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VUILLARD

From Post-Impressionist
to Modern Master



VUILLARD

From Post-Impressionist to Modern Master

Main Galleries

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*An Introduction to the Exhibition
for Teachers and Students*

*Written by Greg Harris
for the Education Department*

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On the cover:

Cat. 126 The Striped Blouse 1895 (detail)

Oil on canvas, 65.7 x 58.7 cm

National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon, 1983.1.38

Designed by Isambard Thomas

Printed by Burlington

INTRODUCTION

'We perceive nature through our senses, which give us images of forms and colours, sound etc. A form, a colour exists only in relation to another. Form alone does not exist. We are only aware of the relationships.'

From Vuillard's journal, November 1888

This exhibition of the work of Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940) gives London its first opportunity to see a comprehensive survey of this artist's work. Often linked with the better-known painter Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), whose career paralleled his in many ways, Vuillard is mainly known for his early intimate, domestic interiors, featuring his family and friends. Painted in a dense, textured manner, the space is often flattened, with figures disappearing into the pattern of the surface. Vuillard also painted large-scale decorations for domestic settings at the same time as designing sets for the avant-garde theatre of the 1890s. After about 1900 his painting style became more realistic, and he adopted more naturalistic solutions to space and light, as he expanded the subject-matter of his work to include landscapes, city views, still-lives and a large number of society portraits. From the late 1890s, he obsessively recorded his family and friends with his little Kodak 'Brownie' camera.

Vuillard began his career as an artist at a time when many painters in France were exploring new and radical approaches to their art in reaction to the perceived realism of the Impressionists. Artists such as Georges Seurat (1859–1891), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Odilon Redon (1840–1916) and others were searching for new ways of structuring their paintings, and in some cases, of redefining the very purposes of painting itself. It was an exciting and competitive time to be an artist, and for the first ten years of his career Vuillard was at the forefront of the avant-garde.

'The Impressionists study colour exclusively as a decorative effect, but without freedom, retaining the shackles of verisimilitude... They heed only the eye and neglect the mysterious centres of thought, thereby falling into merely scientific reasoning.'

Gauguin

BECOMING AN ARTIST

Vuillard was the youngest of three children. After his father's retirement from the army in 1877, the family moved to Paris. Vuillard's mother, who was to be the dominating influence in his life, started a business as a corset- and dressmaker. Six years later, in 1884, Vuillard's father died.

Edouard attended the prestigious Parisian school, the Lycée Condorcet, where he made a number of friendships that would last throughout his life. At first he was uncertain about his career and might even have followed his father into the army, as his elder brother was to do. But on leaving school in 1885, with the encouragement of his school friend, Kerr-Xavier Roussel (1867–1944) and the strong support of his mother, he started studying at various art studios. It was only on his fourth attempt that he gained admission to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in July 1887, and it seems that he was quite proud to be a pupil of the conventional, established painters who taught there.

As a young man, Vuillard was shy and diffident, uncomfortable with his appearance. He kept a journal from 1888 until his death in 1940 (although the years from 1895 to 1907 are missing), in which he recorded aspects of his life in words and pictures. Philosophical musings, notes on art and his changing

views about it are mixed with sketches of paintings from the Louvre, quick drawings of his family and friends, and notes and sketches of what he saw and heard while walking round Paris.

While still a student, at the Louvre he was interested in the German School: Hans Holbein (1497/8–1543), Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Lucas Cranach (1472–1553); in seventeenth-century Dutch painting: Rembrandt (1606–1669), Jan Vermeer (1632–1675) and Gerard Ter Borch (1617–1681); and in eighteenth-century French painting: Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) and, above all, the still-life painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779).

THE NABI

Vuillard's initial artistic impulse was towards a naturalistic observation of his world (only the mural painter Pierre-Cécile Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) is likely to have disturbed this realist approach). However, other forces were also at work: towards the end of 1889 Vuillard's school friend Maurice Denis (1870–1943) urged him to join the Nabi group (the word is Hebrew for prophet). Formed in the autumn of 1888, the group's principal impetus came from Paul Sérusier (1865–1927), who, having worked with Gauguin in Brittany, had returned with a landscape painted under Gauguin's instructions. His friends Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard and Paul Ranson (1864–1909), named the painting *The Talisman*. What they learnt from this painting was the use of simplified forms and flat, exaggerated colour, and the avoidance of illusionistic space. Although painted in front of nature, the painting's lesson was that in future the artist should rely on memory, simplification and imagination in the construction of his paintings; in order to communicate ideas and profound emotions, he should cease to copy and begin to create. This approach to painting had been labelled 'synthetism' by Gauguin's circle. As Denis later wrote: 'thus we realised that every work of art was a transposition, a caricature, the impassioned equivalent of a sensation experienced.' It was heady stuff and perhaps we need to remind ourselves here that, when Vuillard joined the Nabi in 1889, he was 21, Denis was 19, Bonnard was 22 and Sérusier was 26.

