



OPILON REDDY



**ODILON REDON (French: 1840-1916)***Profile Against a Blue Ground*

Pastel on paper: 17 3/8 x 12 1/8 inches

44.2 x 30.8 cm.

Signed lower right: *ODILON REDON*

Executed 1899

The present work, which belonged to the artist's son Ari Redon, is an important new addition to the corpus of pastels by Redon depicting single figures in profile. Acquired years before Ari's death by the art historian and dealer Mira Jacob, it thus did not form part of the very large donation of Odilon Redon paintings, pastels, prints and drawings bequeathed by Ari and his wife to the French State. (On the latter subject, see R. Bacou, *Musée du Louvre: La donation Ari et Suzanne Redon*, Paris, 1984.)

The model for this image of wide-eyed innocence is in all likelihood Ari himself, whose birth in 1889 (especially after the heart-rending loss, some two and a half years earlier, of Redon's other son Jean) inspired in the artist a newfound optimism and sense of wonder. Such physiognomic features as the small, upturned nose and retracted chin—emphasized here by the profile format—are certainly apparent in other pastels and drawings from roughly the same time that are known to depict Ari. Comparable likenesses in pastel are *Portrait d'Ari en rouge* (Wildenstein 34; private collection), which is signed and dated 1894; *Ari au col marin* of c. 1895 (Wildenstein 37; Musée d'Orsay, Paris); and the slightly later *Ari* (Wildenstein 39; private collection).

On our pastel's original backing is an inscription in red chalk, *OR 1899*, which may have been written by Ari Redon. This date not only accords well with the style of this masterfully executed pastel, it also conforms with the apparent age of Redon's son. Redon in fact tended to provide greater elaboration and visual *éclat* to images of his son as the boy grew older, a trend noted in Alec Wildenstein's catalogue raisonné: "...au fur et à mesure que le garçon grandit et que s'affirment son caractère et sa personnalité, Redon portraitiste enrichit sa ligne, cerne plus précisément le galbe du visage." (See A. Wildenstein, assisted by A. Lacau St Guily and M-C. Decroocq, *Odilon Redon: catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, I, Paris, 1992, p. 19.)

In the case of the present work, Redon used Ari's likeness as the point of departure in creating what is essentially a rarified, otherworldly icon, rather than as an essay in pure portraiture. Thus the young figure wears a gold-fringed veil, indicative of priesthood; this feature appears in several other "profile" compositions by the master, as in a much earlier pastel, *Portrait de femme au voile rose* of c. 1885 (Wildenstein 2572), and a pen and ink drawing (Wildenstein 166), in which the distinctive features of Ari may be made out.

Ari also appears in sacerdotal garb in a drawing (Wildenstein 33), in which he faces the viewer and is posed against a Romanesque arcade. That feature, related to the column visible here at the left, may have been intended as another symbol of sanctitude. Here it is worth noting that Redon originally placed an arch above the figure's head. As his composition evolved, however, he obscured this curve with a sweep of pinkish orange pastel, which he then fixed. (On Redon's pastel technique at

this time, see the essay by H.K. Stratis, "Beneath the Surface: Redon's Methods and Materials," in exh. cat., Chicago, Art Institute, and elsewhere, *Odilon Redon, Prince of Dreams, 1840-1916*, 1994-1995, pp. 372-373.) The artist further reduced the effect of the architectural feature at the left by introducing two vertical bands of yellow over the blue column.

The parapet framing this image below is an ancient device indicating holy or ruler status (examples such as Madonna and Child images by Giovanni Bellini). At the dawn of the Renaissance, it had also become a favorite device in carved and painted profile portraiture by artists such as Jan van Eyck and Desiderio da Settignano. Redon adopted the parapet for this and several other profiles from around the same time, such as Wildenstein nos. 140, 335, 336, 339 and 2567. Not only did the form serve a commemorative purpose, it distanced the half-length figure from the viewer, thus providing an additional element of unreality to the composition.

Contemporary with Redon's newfound fascination with the medium of pastel, that is the early 1890s, was a growing interest in religious subjects. More pietistic than orthodox, practicing Catholic, the artist nevertheless befriended Catholic writers and painters, such as Maurice Denis and Édouard Schuré. In fact in composing the present work, he may have had in mind a passage from the latter's *Les grands initiés, esquisse de l'histoire secrète des religions* (Paris, 1889), an inscribed copy of which was in Redon's possession: "Legend wove its golden and azure veil; the history of Joseph and Mary, the Annunciation, and even the youth of Mary in the Temple." (Ibid., p. 460; for this trans., see Chicago, 1994-1995 [cited above], p. 227). Given this context, it is even possible that Redon's intention here was to depict the young Virgin Mary at the time of the feast day of the Purification.

The bravura handling of pastel in this work is outstanding, from the gossamer strokes of varying shades of blue to the *couleur changeante* effect of the figure's robes. The latter passage particularly recalls pastels of the 1880s by Degas, an artist whom Redon revered.

Mira Jacob, who acquired the present pastel from Ari Redon, was a champion of the work of Redon and James Ensor. In 1955 she founded the Galerie Le Bateau-Lavoir dedicated to works on paper of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1998, she donated a large collection of modern art, including seventy-three works on paper by the two artists, to the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Strasbourg. With Jeanne L. Wasserman, she also translated Redon's journal, *À soi-même*, into English (O. Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art, and Artists*, New York, 1986).

## PROVENANCE

Ari Redon (1889-1972), son of the artist, Paris  
 Mira Jacob (1911?-2004), Paris; by descent to a  
 Private collection, until 2008  
 Private collection

## REFERENCES

E. Wilson, "Reviews, New York: 'Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon and The Nabis,'" *Art News*, CIX, No. 3, March 2010, p. 107. Illustrated (color)

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## EXHIBITIONS

New York, Wildenstein & Co., *Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon and The Nabis*, November 4, 2009 – April 13, 2010 (no catalogue)