

The Indescribable Meaning of Art--Odilon Redon's Floral Paintings and the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity

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"Everything in art happens in the inner world. Words falsify it."

- Odilon Redon

Abstract. This paper examines the late floral paintings of Odilon Redon, produced between the 1910s and the final years of his life. It argues that Redon's floral paintings function as phenomenological events that actively restructure the viewer's experience of viewing and enable intersubjectivity with the artist. Methodologically, the paper employs a phenomenological approach grounded in Husserl's concept of epoché. Rather than decoding iconography or tracing symbolic meaning, the analysis attends to how Redon's paintings suspend the viewer's habitual reception. Through the intensely saturated flowers in formation and the presence of eye-like flowers that appear to return the viewer's gaze, Redon disrupts representational reading and destabilises the conventional subject-object hierarchy of viewing. By situating Redon's floral paintings at the intersection of Symbolist aesthetics and phenomenological experience, this paper ultimately argues that the meaning of art emerges not through language or symbolic representations, but through intersubjectivity, which remains indescribable.

Keywords: Odilon Redon, Phenomenology, Epoché Intersubjectivity, Aesthetic Experience

1. Introduction

When encountering Odilon Redon's floral paintings, one can feel overwhelmed, arrested by colour, unsettled by form, and unable to articulate precisely what one is seeing or feeling. This paper takes that inarticulacy not as a failure of interpretation, but as the key to understanding Redon's aesthetic power. Unlike many floral paintings, such as those by Fantin-Latour, which allow identification and symbolic decoding, Redon's flowers refuse conceptual stabilisation. They disrupt the usual viewing procedure and alter the subject-object hierarchy, relocating aesthetic meaning in lived experience rather than in representation.

This paper argues that Redon's floral paintings evoke a phenomenological epoché that suspends ordinary perception, and that within this suspended perceptual field, the artist's consciousness encounters the viewer's consciousness without linguistic or symbolic mediation, enabling a direct intersubjectivity. Meaning emerges at the point of this intersubjectivity; yet, because this encounter precedes both language and reflective perception, the meaning it generates remains ultimately indescribable and exclusive to the two agents involved.

2. Historiography and the problem of interpretation

Although Redon holds a central place in studies of Symbolism and early modernism, scholarship on his floral paintings has largely prioritised his intentions and stylistic development over the viewer's experience. Berger divided Redon's flower paintings into spatial, decorative, and hybrid phases, elevated them to serious modernist experimentation, but remained largely painter-centred [1]. More recent scholarship has approached Redon's work from a psychological angle, examining his engagement with inner states of mind and unconsciousness [2].

What remains underdeveloped is how these paintings are experienced by the viewer and how they generate meaning. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding the viewing encounter itself and by treating Redon's flowers as devices that actively engineer perceptual suspension.

3. Methodology

This paper employs phenomenology as both a methodological framework and an analytic lens. Specifically, it draws on Husserl's account of epoché to examine how Redon's floral paintings restructure the act of viewing itself. Rather than treating the artworks as objects to be decoded for symbolic meaning or historical allegory, this methodology attends to how colour, form, and gaze are given to consciousness through lived experience.

The analysis proceeds through close visual reading informed by phenomenological description. As one encounters Redon's floral paintings, a passive epoché, an involuntary suspension of the natural attitude of the viewer, is induced. Rather than deliberately performing Husserl's methodological reduction, the viewer is momentarily pulled out of representational expectations, stylistic classification, and symbolic interpretation. The focus, therefore, shifts to the pure experiential effects the works generate in the viewer.

Importantly, this methodology shifts the locus of meaning away from authorial intention alone and toward the relational encounter between artwork and viewer. Meaning is treated not as a stable content embedded in the image, but as something that emerges through inner interaction within the encounter with the painting.

3.1. Epoché

According to Husserl, everyday perception operates within what he terms the "natural attitude," a mode in which the world appears already organised, meaningful, and conceptually structured [3]. Objects are immediately recognised as things with names, functions, and categories. The phenomenological epoché interrupts this automatic process by bracketing presuppositions about meaning and allowing phenomena to appear as sheer experience, prior to interpretation [4].

