

Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard

Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection

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1 Odilon Redon
Lemon and pepper on a white tablecloth, 1901
Gemeentemuseum, The Hague
(105)*

Foreword

The heart of any museum is its collection, and almost every active institution in the field endeavours to increase its holdings by means of judicious acquisitions that broaden and enhance what it can offer. Collecting is not an end in itself; its purpose is to ensure that works of art are secured for the public and are accessible to them. The key is the narrative that the museum wants the collection to tell, and every addition to it should make the visitor's experience more nuanced and more fulfilling.

With this goal in mind, the Van Gogh Museum pursues an active collecting policy. Our aim is not so much to expand the already extensive collection of works by Vincent van Gogh as to round it out with the work of his contemporaries. We want to show the broader artistic environment in which Van Gogh operated, focusing particularly on the artists who inspired him, on the people he knew and with whom he corresponded, and on those who were in turn influenced by him. In recent years, with the support of many generous funds and donors, we have been able to add important works by such major names as Paul Gauguin, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Maurice de Vlaminck.

We were presented with an exceptional opportunity in 1996, when the heirs of Andries Bonger offered his collection for sale. In 1879, at the age of eighteen, Bonger left his home in Amsterdam and went to work as a clerk with a firm of merchants in Paris. There he met and formed a close friendship with Vincent van Gogh's brother, the art dealer Theo van Gogh. Through Theo, Bonger came into contact with the art world and was soon at home among the artists of the French avant-garde. He introduced Theo to his sister Johanna, whom Theo married in 1889, strengthening the links between the Bonger and Van Gogh families. Bonger was also one of the few private individuals to acquire paintings by Vincent van Gogh in the late 1880's, when the artist was virtually unknown.

In 1890 Bonger made the acquaintance of Emile Bernard at Vincent van Gogh's funeral, and in 1891, through Bernard, he met Odilon Redon. These two artists were to bring about a dramatic change in Bonger's tastes in art as he became fascinated by their Symbolist work. On his return to the

* The numbers between brackets in the captions refer to the descriptions of the works on pp. 105–47.

Netherlands in 1892 he began to collect their work on a large scale, building up a first-rate, representative overview of their oeuvres.

After Andries Bonger's death in 1936, his heirs began to dispose of works from his collection. During his lifetime Bonger had already bequeathed or sold eight paintings by Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, but now a number of Symbolist works were offered to various museums, among them the Rijksmuseum, the Kröller-Müller Museum and the Rijksmuseum Twenthe. The Van Gogh Museum also received works from the collection on this occasion. In 1969, Emile Bernard's *View of Pont-Aven* was donated to the Van Gogh Museum, the Vincent van Gogh Foundation bought the *Portrait of Andries Bonger, his wife Annie and Emile Bernard* by the same artist, and the museum acquired a number of pastels by Odilon Redon, among them the spectacular work *The boat*.

In 1996 the works that remained in the collection were put up for sale by the heirs. The Kingdom of the Netherlands purchased them all under the provisions of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage Act and, in accordance with the heirs' wishes, placed them with the Van Gogh Museum. There were one hundred and seven items, including fifty works by Redon, almost as many by Bernard and eight by other artists. This acquisition greatly enhanced the Van Gogh Museum's holdings. At a stroke, the museum had received one of the most important groups of works by Odilon Redon in the Netherlands, and had also acquired works of sufficient stature to be able to present Symbolism, one of the most important artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the public.

For an acquisition of such magnitude government support was then – and still is – crucial. Our special thanks go to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and particularly to the then State Secretary, the late Aad Nuis, and to Charlotte van Rappard-Boon, not only for their financial support but also for their confidence in entrusting this collection to the Van Gogh Museum to hold. Ronald de Leeuw, Fred Leeman, Louis van Tilborgh and Ton Boxma were closely involved on behalf of the Van Gogh Museum at the time of the purchase, and we should like to take this opportunity to thank them too.