Regular meetings took place in Paul Ranson's studio. Apart from ideas about painting, the Nabib discussed the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) and his conception of the total artwork as a synthesis of words, music, stage-design and acting. They were also interested in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), who believed in an ideal beauty realised through an art of suggestion rather than of description. Some of the group became involved with the many religious and philosophical ideas that contributed to the movement known as Symbolism. In the desire to communicate underlying meaning, Symbolist painters would use form, colour and shape to represent emotional, religious or spiritual ideas.

Vuillard was later to admit that he had a horror of artistic theories that he had not arrived at for himself. It is also likely that he would have ignored the more esoteric religious ideas of some of his companions. Nevertheless, the support of such a group of artistic friends would give Vuillard the freedom to experiment, to be more forthcoming in discussion and to exchange and develop ideas. Sometimes, however, you feel he needs to remind himself of the new

'It should be remembered that a picture, before being a warhorse, a nude or any other anecdote, is first and foremost a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order.'

Maurice Denis,
August 1890

'Natural objects are the signs of ideas, and the visible is the manifestation of the invisible.'

Maurice Denis

approach – when he notes in his journal, for example, ‘A woman’s head has just produced in me a certain emotion. I must make use of this emotion alone and I must not try to remember the nose or the ear, they are of no importance.’

Cat. 12 This painting of his mother and sister Marie at work exemplifies Vuillard’s adoption of the Nabi preoccupation with non-illusionistic space, simplified forms and flat, exaggerated colour. The viewer looks down on Mme Vuillard as she cuts the large swathe of red cloth revealing the bright yellow of the worktable. The painting relies on fluidity of line and the use of silhouette to create a series of interlocking forms that unify the graceful arabesques into a harmonious whole. Marie’s face is treated with extreme simplicity, no ear or nose particularised, yet the red blush on her cheek, the circles round the eyes and the slight downturn of her mouth suggest an emotional response to some possible criticism.

Vuillard hides his mother’s right arm underneath the red cloth as she cuts it. What effect would it have had on the painting if he had shown it?

What function do you think the black cotton reel plays in the composition of the painting?

What else might the whole process of cutting, reworking and sewing the brightly coloured cloth suggest?

Cat. 12

The Dressmakers 1890

Oil on canvas, 47.5 x 57.5 cm
Private collection



'The set should be an entirely fictional decoration that completes the illusion through analogies with the drama of colour and line.'

The playwright Pierre Quillard

THE THEATRE

'The dramatic poet is obliged to bring down into real life, into everyday life, the idea that he has of the unknown.'

The playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, 1901

Though in the twentieth century it became commonplace for artists to be involved in stage design – Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Marc Chagall (1887–1985) and, in our own day, David Hockney (1937–), all designed sets for the ballet, opera or theatre – the Nabis were the first painters not to feel a loss of status through their involvement with the theatre. It was Vuillard's school friend, the actor and director Aurélien Lugné-Poe, who encouraged him to work on set designs for the radical anti-naturalistic Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, which he had founded, based on the work of Symbolist playwrights like the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906). Dramas like these concentrated on the psychological condition of deeply alienated characters. In Lugné-Poe's productions of Maeterlinck's plays the actors' movements were slowed and stylised, the words delivered as though they were in a hypnotic trance. Sets were suggestive rather than descriptive, sometimes making use of a gauze sheet in front of the stage through which the actors were glimpsed moving across pools of artificial light. All of the Nabis became involved in set design and took the opportunity to try out the ideas that they were developing in painting.

Lugné-Poe also applied his extreme interpretation of Symbolist drama to the more naturalistic plays of Ibsen, much to that playwright's annoyance. Working with Ibsen's tense, emotional interior dramas Vuillard was able to conjure up the claustrophobic atmosphere that would also be present in many of his easel paintings. For the set of *The Masterbuilder*, he designed a sloping stage that seemed to reinforce the instability and unreal aspirations of the characters. Working in the theatre was to have a profound influence on Vuillard's painting (and vice versa), most obviously in the dramatic lighting effects that characterise some of his interiors, but also in the sense of an uncomfortable drama being played out between the figures. It also enabled him to work on a larger scale and to discover new techniques.

