” in the face of such color (or at least, so says the critic—albeit, in language). Expressive color has rendered an art of form and line so unfamiliar, that the work appears not merely child-like or barbaric, but no longer like painting at all, “apart from the materials employed”! The application of color has no purpose but to “amuse” the artist, because there is no longer any act of representation here, only expression—or could expression be a form of representation? And, if so, what is it representing? The terms recall the way *The Golden Cell* had been greeted over a decade earlier.
But the most interesting and nuanced reaction to Matisse’s new direction for color came from Maurice Denis, the painter of *Homage to Cézanne* (1900-01). Far from being the instinctual scrawls that the public made them out to be, Matisse’s colors for Denis represented conscious experiments as a statement of affiliation with both the “sensualists” and the “rationalists.” Denis, on the other side of Signac’s propositions about color, would chastise Matisse for his search for “abstraction” and “generalization” and his failure to take advantage of “sensibility” and “instinct”—which was a strategic accusation, as these qualities were just what Matisse faulted in Signac. Denis in his review in *L’Hermitage* in 1905, wrote:

> What you are doing, Matisse, is dialectic: you begin from the multiple and individual, and by definition, as the neo-Platonists would say, that is, by abstraction and generalization, you arrive at ideas, at pure forms of paintings [*des noms de tableaux*]. You are only happy when all the elements of your work are intelligible to you. Nothing must remain. Nothing must remain of the conditional and accidental in your universe: you strip it of everything that does not correspond to the possibilities of expression provided by reason … You should resign yourself to the fact that everything cannot be intelligible. Give up the idea of rebuilding a new art by means of reason alone. Put your trust in sensibility, in instinct.  

Denis recognizes Matisse’s dialectical practice, but now the terms of painting have switched. Over against Matisse’s own alliance with the sensual as opposed to the scientific, we have Denis classifying him as rational rather than the desirable “instinctual.” Denis seems to take issue with Matisse’s expressive use of color for not making room for
the irrational and instinctual, traditionally aligned with Blanc’s categories for understanding color.

Redon reappeared in the 1905 Salon d’Automne with nine works, mostly flower pastels, but his was no longer the most chromatically innovative—or provocative—work in the show. Redon’s Ophelia (1900-1905) (fig. 5.7), with its radiating waves of color emanating from the blanched figure, imagines color as a fluid exteriorization of thought. Ophelia’s flowers appear as double blooms of red-on-green echoing the expanding half-circle of yellow flowers on blue, the blue and green overflowing line and form as if carried outward by water.

Matisse’s Blue Nude (Memory of Bikstra), 1907 (Fig. 5.8), follows a more Redon-like division of figure and background. Radiant color (also, in this case, blue) is here like *pentimenti* to the figure’s right shoulder, left breast and left thigh (these wavering lines also draw from Cézanne’s nudes). The plant background takes up Redon’s favorite theme of the primitive floral or vegetal world as the background of radiant color, which emanates from the figure. But most importantly, the figure is routinely identified as North African. As in Gauguin’s linking of pure color with primitive people, non-mimetic color and a ‘primitive’ subject are linked—here with an emphasis on the sexuality of the nude. From her exaggerated buttocks to the subtitle “Bikstra,” argues Alistair Wright, “the most confusing element in this welter of contradictory racial signs…would have been the color of the skin. The (later) title is something of a misnomer. Rather than a blue nude, we are faced with a figure whose skin is predominantly pink, with the blue pigment, where it does occur, restricted largely to the shadows.” The Blue Nude, Wright argues, is a “divided sign,” a European nude with shadows which seem to belong to a black
What Wright calls an indeterminate sign might extend to Redon’s figures of chromatic hybridity, with their multiple color referents projected onto the African body.

The most famous artist who alludes to Redon’s color influence was Marcel Duchamp. When asked by Walter Pach if he had been influenced by Cézanne, Duchamp responded: “I am sure that most of my friends would say so and I know that he is a great man. Nevertheless, if I am to tell what my own point of departure has been, I should say that it was the art of Odilon Redon.” Pach, the great supporter of Duchamp (along with the Arensbergs), repeatedly called Redon Duchamp’s “master,” and put down the relationship to the disavowal of the retinal in painting: “If you let go the physical elements of painting, after having banished visible nature from your work, what remains?” Such an explanation made a bridge between Redon’s visionary and spiritualist Symbolism and the conceptual and linguistic experiments employed by Duchamp. “The plane of the artist is not outside him, but within his mind,” Pach quotes Redon as saying, and quickly adds that “Duchamp is one who took him at his word.” Duchamp’s ideas about Cézanne and Redon perpetuate the dichotomy Denis created between their two styles. In fact, given Duchamp’s relationship with Pach and Pach’s investment in Redon’s success, Pach’s presentation of the Duchamp quotation was merely another part of the marketing scheme surrounding the promotion of Redon’s work in America. In American art historical accounts following World War Two, Redon’s uses of non-mimetic color tend to be termed “non-optical” or “anti-retinal,” and stem from Pach’s characterizations of Duchamp.