Since it was acquired, parts of the collection have been exhibited in the Van Gogh Museum on numerous occasions. The museum has also undertaken art historical and technical research into various aspects of it, and digital photographs of the objects have been taken. The results of these activities are now presented to the public in the book and exhibition *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bonger Collection*.

All this, of course, was only possible because the heirs to the Bonger Collection preserved these magnificent works of art for the Netherlands. We owe them a great debt of gratitude – and look back with pleasure on their hospitality, their boundless patience and dedication, and their support during the preparations for the exhibition. We greatly appreciate their willingness to part temporarily with several of the much-loved paintings still in their possession. The Van Gogh Museum also thanks Elise en Cees Wessels, who helped facilitate this exhibition and the institutional lenders who have made it possible to exhibit some of the works that left the Bonger Collection at an earlier stage.

This book provides the first comprehensive and lavishly illustrated overview of the Bonger Collection as a whole. We thank Fred Leeman for his years of dedication and determination: his research brought to light a great deal of information and knowledge about the collection and the man who assembled it, and laid a sound scholarly basis for further study. Aukje Vergeest and Chris Stolwijk enhanced his text with their editorial insights and additions. Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho's contribution on the photographs of Bonger's home throw light on him as a private collector. The overview of the original Bonger Collection means that this book is also a reference work.

The purchase of a collection of such size and coherence is also a rare chance for restorers to find out about artists' methods. It was an opportunity gratefully seized by René Boitelle, Jennifer Barnett, Esther van Duijn, Nico Lingbeek, Renée Velsink and Bianca van Velzen, who restored the collection with great care.

Many people worked enthusiastically on the production of this book. Thanks go to the editorial board: Leo Jansen, Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho and Marije Vellekoop. Suzanne Bogman and Geri Klazema brought about its publication with characteristic resolve. They were aided by a skilled team, each of whom contributed her own particular expertise: Kate Bell, Aggie Langedijk, Lynne Richards and Marjo Starink. Printers and publishers Waanders supported the publication and produced this book, and we are grateful to its managing director Wim Waanders, Peter van de Ploeg, Jacqueline van Wijngaarden, Jan de Ruiter and Gerdinand Nijhuis.

The reproductions of works in the Van Gogh Museum were provided by members of staff and outside experts. We should particularly like to mention Scott Geffert and Howard Goldstein (Center for Digital Imaging), Thijs Quispel, Maurice Tromp (Kleurgamma), Marianne Peereboom and Marije Wissink.

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Axel Rüger
Director, Van Gogh Museum



2 Andries Bongers in his home at 22 Vossiusstraat, Amsterdam, 1908
Private collection, Netherlands

A Businessman's Passion

On Tuesday, 26 January 1937, a year to the day after the death of Andries (Dries) Bonger (1861-1936), his widow Françoise Bonger-van der Borch van Verwolde opened their magnificent house at 13 Gabriël Metsustraat in Amsterdam to the public for a limited period. The walls were filled from floor to ceiling with Bonger's impressive art collection, which included a series of works by Emile Bernard and numerous important Symbolist works by Odilon Redon. The opening of this treasure house did not go unremarked: the critic Kaspar Niehaus described Bonger as a 'progressive patron of the arts' and an 'un-Dutch phenomenon', a 'type in the genre of the French amateurs'.¹ The visitors were much impressed by the collection – some one hundred and forty paintings, and drawings, pastels and decorative objects of international importance.

Just a few years later, the carefully amassed collection began to be broken up and many works found their way to collections in the Netherlands and abroad. Eventually, in 1996, the Kingdom of the Netherlands was able to acquire the remaining part of the collection from the heirs so that it could be housed as a permanent loan in the Van Gogh Museum. The hundred or so surviving works are a welcome addition to the art of Vincent van Gogh and his circle. This loan reflects and perpetuates Bonger's relationship with the Van Gogh family: in the 1880s, when he was living in Paris, Bonger was a close friend of Vincent's brother Theo, who married Bonger's younger sister Johanna (Jo) in 1889.