Distemper was the standard medium for scenery painting. This consisted of powdered pigment mixed with heated glue, or size, which could be used rapidly and economically over large areas and, being quick to dry, allowed for changes or adjustments. Throughout his life, Vuillard was to use distemper regularly in his own paintings, initially in large-scale decorations and then more widely after 1907.

Vuillard was involved with the theatre for much of the 1890s, and although nothing remains of his sets, apart from descriptions in memoirs and newspaper reviews, his numerous programme designs do survive. With their dramatic use of light and dark, swirling lines and enigmatic figures, the graphic style of these designs is markedly different from that of his painting (cats 40–43 and 53–54).

THE INTERIORS

'Why is it in familiar places that one's spirit and sensibility find the most that is really novel? Novelty is always necessary to life, to consciousness.'

From Vuillard's journal, August 1893

In his paintings of interiors of the 1890s, Vuillard presented the enclosed world of family and friends – not in their immediate reality, but in an allusive, veiled and indirect manner. He was not to remain faithful to the strict application of Gauguin's theories as propounded by the Nabi. While stressing the importance of relationships in painting, he also believed that in order to appreciate these relationships one should 'not focus on any point or colour longer than on any other.' He had used aspects of Seurat's pointillism to blur and texture his figures but now he developed a more complex 'all-over' feeling to his paintings, in search of a sense of evocation and suggestion.

Vuillard made endless sketches of his mother and sister and their assistants working, of his family at the dinner table and of his friends at leisure. His paintings, however, are not done from life, but are infused with memory and imagination. Rooms express a feeling, a sensation of what might have been felt rather than the realistic appearance of an interior. As we have seen, in much of his work he flattens space and plays with pattern, colour and tone to such an extent that figures blend into a background and space whose structure we can barely work out.

Looking at his many paintings of seamstresses, we see Vuillard living in a feminine environment of fabric, lace and pattern, creating a sense of silent absorption that was a celebration of his mother's work and possibly also an analogy of his own life as a painter. However, while Vuillard's surroundings may have seemed to send him into a contemplative reverie, it is clear that he also imposed his own interests on them. In some of the mother and daughter paintings we seem to see emotions straight out of an Ibsen drama: Mme Vuillard is presented as a black-clothed matriarch, perhaps somewhat severe and even condemning, while Marie, awkward and uncertain, shrinks away from her dominating presence. We do not know if there were difficulties in the relationship, but it is possible that Marie's prolonged spinsterhood caused some problems between mother and daughter. If this is so, it might explain Vuillard's encouragement of the marriage of his school friend and fellow Nabi Kerr-Xavier Roussel to Marie, in July 1893. Roussel was a handsome womaniser and Marie was seven years older than him. The relationship went through difficult periods; through the detective work of the art historian Guy Cogeval, we now know that this relationship provided Vuillard with many subjects for his painting.

Cat. 89 In this densely textured painting, Vuillard shows his sister Marie standing by the work table, adjusting a length of pale blue cloth while an assistant bends towards an open window. From behind a camouflaged door Kerr-Xavier enters the room to greet his fiancée. It is an optimistic and playful image. Here Vuillard uses light as part of the patterning of the composition rather than to create a naturalistic sense of space. The window is open, although the profusion of blossom melds the exterior with the interior pattern of the wallpaper. Light falls on the assistant's arms and shoulders, picking up

'In fact there is no perception that is not impregnated with memory. To the immediate and present data we receive with our senses we add thousands upon thousands of details from our past experience.'

The French philosopher
Henri Bergson, 1896



Cat. 89

Interior with

Worktable, also known
as **The Suitor**, 1893

Oil on board, 31.7 × 36.4 cm
Smith College Museum of Art,
Northampton, Massachusetts.
Purchased with the Drayton
Hillyer Fund

the blue of the cloth, and reflecting it onto Marie and Kerr-Xavier's faces. The shadow on Marie's neck contrasts with the light flickering over her hair, creating patterns that echo the wallpaper. A contemporary critic said that Vuillard's paintings reminded him of the woolly reverse side of a tapestry.

This painting uses oil paint on cardboard: Vuillard would frequently use cardboard, because it was a cheaper material than prepared canvas and because he liked its warm brown colour.

How has he used the cardboard to help unify the painting?