Duchamp’s most Redon-inspired works were created during his pre-Cubist phase before he moved to America. For his French collector Gustave Candel, Duchamp painted
the Portrait of Gustave Candel’s Mother, 1911-12 (fig 5.9), which was deemed by curators Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine as “perhaps the only direct evidence offered by Duchamp’s work of the influence of Odilon Redon, an artist he greatly admired.”48 The painting shows the bust of a woman on a thin pedestal—the background and central figure are a non-local yellow. The work plays with the notion of the portrait and the reciprocal portrait-like capacity of non-mimetic color. Other works, including Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel (1910) (fig. 5.10), with its radiant halo around the doctor’s hand, explicitly recall Redon’s fascination with eidetic fluids—images of the emergence of the invisible energy which emanated from the human form.49 While there is a long tradition of colorful halos or auras depicted in painting, Duchamp’s interest in depicting a medical doctor and a collector’s mother with such radiant auras recalls Redon’s own depictions of his female patrons and their auratic portraits. Also relating to Redon, Duchamp’s Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree (1911) (fig. 5.11), which he made for the wife of his brother Jacques Villon, shows a Buddha-like figure meditating under a blooming tree. This work, too, is Redon-related, clearly stating Duchamp’s interest in depicting the reification of mental states, or the imaging of pure thought. These works presage Duchamp’s much-lauded interest in moving away from “retinal” art, and their importance has yet to be fully exploited in Duchamp studies.

While the 1905 Fauve Salon d’Automne display showed Redon’s works gaining an audience in the early twentieth century, the pinnacle of Redon’s influence and popularity was the sensation his works caused in America at the Armory Show. The International Exhibition of Modern Artists, on view from February 17 – March 15, 1913, in the 69th Regiment Armory, included a solo room of 38 color paintings and pastels by
Redon. He was named an honorary officer of the exhibition, and was listed fifth in the program of artists: before him were Ingres, Delacroix, Degas, and Cézanne, but he ranked before Renoir, Manet, Monet, or Seurat.

In fact, despite this high billing, Redon’s inclusion was based in part on his relative obscurity in America. The Redon room was originally one of a number of planned solo rooms dedicated to contemporary painters: Cézanne, van Gogh, Matisse, and Gauguin, most of which were not realized due to the price and scarcity of the artwork (fig. 5.12); Redon was one of the few artists with work to spare for the show. Walt Kuhn had first seen Redon’s work in the Hague, and wrote Walter Pach, “We are going to feature Redon big (BIG!). You see, the fact that he is so little known will mean a still bigger success in publicity.” The Americans were as much canny showmen and salesmen as curators, and they knew an undervalued French post-Impressionist when they encountered one. Walter Pach, the European contact for Arthur B. Davies and Kuhn, took the two men to Redon’s studio in Paris. Works were shipped back to New York. The gambit worked: Redons were purchased by influential collectors, and through their collections the show’s holdings became the basis of the strong collections of Redon’s paintings and prints in American museums.

Kuhn and Pach wanted to feature Redon’s color works, presumably based on their own aesthetic taste, instinct for sales, and also with the encouragement of the artist himself. As Pach wrote, “on asking the master for his support in the undertaking [he said] ‘Yes, on condition that you make it an exhibition of Redon the expresser.’” True to this premise, among the works on display were Redon’s iconic Black Profile Gauguin, 1903-05, his ambitious, fantastical, and chromatically experimental Roger and Angelica,
c. 1910 (fig. 5.13), and dozens of floral still life paintings and pastels (fig. 5.14). The choice to include his work so prominently in the exhibition was no doubt aided by the rise of Fauvist painting, as evinced by a 1912 issue of the magazine *La Vie* featuring an article entitled “Homage à Redon” (perhaps in defiance of the painting *Homage to Cézanne*), which paid tribute to Redon’s legacy with writings from younger painters including Fauve Kees van Dongen, Bonnard, Denis, Sérusier, and others, who lavished praise on the “maître”: “What do I admire in Redon’s work? Everything, I admire everything he does,” wrote van Dongen. The implication was clear: without Redon, there would have been no Fauvism.

In a booklet written to accompany the exhibition, Pach praised Redon for his relationship to Delacroix’s color, stating, “It has been in his use of color that Redon has most directly influenced his fellow craftsmen.” Pach, more than any European figure, accepted and promoted Redon’s account of his self-constructed academic heritage. One very dark Delacroix, *Christ on the Lake of Genezareth*, 1853, was even lent by William R. Ladd, and listed as not for sale, in the show. Pach, in his Armory catalogue, took pains to describe (most likely relating a conversation with Redon) how the artist “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.” Such discussion of method attempted to foreground the aspects of Redon’s process often overlooked by the French press (which tended to focus instead on his subject matter): the relationship between the observation of nature and the representation of the fantastical in his work. Pach rendered the French term
“mental ebullience” as “energy” and “imagination” in English. The role of the unconscious mind in such compositional strategies no longer evoked the sinister associations the Parisian press had found so objectionable only twenty years earlier, but the almost scientific and irresistibly American associations with efficiency (“brimming with energy”) and that most Romantic quality, imagination.