Bonger started collecting in 1893, after his time in Paris, the capital of culture – an experience that had a lasting impact on him. His increasingly successful career in insurance provided the financial resources he needed to indulge his passion. In the space of barely fifteen years he put together an extensive assembly of the work of just a few contemporary artists, art which made him, by Dutch standards, ahead of his time. Most of his acquisitions were made not through the art trade but through his personal contacts and ties of friendship with these artists. Such contacts were essential to Bonger, convinced as he was that to appreciate works of art one needed a profound insight into the spiritual and intellectual world of the artist.

¹ See Niehaus 1937, p. 131.

By about 1908, Bonger considered his collection was complete. From then on he devoted himself exclusively to his business career. His work done, he spent his time among his books and his art collection and ‘always dreamt of the years of his youth in Paris’, as his nephew Vincent Willem van Gogh, the founder of the Van Gogh Museum, recalled in 1963.² Bonger lived a very quiet life, and although he occasionally received visitors who wanted to see his collection in his home, he did not publicize it in any way. He would visit his beloved Paris several times a year to see friends and go to exhibitions. He shared this world, which provided him with what might be described as a spiritual counterweight to his everyday existence as an insurance broker, with very few people. On his death, therefore, it was first and foremost his achievements as an expert and incorruptible specialist in marine insurance that were commemorated. He was, for instance, the senior partner in insurance brokers W.E. Mercier and Sickler, Bonger & Co., director of the marine insurance company Verzekering Maatschappij ‘De Zee’, and for many years chairman of the underwriters’ association, the Amsterdamse Vereeniging van Assuradeuren.

Who was this collector, this man who played so many different parts: friend of progressive artists, passionate lover of literature and Symbolist art, introvert, upright insurance underwriter? What was his collection like? What were the artistic principles on which he based it? How did it come into being? Where did he buy his art? Sadly, Bonger himself wrote little about his collecting activities and the underlying motives, but it is possible to build up from his prolific correspondence with family, artists, writers and friends and from other documents a picture of this patron of the arts and collector, who largely kept himself to himself and enjoyed his treasures in silence.

AN UN-DUTCH PHENOMENON

At the end of his life Bonger owned an ‘ensemble’, as he called his carefully and lovingly amassed collection, of some two hundred and fifty objects: paintings, drawings, prints and applied art. One striking aspect is that relatively few artists are represented in it: Van Gogh, Bonnard, Cézanne, Fantin-Latour, Bresdin, Gauguin, Laval, Monticelli, Ter Maten, Toulouse-Lautrec, Chéret, Calame and Delacroix. At the heart of the collection, however, are works by Bernard and Redon. Bonger concentrated on these two artists, whom he knew personally; he bought directly from them and commissioned them to make work for him. This enabled him to bring together a comprehensive overview of Bernard’s work from various periods and in diverse techniques: paintings, prints and drawings, but also tapestries, panels designed especially for him and a mirror frame. His collection of Redon’s work was representative of the artist’s oeuvre and included ninety prints – his entire graphic output.

In 1930 the eminent art critic M. D. Henkel explained what it was, in his view, that made Bonger’s collection so outstanding: ‘He bought work from artists when they were not yet celebrities and still had to fight for recognition.’³ Other Dutch collectors around 1900 tended to concentrate on less progressive art than Bonger, who was already buying work by Cézanne, Van Gogh and Redon when they were little known or appreciated in the Netherlands. Redon’s original dream representations were initially met with incomprehen-



3 Odilon Redon
Obsession, 1894
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(219)

2 Vincent Willem van Gogh, *Memoirandum A. Bonger*, 1 January 1963, Vincent van Gogh Foundation Archives.

3 ‘Die Werke wurden erworben, als die Künstler noch keine Berühmtheit, sondern noch Werdende und Ringende waren’; see Henkel 1930, p. 598.



4 Paul Cézanne
Cup, glass and fruit, c. 1877
Jan Krugier and Marie-Anne Krugier-Poniatowski, Geneva
(74)