Although there is a very large amount of pattern in this painting, a sense of harmony is achieved by the use of a very limited palette.

What part does the orange cupboard play in the structure and feeling of the painting?

The spatial treatment of the table, chair and cloth in the bottom right-hand corner seems ambiguous.

What part does this ambiguity play in the painting?

Vuillard's paintings are often quite small.

How does looking close-up at small paintings contribute to the effects he might be seeking?

Vuillard's optimism was not to bear fruit. Marie gave birth to a stillborn child in December 1894 and Roussel continued the affair he had been having with the sister-in-law of the Nabi painter Paul Ranson. As Marie and Roussel's problems deepened, Roussel moved out of the Vuillards' apartment to live with his mother. The famous *Large Interior with Six Figures* (cat. 143) has now been shown by Cogeval to represent a visit by Mme Vuillard to the Ransons' apartment, during which the guilty parties were encouraged to end their relationship.

Cat. 96 In this painting, we see Vuillard's interest in the theatre coming to the fore. The dining room, familiar from earlier paintings, is here transformed into a dark stage set, in which a tense drama has just been played out. Bare, black windows help to create a sense of claustrophobia. Kerr-Xavier is a silhouette at the front of the picture plane; behind him stands Marie, her face hidden, hands on the table, under a dark, unlit lamp hanging from the ceiling. The shadow of this lamp, falling gloomily over the ceiling and left-hand corner of the room, like the inverse of light, is cast by the sole source of illumination, a table lamp on the right-hand side of the room. Over here we see Mme Vuillard hovering in the wings, as though uncertain whether or not to make an entrance. The lamplight reveals a display of bright discordant colours, a small still-life expressive of the emotional temperature. A mutual friend, who may have been trying to reconcile the couple, balances the composition on the left of the painting.

Cat. 96

A Family Evening 1895

Oil on canvas, 48 x 65 cm
Private collection



'Who speaks of art speaks of Poetry.

There is no art without a poetic aim. There is a species of emotion particular to painting. There is an effect that results from a certain arrangement of colours, of lights, of shadows etc. It is this one calls the music of painting.'

From Vuillard's journal, January 1894

Cat. 179

Misia Natanson in the Salon of Les Relais, in Villeneuve sur Yonne
1899

Original gelatin silver print,
9 x 9 cm Private collection



How does the placing of Kerr-Xavier help to create a sense of space and distance?

The brightly lit right-hand side of the room is made up of sharp-edged rectangles and corners.

How does this contrast with the rest of the room and what atmosphere does the contrast create?

What colour combination has Vuillard possibly used to remind himself of happier times?

THE NATANSONS

Thadée Natanson, co-editor of the influential *La Revue Blanche*, was one of three wealthy brothers. He was attracted to the work of the Nabis, commissioning illustrations and covers for his magazine from them. In 1891 he gave Vuillard his first one-man exhibition in the *Revue's* offices. Two years later, Thadée married Misia Godebska, a Polish pianist and pupil of the composer Gabriel Fauré. Misia was attractive, intelligent and capricious. She gathered around her a group of bohemian admirers and there is little doubt that Vuillard fell under her spell. He helped her to decorate her apartment, went with her to exhibitions and in the 1890s painted her more than any other person outside his family. Misia would introduce him to what Guy Cogeval calls 'an adult sensuality'.

From 1895 Vuillard started spending his vacations at the Natansons' country retreat, recording this leisured life both in his paintings and, from 1897 with his newly acquired Kodak camera. Although there are intriguing connections between some of the spatial distortions in Vuillard's painting and the technical limitations of these cameras, such as the wide-angled flattening of space, the limited range of focus and the dramatic enlargement of objects close to the camera, Vuillard had already explored such effects before he took up photography. He made use of his photographs as the basis for the compositions of some of his paintings, but like his sketches, they were aids to his memory,

sensations recalled, such as the colour of a woman's dress (in spite of the fact that the photograph was in black and white!).

The relationship between music and painting was a central part of Symbolist thinking, linked to the concept of synaesthesia, through which the senses are related, in such a way that, for example, sounds can provoke the mind's eye into seeing colours or images, and vice versa. Vuillard actively wished to associate music and painting. When we look at his densely textured, ambiguous works, we realise that, in the same way that a series of notes exists in time to make up the shape and harmony of a piece of music, we need time to decode the patterns, to work out the relationships and to feel the atmosphere



created by the many small brush strokes that make up Vuillard's evocation of a space, a presence, or a feeling.