Pages from treasurer Elmer MacRae’s annotated catalogue of the exhibition show Redon’s paintings as mainly flowers and fantasy scenes, priced from $195 (for a tiny floral pastel) to $4000 (for a Chariot of Apollo). 60 Daniel H. Morgan made the first purchase of the show, buying three Redon paintings on February 19th. 61 Lillie Bliss bought two Redon paintings and 18 prints, 62 and Katherine Dreier, John Quinn, and Arthur B. Davies were among the prominent American patrons of modern art who purchased his work. 63 Due in part to his large representation in the show (of about 1,300 works in the show, 1/3 were “foreign,” and some 74 were by Redon 64), Redon sold more works than any other artist. 65 Milton Brown recalls that all parties involved considered Redon’s part in the exhibition a great success:

As Davies and Kuhn had hoped, Redon went over big. Of all the avant-garde artists he was accorded the most favorable reception in the press. The esoteric symbolism and strange forms of his art did not seem to disturb the critics and he was hailed as a great master. The ravishing quality of color, the poetic and mystical content of his art appealed to a taste conditioned by Whistler and Davies. One could overlook its involved personal symbolism since it appeared to reflect legitimate artistic license and philosophical profundity. Redon was by far the most
successful of the exhibitors and the phenomenal acceptance of his work came
while he was still alive.\textsuperscript{66}

Redon’s painting appeared relatively accessible to American audiences next to the more
formally challenging Cubist and Futurist art featured in the show. If the Armory Show
presentation of Redon was successful in most ways, it was foiled only by the far greater
critical attention in the form of derision going to the Cubism of Georges Braque,
Duchamp, and Pablo Picasso of 1910-11, which made the carefully constructed story
about Redon and color seem sweetly anachronistic.

Reactions were largely positive, but although accounts speak of Redon’s
“peculiarly colored” canvases as being “remarkably attractive,\textsuperscript{67} there are also concerns
that the non-mimetic colors deployed throughout the exhibition indicate a lack of
sincerity on the part of the artists (“Is it Art, or are they humbugging us?”\textsuperscript{68}). The use of
expressive color predictably called up critical associations with children, the insane, and
the anarchic: Redon’s work was described by the Chicago organizer with the familiar
charge of being composed by a “sincere but unbalanced mind.”\textsuperscript{69} Matisse’s \textit{Red Studio}, a
work extending Redon’s infectious use of color, was accused of being the work of an
“adult playing a trick,” by the weekly magazine \textit{Brooklyn Life}.\textsuperscript{70} A cartoon in the \textit{New
York Evening Sun} encouraged would-be post-Impressionists to imbibe absinthe and rub a
cat dipped in wet paint on a blank canvas.\textsuperscript{71} The \textit{New York Herald}, on a more serious
note, wrote an explanatory review describing how the new school “tries to reproduce by
means of color the mental impressions and feelings of the artist on beholding a certain
object or scene.”\textsuperscript{72}
American artists were manifestly under the influence of Redon’s still life painting following the Armory Show. Florine Stettheimer was an amateur artist in the orbit of Marcel Duchamp whose work often seems almost a caricature of what a Redon painting looked like. Stettheimer, along with her sisters, took French lessons with Duchamp. Her exposure in Parisian galleries to Redon, Cézanne, Renoir, Moreau, and other painters during the period 1909-1913 prepared her, upon return to her native New York in 1914, where she became a protégée of Duchamp, to paint her idiosyncratic still life paintings, all imagined flowers and “violent color.” In 1916, the year Redon died, works like *Morning (White Curtains)*, 1915-16 (fig. 5.15), in her exhibition at M. Knoedler & Company Gallery were compared with Redon’s flowers, the press having been primed no doubt by the Armory Show presentation of Redon. The comparison springs from a sense of naïve or child-like painting technique which American critics felt resembled Redon’s “naïve” or “untrained” use of form and color, his reordering of the priority of interior and exterior, color and form, and above all the sense that the still life might have been painted from a dream rather than from observation, indicating the lines which followed Redon to America through the work of the next generation of painters.