This paper adopts epoché not as a philosophical method imposed by the viewer, but as an effect produced by Redon's paintings themselves. Rather than asking what the flowers represent, this paper attends to how they induce the state of epoché and reorganise perceptual experience.

3.2. Art as inner creation

The phenomenological effects experienced by the viewer are neither accidental nor merely the result of stylistic experimentation. They are rooted in Redon's own artistic creation as an interior, pre-verbal process.

In Odilon Redon (1913), André Mellerio recalls asking the artist to explain where his images came from and what they meant. Redon, according to Mellerio, grew visibly embarrassed and

ultimately admitted that he could not explain or justify his works in logical terms. He responded simply: "Everything in art happens in the inner world. Words falsify it" [5]. While Mellerio himself interpreted the flowers as spiritual beings suggestive of redemption and salvation, Redon's own remarks indicate a different emphasis.

In Redon's notebooks, *À soi-même*, he wrote that "Everything is done by docilely submitting to the arrival of the 'unconscious,'" and "My drawings place us in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate" [6]. These remarks indicate that Redon's flowers grow from an isolated mental space withdrawn from ordinary logic, social discourse, and empirical observation, but from a domain of dreams and fluctuating states of unconsciousness that resist linguistic capture.

4. The evocation of *epoché*

4.1. Firework sensation

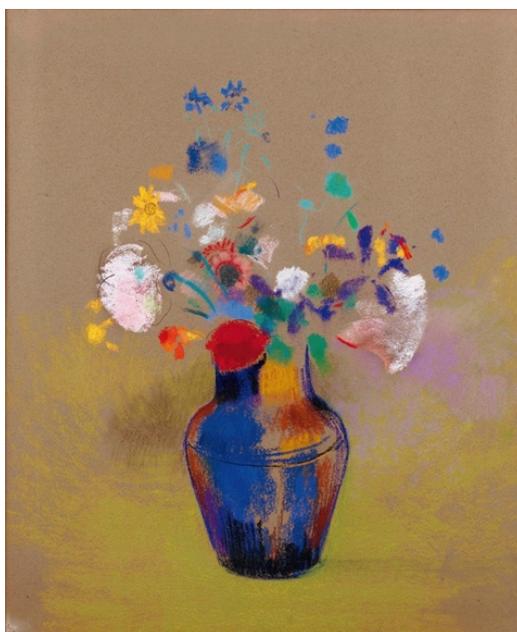


Figure 1. *Fleurs sur fond gris* (1916)

This painting was created in the last year of Redon's life. Here, the flowers do not sit still in the vase but detonate outward. The vase swells with electric blues and vivid yellows, creating the impression of internal combustion; everything appears and explodes. According to Berger, this work belongs to Redon's "decorative" phase, in which the bouquet becomes a field of dynamic chromatic energies rather than an arrangement of flowers [1]. The individual blooms are barely traceable, and the stems of the flowers are almost missing; the blossoms seem to grow not from actual botanical structure but from an invisible energy emanating from the vase. The flowers exist like momentary illuminations, like fireworks that burst and fade in the same instant.

However, the bouquet generates a firework-like sensation without directly depicting fireworks in the floral forms themselves. The viewer experiences the painting as if witnessing a firework display without being consciously aware of the association. It is precisely in this mismatch, between cognition and sensation, that a brief moment of *epoché* becomes possible. One only "knows" that one is looking at a bouquet painting, yet this cognition cannot fully align with the experience of "fireworks". The viewer does not actively choose to perform the *epoché* in order to experience the

painting; instead, the painting forces this epoché on the viewer without warning by generating an experience that cognition cannot assimilate. As a result, habitual judgment stalls and interpretation halts, and sensation momentarily takes over. What is left is an experiential clearing generated by the collapse of object stability and the amplification of chromatic intensity.