Cat. 157 *Misia at the Piano* is set in the large salon in the Natansons' Parisian apartment that Vuillard had already depicted in a more sharply focused way in *Interior, the Salon with Three Lamps, Rue Saint-Florentin* (cat. 156). In this painting of the same room, we are aware of considerable distortion and ambiguity: Misia seated at the piano seems too small and far away, her husband at the right too large; the size of the white lamp on the piano, looming over the scene, suggests that the end of the instrument is closer to us than it is. Behind the piano the indecipherable tapestry, shot through with tiny dabs of paint, blends with the objects on the piano to create an intensely rich colour-harmony. At the same time there is a sense of disquiet. The shawl draped over the piano appears to float in space as though trying to connect Thadée with the music on which he has turned his back. Above his head a similar pattern of white and blue ascends to the top corner, where Vuillard has placed his signature.

What is the function in the painting of Misia's comparatively plain yellow dress?

Both lamps are on, but do you feel that Vuillard has lit the scene in a manner that is consistent with that fact? If not, why?

Why does nothing in the painting seem solidly grounded?

Cat. 157

Misia at the Piano 1899

Oil on board, 55 x 80 cm
Private collection

'The ground was rough, I tripped on a root and almost fell; Vuillard stopped abruptly to help me regain my balance. Our eyes met. In the deepening shadows I could see the sad gleam of his glance. He burst into sobs. It was the most beautiful declaration of love ever made to me.' Misia Sert (Natanson) (published 1953)

THE DECORATIONS

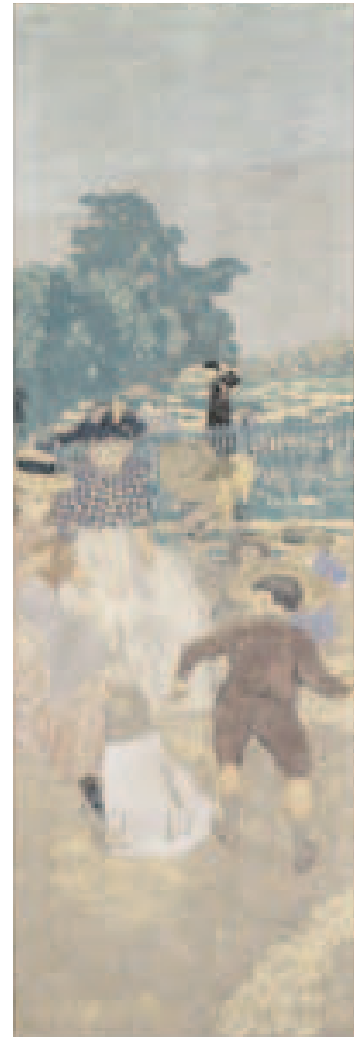
From the beginning, the Nabis, in keeping with their fellow Symbolists, had been determined to expand the boundaries of art. They felt that easel painting was too restrictive and that the artist should work in many different media and environments. It was an idea that came readily from their work in the theatre, from their admiration for the mural paintings of Puvis de Chavannes, and from their love of medieval tapestries and Japanese screens.

Through his friendship with the Natansons, Vuillard would receive a number of commissions to provide decorative panels for rooms in the houses of wealthy patrons. These gave him the opportunity of varying his subject matter and of enlarging onto a grander scale some of the themes of his intimate paintings.

All of Vuillard's decorations were for specific rooms in his patrons' houses, their size and format being dictated by architectural considerations. Generally, he was free to decide on the subject matter. Writing about these decorations for Alexandre Natanson, he noted, 'Offer for a decoration to do what I want. Why not attempt it, why avoid these vague desires, why not have confidence in these dreams which are, which will become reality for others as soon as I give them precedence?'

Cats 113-115 In this instance, he chose to depict nurses and children in the public gardens of Paris, a subject already addressed by other Nabis such as Bonnard, who painted *Nannies Out for a Walk* in the same year. The three panels that we see here (part of a group of nine) occupied one of the long walls of a rectangular room. Vuillard is using distemper here for the first time in a large-scale composition outside of the theatre. The matt surface, reminiscent of fresco painting, allows him to achieve subtle effects of tone and colour. In the composition, the ground seems to tip upwards quite steeply, occupying nearly half the space. Where the sandy gravel meets the green fence and clumps of vegetation it forms a kind of horizon. In the left-hand panel, animated children and their nurses form a cluster of overlapping figures, while in the central panel, children are shown in the far distance, behind the white umbrella of one of the three women sitting talking; our eyes dwell on the light and shade and the texture of the ground in front of us. In the right-hand panel, we find a rather lonely grandmother accompanied by her dog, but the tree above her sparkles with light, which is reflected at her feet.