Redon died at home in Paris in July 1916. *Paris Midi* announced that afternoon that the funeral was the next day. *L’Intransigeant*, on July 7, noted that “[h]e did not represent what is. He suggested that which we all wished to see. His flowers of underwater colors with antennas and eyes; a lofty magic emanated from them.” *La Pâtripe* noted that he had shown in “the majority of the salons,” and remarked upon his “noteworthy personal originality.” In his obituaries in the French dailies of that year, most publications called Redon a “peintre-graveur,” although a few called him “grand
peintre” and at least one just a “graveur.”"¹⁸² Bordeaux’s La Petite Gironde called him the Bordelaise printmaker,¹⁸³ and noted his participation in the international Armory Show, and London’s Daily Mail called him “one of the French masters of etching,”¹⁸⁴ while the Montmartre publication Humanité noted that he was the master of the pastel.¹⁸⁵ Le Journal Débats reported on his studying lithography with Bresdin, his Yeux Clos and his frescos.¹⁸⁶ Most mentioned the lithographic portfolio Dans le Rêve and the painting Yeux Clos at the Luxembourg. Some mentioned his part in the Armory exhibition in New York, Chicago and Boston; all cited the Legion of Honor. The most impassioned text was by the pseudonymous Marius Leblond in L'Œuvre, who noted that Redon had found in flowers “the marvelous imagination of nature,”¹⁸⁷ and “renewed and reinvigorated French idealism in painting”;¹⁸⁸ Leblond criticized the Luxembourg Museum for only owning the one painting by Redon, in a text that was republished by other newspapers.

Yet due to the larger issues at stake in the war, Redon’s death merited scarcely more than a paragraph of text in most publications. The Petit Parisien that day instead reported on the Russians attacking the front, and the situation in Picardie. His death notices lay among the obituaries of army sergeants and infantry captains who died in battle.¹⁸⁹ Next to those announcements, the death of a 77-year-old artist who died after receiving the Legion of Honor didn’t seem so tragic.

Charles Blanc had written, “The word ‘drawing’ has two meanings. To draw an object is to represent it with pen-strokes, patches of light and shadow. To draw a scene, a building, a group is to express one's thought through these objects. That is why our forefathers wrote dessein, and this intelligent spelling made it clear that all drawing is a design, plan, or project of the mind.”¹⁹⁰ Redon’s unique contributions to painting were that
color might represent the art of closed eyes, that color, rather than drawing, might be the tactile concretization of thought; that notions of spirituality and fin-de-siècle interest in mysticism could be combined with color to produce extraordinary portraits, and that color might be the place where automatic “ebullient” abstractions play out after the stimulus of form. Such colors were expressive but also affective, creating subjective reactions in spectators. These ideas were not received whole by younger artists like Matisse, Duchamp, or Stettheimer. Instead, the interest for art historians is in precisely the way these ideas are misconstrued. Misapprehension made Redon the father of movements he could never have dreamed of, and history has—as the changes to Barr’s diagrams show us—erased and obscured some of these very strange stories of artistic transmission and transformation.

A profound shift in attitude towards the role of color took place in French painting during the last half of the nineteenth century. Color, once figured as a secondary component of a picture, was reconceived of as primary. In this shift Redon’s art occupies a pivotal role. Despite his self-presentation, he was not an outsider artist, nor were his notions about color sui generis or without precedent. I have endeavored to show that Redon, far from being an isolated artist whose artworks in color derived from psychological responses to personal loss or desire for commercial gain, must and can fruitfully be considered in conversation with the debates around color and painting taking place in France at the fin-de-siècle. By better understanding his interest in “moral color,” the role of color in the depiction of the unconscious mind and the invisible, the subversive potential in gender and race evoked by the use of color, the technological context for aniline pigment use, and the delayed and distorted relationship of observation
to painting Redon articulated in discussions of his method, we can better identify the complex propositions in painting taking place in Paris around color and representation during this era. Redon’s work defined color’s potential in relation to Delacroix’s paintings quite differently from the ways proposed by Signac, positing instead that color might be put at the service of the invisible rather than the visible, the interior rather than the exterior, and creates as much as recreates experiences for the viewer—propositions which led the way to freeing color from mimesis. Redon’s work in color left a resonant and lasting legacy that worked to redefine color in Western art as a primary quality of objects. That many of the more obscure propositions of his work—the notion of moral color, the profound relationship of color to non-Western identity positions, the role color plays in the hypnotic and transportive mechanism of “mental ebullience,” and the insistence that arbitrary color can evoke a multitude of referents—are available for resurrection is part of Redon’s continued value as a resource and subject. In examining Redon’s color work, we can see his Romantic and esoteric vision of color and its functions in relation to viewers and critics come to maturity—and within this trajectory, a chapter in the history of the role of painting as affective that anticipates contemporary notions of the centrality of the spectator and notions of participation in the work of art.


2 Ashton and Rewald, *Redon, Moreau, Bresdin*, 43.

3 Pach, *Queer Thing, Painting*, 165.

4 Ibid., 166.


“Société du Salon d’Automne,” in *Catalogue de Peinture, Dessin, Sculpture, Gravure, Architecture et Arts Décoratifs* (Paris: Ch. Hérissey, 1904), 69. Gauguin had died in the spring of that year, and the catalogue lists his name with amateur enthusiasm as, “Paul Ganguin” [sic.].


The titles “Fleurs” or “Vision” can be found in *Ibid.*, 111-14, indicating that they did not receive the titles after the fact, but rather for the exhibition itself.

The work was later sold to Bonger. Druick, ed., *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams*, 270.


