Odilon Redon’s *Une femme revêtue du soleil* (1899) is the sixth of twelve plates from the artist’s final lithographic series: an album of images illustrating the Apocalypse of Saint John, the last book of the New Testament, also known as the book of Revelation.¹ The twelve plates correspond to different sections of the biblical text, and the captions below each image are quotations taken from the book in sequential order. The caption “une femme revêtue du soleil” refers to chapter 12 of the book of Revelation in which a heavenly figure described as “a woman clothed with the sun” is set in a cosmic battle against a seven-headed

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¹ Redon executed an extraordinary number of lithographic albums over a period of twenty years, beginning in 1879 with *In the Dream* and followed by such other series as *To Edgar Poe* (1882), *Homage to Goya* (1885), and three albums dedicated to Gustave Flaubert’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1879, 1889, and 1895). He was already transitioning to color works at the time he created the *Apocalypse of Saint John*; this was his last album in the lithographic medium before he shifted over fully to pastels and oils. See Francis Carey, ed., *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 297.
fire-breathing dragon.² Redon dedicates a separate plate each to the woman and the dragon.³ In his print of the woman he devotes as much attention to the bright orb of light as to the woman herself, dramatically capturing the impacts of light and shadow that play across the woman’s delicate features, making parts of her glow while the rest of her body is submerged in total darkness. This emphasis on light and dark may also allude to the battle that takes place between good and evil in the biblical narrative.

Though Redon himself did not proclaim allegiance to the Symbolist movement of his time, his work was and continues to be associated with it. Symbolism emerged in the 1880s as a reaction against the perceived naturalism of the Impressionist movement of the 1870s. Redon and his contemporaries, such as Paul Gauguin, Gustave Moreau, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, felt that the Impressionists were too dependent on optical sensations and descriptions of the natural world. Instead they looked to mythology, religion and mysticism, and Symbolist literature to express their inner thoughts, reflections, and imaginations through the vehicle of art.⁴ Writer Gustave Kahn contended in 1886 that the aim of Symbolism was to “objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the idea), instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament).”⁵

² The book of Revelation contains warnings to Christians about the consequences of straying from their faith and spirituality through a series of allegorical narratives with moral messages. The woman in Rev. 12 is a heavenly being about to give birth, pursued by a dragon with seven heads and ten horns. The child, who was to reign over all the nations of the Earth, instead is swept up to God while the woman flees into the desert for safety. For these reasons the woman is commonly interpreted as the Virgin Mary, the dragon as Satan, and the child as Christ with allusions to his inevitable resurrection. See Natasha O’Hear and Anthony O’Hear, Picturing the Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 110–12.
³ Plate 8, called And Bound Him a Thousand Years, is dedicated to the dragon, which in Redon’s version is a snake, alluding to traditional representations of Satan as a serpent.
⁵ Gustave Kahn, as quoted in ibid., 1.
Redon disseminated this Symbolist sensibility through representations of grotesque and whimsical subject matter via lithographic prints, a medium, like other types of prints, with renewed popularity in Paris at the turn of the century.

This fin de siècle print revival developed in part as a reaction against both the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the primary official institution in France to promote and support the arts, and its annual Salons, the Académie’s state-governed exhibitions whose juries expressed conservative leanings in terms of style and subject matter. Young innovative artists were disillusioned with what had become a rather antiquated system and instead looked to alternative means to promote their art and earn a living. Many artists took up printmaking, which enabled them to reach much larger audiences for their work. New technologies in both commercial and traditional printmaking, such as the inclusion of photographic processes and color printing, amplified artistic possibilities of the medium, contributing to an intense proliferation of printed images by artists. By the 1890s artists began to create original prints for posters, albums, books, periodicals, music primers, song sheets, and even folding screens.

Between 1878 and 1900 Redon produced close to 30 etchings and 170 lithographs that were conceived, in part, as a way to disseminate his enigmatic, richly textured charcoal

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7 Cate et al., *Prints Abound*, 16–18.
drawings, which he termed noirs. The noirs exemplify Redon’s fascination with the impact and resonance of the color black. In fact, in Une femme revêtue du soleil, it is precisely because of the density of the black spaces that the lighter surrounding areas appear to be glowing, demonstrating the artist’s exceptional understanding of the dramatic effects of black in a composition. In exploiting the potential of black charcoal, Redon created palpably layered, viscous-looking surfaces, at times resulting in indeterminate and ambiguous spaces. As Jodi Hauptman argues, this push-pull of tactility and indeterminacy was at the heart of Redon’s noirs and their ability to incite disturbing and unsettling sensations within the viewer. The liminal, dreamlike ambiance produced by the hazy, vaporous properties of charcoal combine with bizarre subject matter—mutilated, distorted, often fused bodies of humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects—to render visible that which is invisible: the irrational, subconscious mind.