Although we rightly admire Vuillard for his



sense of pattern and texture, a large part of the success of his work comes from the extraordinarily expressive quality of his drawing. Often using silhouette, or the most simple of lines, he catches the energy of the young boy in brown, the character of the women in conversation, the tiredness of the lady in black – a result of the many hours spent sketching in the parks.

'Really, for apartment decoration a subject that is objectively too exact would easily become intolerable. One becomes bored less quickly by a fabric, pictures without too much literary precision.' From Vuillard's journal, August 1894

How might Vuillard have created a sense of 'fabric' in these panels?

'The wall must remain a surface, must not be breached by the representation of infinite horizons. There are no pictures only decorations.' (Jan Verkade [1868–1946], an artist associated with the Nabis, 1930).

How has Vuillard avoided creating an illusion of a 'hole' in the wall of the room in which the decorations hung?

Cats 113–115

**The Public Gardens:
The Nursemaids,
The Conversation,
The Red Parasol** 1894,

reworked in 1936

Distemper on canvas

214.5 × 73 cm,

213 × 154 cm,

214 × 81 cm

Musée d'Orsay, Paris





Cat. 126

The Striped Blouse

1895

Oil on canvas, 65.7 x 58.7 cm
National Gallery of Art,
Washington. Collection of Mr
and Mrs Paul Mellon, 1983.1.38

Cat. 126 *The Striped Blouse* is one of the five panels painted for Thadée Natanson that were known collectively as 'The Album'. Sadly, only two of the five have been able to travel to London. Here Vuillard has taken his familiar theme of the life and activity of women and treated it on a larger scale. He is probably also influenced by the Symbolist association of women and flowers with purity and innocence. In these five panels, he reaches an apotheosis of sensuality, with figure, flower, foliage, pattern and colour blending to create a remarkably rich surface. Thadée Natanson wrote of these paintings: 'Drawing, or the depiction of objects, has no value in these paintings but the plastic value of arabesque. The pleasure of naming objects is doubtless part of that given by the images, but it is not the essential part, which is abstract.' Thus although we see a woman in a striped blouse, the sensation we experience is not that of a clothed body but rather that of the liquid flow of lines and colour rippling over the surface. The women are arranging flowers and foliage but the mass of leaves blocks our sense of space and form.

Is there a unifying colour in the painting?

What part do the black and white flowers play in the structure of the picture?
And the red?

How long did it take you to find the third figure in the painting? How do you account for the space she occupies?

TRANSITION AND CHANGE

At the turn of the century Vuillard's work changed, both in style and in subject matter. This shift may partly be explained by changes in his personal life. Vuillard's home environment had altered: his sister Marie and her husband had moved out at the end of 1895, and although they lost another child at the age of two months in 1896, the tensions in their marriage were partially resolved by the birth of their daughter Annette in 1898. Vuillard and his mother moved to a smaller apartment shortly after Marie and Kerr-Xavier's departure and 1898 is the last year in which his mother's name appears as a *corsetière* in the commercial directory. The bustle and activity of work in the home had gone.

By 1900 the intensity of Vuillard's friendship with Misia Natanson had diminished; he now became friendly with Lucy Hessel, the wife of his new dealer, Jos Hessel. She took him under her wing, and much to the annoyance of Mme Vuillard, became a second mother figure and, probably, lover. It was a friendship that was to last until his death. Her husband worked for the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, which was to introduce Vuillard to new patrons and encourage him to expand his subject matter. Under the Hessels' influence, he began to move in wealthier social circles. Although Vuillard's image is that of a shy, retiring man, by this time he was in fact constantly dining out, attending the theatre, ballet and cabarets or spending time with his friends.

Vuillard's change in style was also largely due to his reassessment of Symbolism and his revisiting of the art of the Impressionists, which led to a growing interest in light and the way it can be used to create space and volume. He began to use natural light sparingly in some of his interiors to ameliorate the flattened space and separate the figures from the background. With an increasing interest in exterior subjects and landscape, light would be used to create more realistic depictions. His activity as a photographer was another contributing factor to this change. Photographs of family and friends, set in a definable space, would lead him to paint his subjects more as individuals than as 'figures'. Later paintings of his mother would lose that element of caricature and become more gently maternal. Early in his career he had noted the difference between photography and painting: 'the expressive techniques of painting are capable of conveying an analogy but not an impossible photograph of a moment. How different are the snapshot and the Image!' He went on to say that 'painting will always have the advantage over photography because it is done by hand.' Vuillard's 'hand' was changing.