“Qui dit romantisme dit art moderne,—c’est à dire intimité, spiritualité, couleur, aspiration ver l’infini, exprimées par tous les moyens que contiennent les arts.”


“Si vous êtes sensibles aux sortilèges de la couleur, vous y serez pris, dès l’abord, par ces chatoiements de pétales, des reflets d’étoffes miraculeuses, ces miroitements de madrépores humides. Laissez agir le philtre. Approchez-vous. Analysez ces petites natures mortes jetées en quelques touches sûres au milieu d’un papier gris, ces visions de rêve, cette barque d’or et d’argent sur une mer opaque, sous un ciel qui semble jonché de fleurs….Oubliez tout ce que vous avez lu sur l’apocalyptique, le satanique Redon, toute littérature, même des captieuses pages de M. J.-K. Huysmans, et ne voyez ici que le peinture à la rétine affinée, à la main merveilleusement ferme, — l’un des plus prestigieux artistes de ce temps.”

16 See Pascal Rousseau’s exhibition “Mystères de l’Ouest,” 2012, at the Centre Pompidou, for an extended examination of the fascination with teleportation as it relates to the history of abstraction.

17 “Et parfois, des trouvailles d’un coloris miraculeux; regardez son paravent où se cabre une formidable centaurese, parmi l’envol des têtes d’anges, des fleurs irréelles et des madrépores translucides. Et voyez le marchand de « ballons qui sont des visages. » Et certain profil florentin, que le divin peintre d’Isabelle d’Este eût goûté…Puis, ô charmante surprise, à côté de ces rêves de buveur d’opium, voici des giroflées, des œillets, des géraniums au pastel, d’une douce simplicité, des portraits de jeunes femmes, des dessins, une sanguine, de psychologie merveilleuse…Singulière cohabitation, en ce cerveau de peintre, des chimères mystérieuses, et du réalisme. ” Louis Vauxelles, Gil Blas, no. 9138 (October 14, 1904): 1.


21 Barr, Matisse: His Art and His Public, 16 and 47. Barr’s points can be amply substantiated by looking at the style of Matisse’s paintings between 1895-1899.

22 Barr, Matisse: His Art and His Public, 59.


ces principes ». Je n’ai pas su lui dire pourquoi. Longtemps après, j’ai compris que dans les théories des néo-impressionnistes, tous les tableaux se composent de dominantes soutenues par des complémentaires, mais ces complémentaires sont soumises à la dominante et, par conséquent, d’importance moindre. Dans mon tableau, j’avais donné autant d’importance à ces couleurs secondaires jusqu’aux principales.” Ibid., 332.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 32-33.


29 “Le choix de mes couleurs ne repose sur aucune théorie scientifique: il est basé sur l’observation, sur le sentiment, sur l’expérience de ma sensibilité. S’inspirant de certaines pages de Delacroix, un artiste comme Signac se préoccupe des complémentaires, et leur connaissance théorique le portera à employer, ici ou là, tel ou tel ton. Pour moi, je cherche simplement à poser des couleurs qui rendent ma sensation.” Ibid., 740-41.


31 “En réalité, j’estime que la théorie même des complémentaires n’est pas absolue. En étudiant les tableaux des peintres dont la connaissance des couleurs repose sur l’instinct et le sentiment, sur une analogie constante de leurs sensations; on pourrait préciser sur certains points les lois de la couleur, reculer les bornes de la théorie des couleurs telle qu’elle est actuellement admise.” Henri Matisse, “Notes d'un Peintre,” in La Grande Revue, 741.

32 Ibid., 739.

33 Over and above the still life, or landscape—terms which echoed Redon’s apprehension of the import of bringing “moral” color to history painting in Delacroix’s choice of subject matter: “Ce qui m’intéresse le plus, ce n’est ni la nature morte, ni le paysage, c’est la figure.” Ibid., 741.

34 André Gide, “Promenade au Salon d’Automne,” Gazette des Beaux Arts (December 1, 1905), in Barr, Matisse: His Art and His Public, 63.


38 Maurice Denis, “L’Salon d’Automne de 1905,” *L’Ermitage* (November 15, 1905), quoted in Barr, *Matisse*, 64. Denis and Signac, despite their differences, later co-founded the Société des Amis de Delacroix, the basis for the Musée National Eugène Delacroix.


42 Ibid., 168-170.

43 Duchamp about Cézanne in Pach, *Queer Thing, Painting*, 163.

44 Ibid., 164.

45 Ibid., 162.

46 Ibid., 163.


On this particular painting and its connection with eidetic fluids see John F. Moffitt, “Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-Garde,” in Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles County Museum and Abbeville, 1986), 257-69, although for whatever reason, Moffitt does not make the connection between Duchamp and Redon.

Ashton and Rewald, *Redon, Moreau, Bresdin*, 43.


Ibid., 78.


Ashton and Rewald, *Redon, Moreau, Bresdin*, 43.