As his work in lithography progressed, Redon began to improvise freely in the print format rather than make exact reproductions of his charcoal drawings, and the lithographs became individualized works of art in their own right. As with this lithograph, he printed almost exclusively using chine appliqué, a type of print in which an impression is made on a thin sheet, backed by a stronger, thicker wove paper to which the image is transferred through a press. Together with the lithographic crayon, Redon’s primary tool for making prints, and the subtle range of colors offered by the chine appliqué, the artist was able to achieve both intense and nuanced effects of hues and contrasts of light and

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10 See Gott, The Enchanted Stone, 23.
One of the major proponents of artistic production of lithography during the print revival was Ambroise Vollard, the prominent art dealer who commissioned and published the *Apocalypse of Saint John*. While Vollard’s interests in the artists whose works he purchased and printed were often market driven, he was well aware of Redon’s preoccupation with spiritual and religious subject matter and likely commissioned subjects that played to the artist’s interests and strengths. Symbolist art, in addition to forming in reaction to Impressionism, also emerged as a counterpoint to the secular philosophy of the government under the Third Republic, and many Symbolist artists embraced religious subject matter in art and literature. Some artists, such as Maurice Denis, focused on Catholicism for inspiration, while others, such as Redon and Gustave Moreau, were deeply interested in mysticism, invoking imagery not only from Christianity but also from Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Eastern philosophies. Prior to creating this print Redon had used the feminine head profiled against a spherical form in

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11 Redon, as quoted in Figura, “Redon and the Lithographed Portfolio,” 80.
12 Redon’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1896), another religious narrative that refers to Gustave Flaubert’s novel of the same title, was one of Vollard’s first projects as a publisher of prints and illustrated books (see ibid., 90). Vollard also commissioned a variety of subject matter from different artists, not just religious or apocalyptic topics, in part to appeal to a wider audience. Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, for example, made prints of domestic interior scenes.
13 The political philosophy of the Third Republic, established in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War, was based on democratic and egalitarian principles of French republicanism. This secular form of government caused friction with opposition groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, dividing all classes on either side of the conflict. From these circumstances of church versus state arose both anticlerical artists and a Catholic and religious revival in the arts as seen in the work of the Symbolists. See Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 95–96.
multiple religious and cultural contexts. In fact, the isolated head was one of the most common motifs in the artist’s oeuvre and recalls the Symbolist concept of unmitigated introspection.

And yet, for all its religious references, *Une femme revêtue du soleil* is simultaneously secular, a point that becomes clear when compared to Albrecht Dürer’s own famous series of fifteen woodcuts on the theme of the Apocalypse (published in 1498). With the renewed interest in printmaking in the late nineteenth century, artists often looked to the skills and techniques of Old Masters such as Dürer and Rembrandt van Rijn; as noted by Starr Figura, Redon’s series the *Apocalypse of Saint John* was inspired by Dürer’s. For Dürer’s woodcut version of the subject of Redon’s *Une femme revêtue du soleil*, Dürer followed the traditional religious iconography of depicting the moon at the woman’s feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. In comparison Redon’s version is highly contemporary and secularized. Rendering the woman with her arms raised in the graceful stance of a dancer, the pious Virgin transforms into a type of stage performer along the lines of Loïe Fuller. Furthermore, whereas Dürer filled his scene with a profusion of details—angels, God, a distinct landscape, and the dragon as a foil to the holy woman—Redon dramatically simplified the composition to focus on the woman from the bust up, shown in profile, which again recalls the artist’s many other representations of enigmatic, mystical female figures. In fact, this simplification renders the print’s narrative so

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14 Redon’s drawing *The Golden Cell* (1892) at the British Museum, for example, features this motif and refers to Hindu concepts of the origins of the universe.

15 See Figura, “Redon and the Lithographed Portfolio,” 93–94.

16 Loïe Fuller was a highly popular American performer at the turn of the century famous for her visually spectacular skirt dancing and luminescent lighting on stage. The light behind Redon’s female figure makes the connection with Fuller particularly compelling. See O’Hear and O’Hear, *Picturing the Apocalypse*, 127.
abstract that the original religious context would be undetectable were it not for the inclusion of the caption.

But one can also see how Redon may have been inspired by Dürer’s choice to represent the “woman clothed with the sun” with lines radiating outward to signify a glowing figure. In Redon’s version he furthered this effect of emanating light by adding loosely sketched arched cross-hatchings that enhance the effect of warmth and sparkling energy, made even more dynamic when juxtaposed with the static, melancholic face of the woman. Each artist thus took advantage of the expressive effects of his unique medium; the woodcut allows for a precision of details and meticulously carved lines, while the lithographic crayon creates dense shadows and ambiguous forms. 17

It is precisely Redon’s ability to create art shaped by his unique and personal interpretations of the world, combined with an expert handling of his craft, that resonated so powerfully with viewers both in his time and in posterity. In 1961 Harold Joachim, curator of the Print Room at the Art Institute of Chicago, wrote that in the Apocalypse of Saint John Redon achieved a wider range of contrasts than he ever had before. Indeed in the print in the collection of the Kemper Art Museum one observes the whole panoply of the artist’s skills, from dense blacks, to pure outlines, and even to soft gradations of gray. Joachim further added, “If nothing remained of Redon’s work except the lithographs, his whole range of thought and emotion, the mysterious and visionary strength and delicacy

17 See Figura, “Redon and the Lithographed Portfolio,” 94.
of his art would still be clearly evident.”¹⁸ Une femme revêtue du soleil speaks to the breadth and potential of Redon’s powerful artistic sensibilities and, by extension, stands as a statement for the innovations of the print revival movement of the fin de siècle.