Cat. 271 Unlike Monet, Vuillard never painted landscapes unimbued with personal association. Rather he painted places associated with friends or family, where he would take leisurely vacations and fully absorb the atmosphere. In





Cat. 271

**Five-panel Screen
for Miss Marguerite
Chapin: Place
Vintimille 1911**

Distemper on paper mounted
on canvas, 230 x 60 cm
(each panel)
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Gift of
Enid A. Haupt, 1998.47.1

'Some strange painting paraphernalia [...] filled a corner of the room near the window... small earthenware pots, little brown vessels used for cooking eggs, grouped around a pan in which brushes were soaking; there were paper bags full of powdered pigment, and, nearby, on a little table, a spirit stove on which sat a bain-marie, a mustard pot with its little wooden spoon, in which the glue was cooling.'

Jacques Salomon,
Auprès de Vuillard, 1953

Paris, it was the views that were closest and most familiar to him that inspired him. In 1908, Vuillard and his mother had moved to a fourth-floor apartment on the Rue de Calais overlooking Place Vintimille. He had already completed two commissions for the wealthy American Marguerite Chapin, when he was asked to produce this screen for her in May 1911.

Vuillard incorporates elements from Japanese decorative screens, such as a high-angled viewpoint, the cropping of action and shape at the edges and the off-centred composition. Here he depicts a bright spring day, blending the various greens of the emerging leaves and building towards the brightest young leaves (or yellow blossom) that appear in the centre of the gardens. Shadows cast by branches enliven the busy pavement. Vuillard used distemper for the panels, a medium in which he had to work quickly, since the mixture of pigment and size had to stay at blood temperature. Here we sense him revelling in the animated brush strokes and frequently leaving the brown of his paper support to define his forms and unify the space.

Do you think Vuillard could have seen the whole of this view from one position or would he have had to turn his head to take it all in? Might he have used photographs to help him?

How has he used the people and their black, blue or white clothes as accents in the painting?

What function does the circular pavement with its circular tree-bases have in the painting?

THE REALIST MASTER

The Nabis had never been a very stylistically unified group and by the turn of the century they had gone their separate ways. The rush of avant-garde movements in the first decade of the century swept past them and Maurice Denis was to write in 1909, 'Under the pretext of synthesis, we have often made do, let us admit it, with hasty generalisations. By becoming more simplified, our art has become fragmentary and incomplete. We have produced many sketches and very few paintings.' Denis, along with Roussel, would engage in what he called 'the search for a classical order', while Bonnard and Vuillard turned increasingly to nature. Bonnard wrote, 'The pace of progress speeded up, society was ready to accept Cubism and Surrealism before we had achieved what we had set out to do. We were left, as it were, hanging in the air.'

In the 1890s the pressure to be non-naturalistic and constantly innovative had been intense; to produce realistic images would have been unacceptable to Vuillard and his fellow Nabis. Now, however, Vuillard would feel free to do so. Gradually he would adopt a more traditional approach to a widening range of subject matter: studio-based nudes, still-lives and, above all, portraits. In doing so he would engage more with the modern world, including its masculine dimension, in portrayals of professionals at work. In documenting reality, rather than evoking a subjective response to it, he would be able to make different kinds of observations on Parisian life.



Cat. 289

**Self-portrait in the
Dressing-Room Mirror**

1923–24

Oil on board, 81 × 67 cm
Dian Woodner and Andrea
Woodner, New York

Cat. 289 Shortly before painting this self-portrait, Vuillard finished a series of decorative panels representing four galleries in the Louvre. On the one hand a celebration of the art of the past and of French tradition, they were also a meditation on the act of looking at and copying paintings. In this self-portrait, we see Vuillard reflected in a mirror in the act of washing his hands. Surrounding the mirror are copies and reproductions of images that have inspired him: a painting by the seventeenth-century artist Le Sueur, the goddess Flora, a Poussin drawing, a Michelangelo head and a Japanese print. His unseeing eyes stare out. With him in the mirror are examples of his own works, so that the portrait becomes a reverie on past and present, a contemplation of his feelings about that tradition.