MacRae’s annotated catalogue of the Armory Show, reproduced in Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, 21. By comparison, the highest priced sold work in the show was Cézanne’s *Colline des pauvres*, which sold to the Met for $6,700 (ibid., 131), while
works by Gauguin were valued at an incredible $40,000, van Goghs at $26,000, and remained unsold (ibid., 132).

61 Ibid., 120.

62 Ibid., 121.

63 Ibid., 336.

64 Ibid., 110; “Catalogue Raisonné,” in Ibid., 305-309.

65 The works sold were as follows: Matisse 15, van Gogh 14, Gauguin 12, Cézanne, Rousseau and Picasso 8 each; Monet, Pissarro and Renoir, 4 each; Degas 3, Lautrec 2. Redon sold 38 paintings and pastels, 29 lithographs and 7 etchings (although Marcel Duchamp, for whom all nine of nine works represented in the exhibition sold, could boast the highest percentage of sales). See Rewald, *Redon/Bresdin/Moreau*, 43.


68 Ibid., 305.


75 Ibid., 43-44.

77 Ibid., 45.


81 “Son originalité personnelle et très marquée,” Ibid.

82 Undocumented French press clippings (1916), Mellerio archives, AIC.


88 “Il fit ressourger et resplendir l’idéalisme français dans la peinture,” Ibid.

89 See, for example, the surrounding obituary notices published in the *Journal* (July 7, 1916): n. p.

APPENDIX 1

Letter from the Ministry of Fine Arts to Baron Larrey (2 May 1879), Archives Nationales de France, Doc. A.N. F21 # 1709, Paris

I have the privilege of having received the letter by which you asked for the commission of copies of the Eugene Delacroix paintings for Mr. Odilon Redon. I [illegible] to inform you that [illegible] was mistaken in that someone told him that the administration of the Beaux-Arts had commissioned copies when it is only executing lithographs after the Delacroix works. I [illegible] regret not to be able to [illegible] at the… I would have been happy to take into account Mr. Redon on your recommendation, but it is absolutely impossible to grant his request. [Agrez M. le Depute “J'ai l'honneur de vous accuser réception de la lettre par laquelle vous me demandez pour M Odilon Redon la commande de copies des tableaux d'Eugène Delacroix. J'ai X de vous informer que X X a été trompé lorsqu'on lui a dit que l'administration des Beaux-Arts avait commandé les copies car elle n'a fait exécuter que des lithographies d'après les oeuvres de Delacroix.---J'ai X le regret de ne pouvoir X X à la …--- J'aurais été heureux de savoir tenir compte à M Redon de votre recommandation mais il m'est absolument impossible de donner suite à sa demande. Agrez M. le Député.” See Redon file, Archives nationales, A.N. F21 doc. # 1709 (denial dated 2 May 1879). “You do me the honor of recommending to me Mr. Odilon Redon who would like to be commissioned with executing one of the copies after [illegible] Delacroix which will be commissioned at this moment. The Administration cannot at this moment commission anything except lithographs for the publication of the illustrious master and can’t [illegible] give the order for painted reproductions. Mr. Odilon Redon
has therefore been led in error on this subject, but I hasten to add that I would be very happy to take notice of this artist whom you honor with your interest, as soon as an occasion presents itself.” (Vous m'avez fait l'honneur de me recommander M. Odilon Redon qui désire être chargé d'exécuter l'une des copies d'après X Delacroix qui serait commandées, en ce moment. L'Administration n'a jusqu'à présent commandé que des lithographies d'après la parution de l'illustre maitre et n'est pas donné l'instruction d'en faire exécuter les reproductions peintes. M Odilon Redon a donc été induit en erreur à ce sujet, mais je m'empresse d'ajouter que je serais très heureux de tenir compte à cet artiste de l'intérêt dont vous l'honorez dès qu'une occasion s'en présentera.)
APPENDIX 2

Odilon Redon, “The Tale of Mad Martha (A Creole Story)” (1878)

Trans. Maika Pollack

In 1842, the frigate Le Berceau left France to go to Pondichéry. My father brought me with him to rejoin my mother and sister who still lived in that hot and lush country where I was born. I had just finished my education and wanted nothing more than to see my parents and childhood friends again, for a period of six years had separated me from them. I corresponded from time to time with my sister Aug and my sister Helena, and I knew what strong desire my mother had to see me, and not part from me again. As for my father, I had seen him, certainly, at intervals, but these brief appearances at the convent where he had placed me did nothing but trigger in my spirit the lasting melancholy which is known, I'm sure, to all those who were separated young from the vast solitudes of Creole lands where the simple mores, and free and plain life, were in such contrast to the spell which I had just passed between the sad and silent walls of the convent.