Studies on aesthetics and psychobiology suggest that visual stimuli like Redon's bouquet can hold sensational attention before conceptual recognition. Berlyne's theory of "arousal potential" shows that stimuli that are high in complexity, novelty, and luminance temporarily inhibit analytical cognition and elicit focused, exploratory attention. With exploratory attention elicited by Redon's flowers, the viewer is not searching for meaning but tracking sensation [7]. In psychological terms, the mind is held in a heightened state of sensory engagement before conceptual processing can stabilise the image, which corresponds to the suspension of the natural attitude that Husserl describes.

Redon's bouquet thus operates not as a stable perceptual object but as a sensory event that presses itself upon the viewer, preventing habitual cognition from taking hold. Once cognition is suspended by the mismatch between initial recognition and eruptive sensation, the chromatic force of the image occupies the viewer's sensational attention and the field of consciousness, during which the viewer encounters the art as sheer experience.

4.2. The autonomous stare



Figure 2. Vase de fleurs (1912)

In this painting, Redon fills a cobalt jug with anemones whose airy petals radiate in pink, crimson, and milky white, creating the optical effect of an iris surrounding a dark void that resembles dilated pupils.

These anemones do not merely resemble eyes; they function as eyes with their own authority. The bouquet behaves less like an arrangement of flowers and more like a cluster of watchful eyes. The dark centres seem to draw the gaze inward, as though absorbing vision rather than reflecting it. They stare autonomously; rather than gazing at a harmless still-life, one feels gazed upon. There is an almost hungry, predatory stillness in their stare. The flowers wait and watch, and the viewers become the prey of the image's attention.

This reversal of gaze destroys the epistemic privilege normally granted to the observer, echoing Sartre's idea of the gaze as a moment in which visual sovereignty collapses—to be seen is to lose

mastery and become exposed [8]. Under the sensation of being "stared at," the viewers are hypnotised, exposed and controlled. Such a reversed hierarchy disrupts and destabilises the habitual cognitive structure and process of viewing. The dislocation of power suspends viewers' judgment and interpretation by disrupting perceptual control. Viewers are passively shifted from the subject to the object, from the perceiver to the passive receiver, who can no longer dominate the world around them through naming, categorising or interpreting, and can only experience and sense things as they are experienced. Habitual cognition is passively dismantled, opening the space for epoché.

Crucially, this transition occurs before the viewer consciously recognises the flowers as eyes. The loss of perceptual privilege happens before the reflective thought "these flowers are staring at me". The viewer undergoes a disturbance in experience, a subtle but immediate sense of exposure without knowing why. The flowers' eye-like function exerts its force before the mind has formed the idea that they resemble eyes at all. By being unconsciously gazed upon, the viewer loses their reactive cognitive capacity to counter the gaze, allowing the epoché to unfold.

5. Meaning of art through intersubjectivity

Once the viewer's habitual perceptual and cognitive structures are bracketed through epoché, the artwork becomes a site where intercommunication becomes possible. In this state, the viewer does not confront a meaning encoded by the artist but encounters the artist himself.

This encounter creates intersubjectivity, not because it produces mutual understanding in the conventional, communicative sense, but because it establishes a link between the viewer and the artist that transcends language or symbolic meaning. The viewer's consciousness, without reliance on linguistic or conceptual grounds, resonates with the artist's consciousness at the moment of creation, a state also withdrawn from linguistic and logical explanation.

In this sense, Redon's paintings do not transmit thoughts or intentions; they offer a field in which consciousness meets consciousness through shared experience rather than comprehension. At the centre of this encounter, meaning is not pre-given or universally accessible but is formed within the relation itself, belonging uniquely to the two agents involved.

However, this intersubjectivity differs slightly from that described by Husserl, which often relies on shared structures of meaning and worldhood. Here, intersubjectivity precedes language and reflection; it remains fundamentally indescribable.

6. Conclusion

Redon's floral paintings realise their meanings through intersubjectivity. By inducing an involuntary epoché, his work destabilises the habitual perception of viewers. In this suspended field, the viewer confronts and communicates directly with the artist without linguistic or symbolic mediation. Meaning emerges as a moment of intersubjective resonance, brief and pre-reflective, and remains fundamentally indescribable. They thus prove, with remarkable clarity, the truth of Redon's own claim: art's meaning happens in the inner world, where words cannot reach or describe.

References

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