Might Vuillard be making a connection between himself and one of the reproductions on the wall beside the mirror?

How does the way Vuillard has painted himself compare with other portraits by him painted at this time, such as that in cat. 316?

Do you think the way that Vuillard has painted this has the 'stamp' of old age on it?

In the 1920s Vuillard was one of the most sought-after portrait painters in Paris. He was famous for saying 'I don't paint portraits, I paint people in their homes.'

Vuillard admired the critic Edmond Duranty who had written of the Impressionists in 1876, 'And since we stick closely to nature, we no longer separate the figure from the background of the apartment or of the street. The figure would never appear to us, in real life, against a neutral, empty, vague background. But around and behind it there is furniture, [there are] mantle pieces and wall hangings – a backdrop that speaks of the subject's wealth, class, profession.'

Just as in his earlier interiors Vuillard had drawn furniture, flowers, wallpaper and other objects into an evocation of the relationships between the figures he portrayed, so now in his portraits he would obsessively record the details surrounding his subjects as a means of probing and illustrating their personalities. As a consequence, the feel of the paintings ranges widely from the comparative austerity of the businessman and collector Marcel Kapferer (cat. 318), to the almost baroque exuberance of *Yvonne Printemps on the Sofa*

Cat. 326

Jeanne Lanvin 1933

Distemper on canvas,
124.5 x 136.5 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Bequest of the Countess
Jean de Polignac, daughter
of the sitter, 1958



(cat. 310); from the restrained harmonies of pinks and reds bathed in the yellow electric light that surrounds Mme Fernand Javal (cat. 323), to the portrait of the Countess Anna de Noailles (cat. 322), now confined by illness to her bedroom and painted by Vuillard in harsh, dissonant colours that seem almost cruel in intent. She remarked: 'For heaven's sake hide that tube of Vaseline. M. Vuillard paints everything he sees.'

Cat. 326 The clothes designer Jeanne Lanvin was the creator of one of the first powerful Parisian fashion houses. Vuillard's earlier portrait of her daughter, the Countess de Polignac, had given him considerable problems. In December 1928, a month after he had started the portrait, his mother had died, and Vuillard had been thrown into a crisis of grief and mourning. His nephew-in-law Jacques Salomon believed that the long, drawn-out work on the Countess's portrait became a kind of refuge and 'the distraction he was seeking from his great sorrow.' When Vuillard came to paint Jeanne Lanvin's portrait he wrote: 'effect of green in grey, tall mannequin, black, fabrics, street, quick decision; women at work, childhood memories.' It seems that this was a commission that would allow him to reflect on his mother's work.

Mme Lanvin is seated in her office. A strong sense of calm and order is conveyed by the verticals and horizontals of the cupboards, shelves and curtain behind her, and by the horizontal desk at which she sits. It is the setting of a successful businesswoman. Across the desk, starting at the bottom right-hand corner and proceeding in a gentle diagonal are the signs of her creative life: swatches of material, scraps of fabric, paper and sketches of designs. As usual, Vuillard did many small studies of her hands, her face, the bookshelves and the dog; on one sheet of his sketchbook he wrote a list to remind himself of important details: 'pencils, telephone, handles, necklace, samples, hand'. From the details the picture draws its life. The cool, blue-grey colour of the background is broken up with colour from the fabric samples and the bindings of pattern books. Shiny metal handles on the cupboard doors indicate a fashionable modernity. The sharpness of pencils suggests clarity of line. And on the desk is a small bust of her daughter Marie-Blanche, so that the portrait is not only an expression of Mme Lanvin's creative achievement, but also of maternal affection.

Comparing this to Vuillard's earlier paintings, how has he used the light coming from the right-hand window?

Do you think Vuillard has manipulated reality or has he painted exactly what he saw?

Looking closely at the head and its surrounding paintwork, do you think that Vuillard has worked especially in this area, adjusting and correcting?

Edouard Vuillard died in 1940, two years after a large retrospective exhibition of his works in Paris. Claude Roger Marx, who produced one of the first books on Vuillard, wrote of the exhibition, 'A respectful semi-silence was maintained by the critics: in general they seemed loth to discuss the work of the last fifteen years.'

Why might this have been?

CONCLUSION

This exhibition reveals Vuillard as an artist who bridged the divide between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the previous century, Vuillard's radicalism had allowed him to explore his most intimate feelings about his world. In the twentieth century, while still documenting his life, a more realist style enabled him to make observations of the Parisian world in a more objective way.