Often, I remembered my vagabond rambles across the edges of the vast forest that bordered my parents' home. The old negro Moutéa watched after me tenderly; the blacks, so slandered by some, so championed by others, have never been well understood: they possess a sweet humility which attracts and resonates with true feeling. I think I may say, without disturbing the memory of my dear parents, now gone, that without the presence of this old childhood guardian, attached to our family by all the force of instinct—of good instinct—I don't know what my crazy antics might have caused to happen. And so the
particular ease of Creole life, that large and strong spirit in the heart of a society which barely restrains an ancient tradition; this great atmosphere, in a word, which the spirit breathes in the midst of a virginal and vivacious nature, I missed all this in France, and my closest thoughts often made a journey to the lands under the so-distant sky of my first years.

We departed on a calm and sunny morning. The breeze that swelled the sails carried us on calm waves, and the ocean, the great ocean appeared in her supreme majesty and mystery—a vast expanse without limits, under a deep and immense azure. I still remember with pleasure the initial sensations that I experienced at this first glimpse, as I had come young to France and nothing or nearly nothing of the crossing had remained in my mind. At the moment of which I speak, I was twenty. I was in a hurry to know everything, and how vivid and various were the illusions which crossed my mind!

I won't tell you anything of the trip, which passed slowly and without incident. We hugged all the coasts of West Africa, just to the Cape of Good Hope, and all of us believed that our voyage would end happily. One night, when I remember we had heard that we were not far from Tuibalewé, we were awakened brusquely by violent commotion. The boat succumbed to the abuses of a swollen and reckless sea: a black and sinister storm menaced us. By the urgent, anxious orders the captain gave, I quickly understood the degree of danger we ran; the heavy gusts of wind, the brutal, wild swells crashed on the deck where the passengers clung with fright. We felt a strong jolt that told us all too well that we had touched a skiff: all was lost. The passengers descended with difficulty into a sloop. My father, I recall, took me in his arms, and laboriously crossing the deck as he could among the hanging poles and ropes, tried to climb down with me.
The first gleams of morning extended their grief upon this horrible scene. The figures were pale. We sat painfully in the overfull boat which we entrusted to the sailors: a small distance away one saw the sharp point of a black rock and of sand; we weren't far from the shore. But what happened then, alas… I don't know… Again, I felt ice-cold as a wave enveloped us, distantly, as I lost consciousness…

When I returned to my self, to consciousness… was it a dream? Was it delirium? I was on a bed of mosses and leaves, of large ferns, below the arc of a rustic cabin, of sorts, of which the branches of a thick and dense tree composed the foundation for this bizarre architecture. The sad memory of the sinister night quickly came back to my mind, and I believed myself saved. A soft noise caused by steps on the leaves I trusted was the presence of my father, but, oh misery, I was startled to see before me, at my feet, a giant gorilla whose liquid and disquieting eyes regarded me with a steadiness and a softness that was entirely human. He was large, of strong build, squat, and seemed at submissive attention. He held in his hand a coconut, drank, and gestured to me as if to tell me to take it. One could hear the dry, shrill little cry which these sorts of beast possess; and he began leaping on the branches, to descend, to return to me again with exotic fruits. I understood quickly the extent of my misfortune.

While going over it on the floor where my sad fate had cast me, I began to understand what had passed during the hours I had passed unconscious. The gorilla had undoubtedly gathered me on the sand of the coast and had thus carried me into these leaves.

I don't know how long I stayed supine and half-dead at the fright of my situation
and of my unhappiness. But I must say that the strange animal, at once submissive and
disquieting, tended to me with care, and with a sensitivity to my weakened state which
astonished me, as you might imagine. He would leave, returning to the small thatched
cabin, without losing sight of me at the slightest movement I would make. He brought
silky mosses back from outdoors with which he filled the floor, and which he arranged
around my head with attention and thoughtful delicacy. These mosses of a virgin land
resembled the richest supple tapestries made by Oriental hands. The fruits he brought
scented the air and would intoxicate me almost to delirium. The coconut, the papaya, the
mango, the guava, the pineapple, I had finally found them again and their soft flavors
carried me back to my earliest childhood, and to I don’t know what joy, the nectar of my
first years.

I was weak, the night came and with it all the nocturnal terrors. The monkey took a
strong rod and squatted at the entrance of the hut which he practically blocked with his
large shoulders. At the least movement that I made, he emitted a hoarse and strange cry. I
heard well, during that breathless night, the howls of ferocious beasts panting—they had
no doubt scented me; but my misery, my distress, the weakness, which caused me such
strong and unexpected feelings, soon overcame my fright. I slept as if intoxicated.

From the first rays of the day, a sort of immense and confused rustling woke me,
the tones of which are difficult to describe. The lush forest that sheltered me was filled
with birds that sounded a supreme song. This celestial harmony was like the cries of an
infinite love. No music has resounded for me to equal this concert of nature and of
unconscious life. To hear this each morning, at the hour when I would begin to pray,
would become one of my many pure pleasures and one of my most cherished
consolations.

Whoever who has suffered a lot, whoever has borne grievances in human society, moreover, will not gain calm nor rest but in relation to the natural unconscious. The tree, the flower, the rock, the river, these are the wounded soul’s confidantes. They are beloved because they harm no one. Aren't they the distant refuge, the soothing balm, benevolent to those who were never consoled by love or by justice?

I was resigned to my defeat and strong enough the next day to wake, to walk, to explore the strange sites where I had run aground! When the large ape saw my first steps, he jumped, walked, exhibiting the signs of great cheer. I had scarcely thought of keeping myself with him, as I had quickly seen that this strange companion hardly sought to let go of his prey. I left the cave and descended by a dark, narrow path just to the base of a little hill where I discovered the picturesque and varied location where I had been forsaken. I quickly saw that this was an uninhabited island, undiscovered, and I was aware then of the enormity of my misfortune.

The island was large, dense, and thick with vegetation. Before me stretched a long shore which faded into infinity, an image like and no less limitless than my despair. I was lost. The vast sea and peaceful vapors under a clear sky, of a heat and brilliance particular to the skies of the tropics, and this vigorous expanse of mute life under the noise of the vast ocean, plunged me into an infinite sadness and gave meaning to all my misery. I burst into tears, and letting them fall on the sand, head facing towards the sun, I implored God.

An eternal murmur responded to my pleas. Only the great conquering ocean spoke, rumbling ironically and responding to my sobs. The debris of the boat was on the beach,
fragments of mattresses, wooden boards, some objects which I recognized to have belonged to travelers no doubt now vanished. I found a small wooden box, well sealed, which I had filled with objects intended for my sisters and my mother, notably several books and white linens. It was easy for me to brush off the sand from where it was half-buried and open it by means of a fragment of iron fallen from the wreck. These objects quickly made me feel with greater bitterness and agony the distance that I had from any human contact.

What contrast in appearance these things made: particularly a mirror to reflect me to myself, as if God, in leaving me in these locations of exile, also wanted to give me the image of my own face which no being in the world would ever be able to see again. The monster who watched me took from me each object one by one, with a surprising alacrity, turning them in all directions, trying to bite those which seemed to him the most unexpected or the most brilliant. He also saw himself in the mirror, searching in it in vain to understand this apparition of himself.

I piously carried these vestiges into the cabin where I would henceforth reside, and installed each thing by suspending it in the foliage. A small crucifix, the bands of which were useful to protect me from inclement nights; because despite the beautiful sky which rolled out before me, my time in the North had changed me, and had rendered me scarcely able to return to the Creole life, where as you know, it is permissible to pass entire nights under the half-open roofs…¹

¹ For the handwritten transcript of the original story, see carton #14 16:1, “Essais Littéraires: Stories and Poetic Prose,” in the André Mellerio archives, Ryerson Library, and Burnham Archives, Art Institute of Chicago.
ii The cradle.

iii Redon seems to momentarily forget that his narrator has only one sister?

iv It is unclear to me why touching a skiff [esquif] would sink the ship. Perhaps he means their boat hit a small fishing vessel? However, this does not at all fit the context of the desert isle. I suspect Redon actually meant something like a reef [un récifs].

v André Mellerio, Redon’s biographer, considers this story unfinished. I’m not so sure.
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Fig. 29. — Ecriture automatique de Hub. A partir de 1 se produit l'écriture automatique spontanée; en 2, elle se poursuit quoiqu'on ait rompu le contact avec la main du sujet. Le mouvement reste régulier.

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"Hub," Alfred Binet, Suggestibilité, 1890.

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Figure 3.19. "Delans," Alfred Binet, Suggestibilité, 1890.
"Obre," Alfred Binet, Suggestibilité, 1890.
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Figure 5.8. Henri Matisse, *Nu bleu (Souvenir de Biskra) (Blue Nude (Memory of Biskra))*, 1907. Oil on canvas. 36.75 x 55.25 in (92.1 x 140.3 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Cone Collection.
Figure 5.9. Marcel Duchamp, *Portrait de Gustave mère de Candel (Portrait of Gustave Candel’s Mother)*, 1911-12. Oil on canvas. 24.01 x 17.12 in (61 x 43.5 cm). Private Collection.
Figure 5.10. Marcel Duchamp, *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel*, 1910. Oil on canvas. 39.5 x 25.86 in (100.3 x 65.7 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
Figure 5.11. Marcel Duchamp, *Draft of the Japanese Apple Tree*, 1911. Oil on canvas. 24 x 19.75 in (60.96 x 50.10 cm). Collection of Dina Vierny, Paris.
Figure 5.12. Initial sketch for the 1913 Armory Show exhibition.
Figure 5.13. Odilon Redon, *Roger et Angélique (Roger and Angelica)*, c. 1910. Pastel on paper on canvas. 36.5 x 28.75 in (92.7 x 73 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 5.14. Redon Room in the Armory Show at the Art Institute of Chicago, room #26, c. 1913.
Figure 5.15. Florine Stettheimer, *Morning (The White Curtains)*, 1915-16. Oil on canvas. 32 x 36.18 in (81.4 x 91.9 cm). Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA.