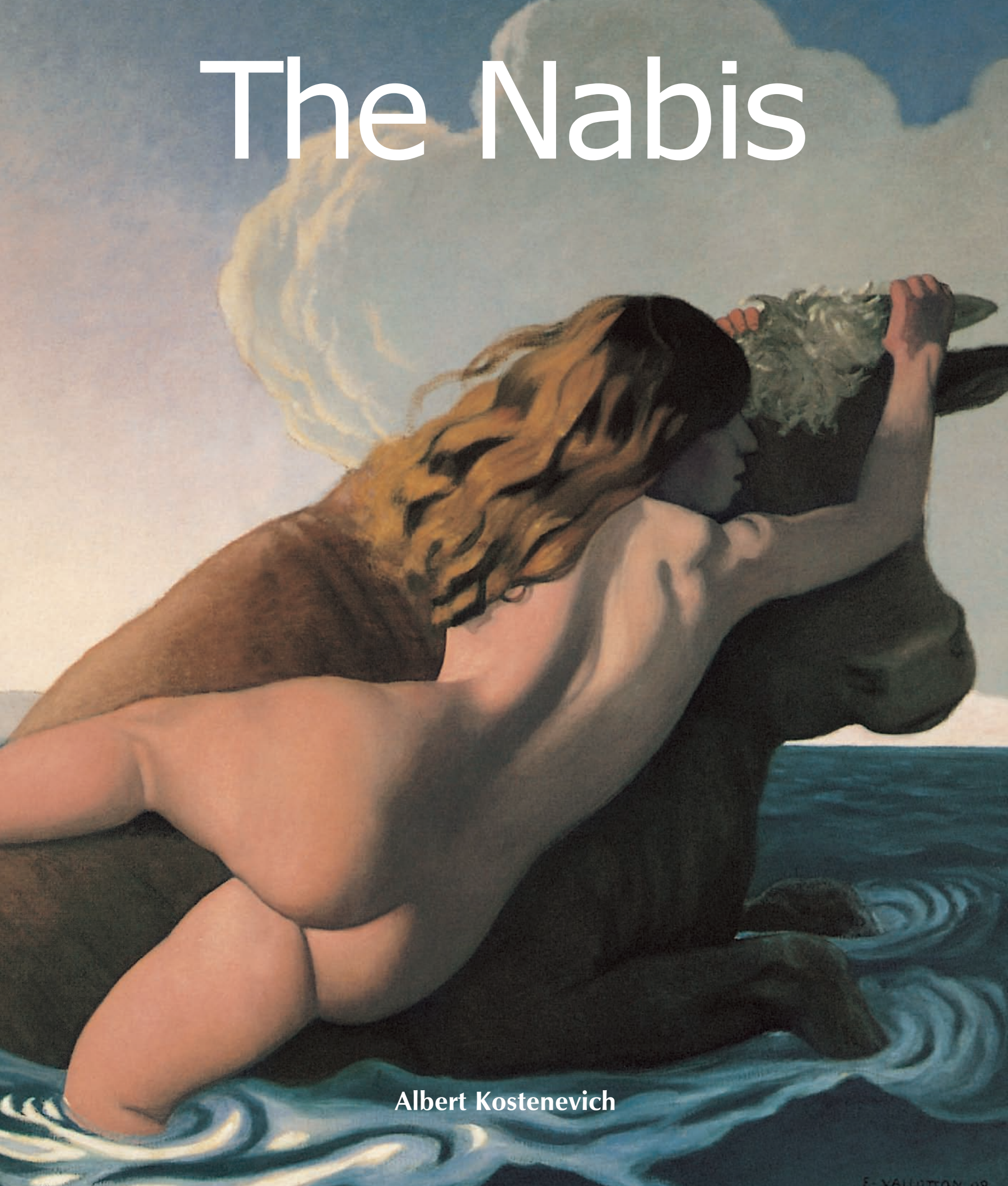


The Nabis



Albert Kostenevich

Text: Albert Kostenevich

Layout:

Baseline Co Ltd,
33 Ter - 33 Bis Mac Dinh Chi St.,
Star Building, 6th Floor
District 1, Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

© Parkstone Press International, New York, USA
© Confidential Concepts, worldwide, USA

© Estate Bonnard / Artists Rights Society, New York, USA / ADAGP, Paris
© Estate Denis / Artists Rights Society, New York, USA / ADAGP, Paris
© Aristide Maillol / Artists Rights Society, New York, USA / ADAGP, Paris
© Estate Matisse / Artists Rights Society, New York, USA / Les Héritiers Matisse
© Estate Roussel / Artists Rights Society, New York, USA / ADAGP, Paris
© Jan Verkade
© Estate Vuillard / Artists Rights Society, New York, USA / ADAGP, Paris

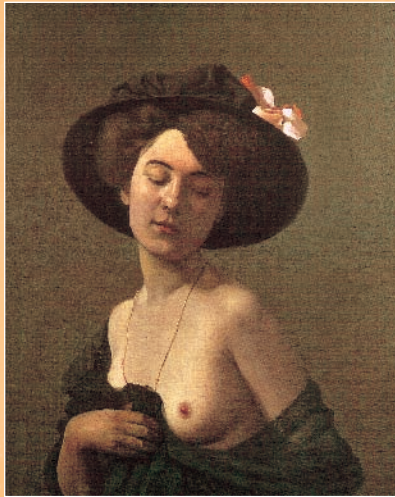
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or adapted without the permission of the copyright holder, throughout the world. Unless otherwise specified, copyrights on the works reproduced lie with the respective photographers. Despite intensive research, it has not always been possible to establish copyright ownership. Where this is the case we would appreciate notification.

ISBN: 978-1-78042-799-7

Albert Kostenevich

The Nabis



Contents

The Group	7
Major Artists	61
Félix Vallotton	63
Ker Xavier Roussel	77
Pierre Bonnard	85
Édouard Vuillard	155
Maurice Denis	175
Notes	196
Bibliography	197
Index	198



The Group

Although Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, Roussel and Vallotton have gone down in the history of painting as artists belonging to a single group, their works, in spite of some common features, in fact display more differences than similarities. They were bound together in their youth by membership in a circle which bore a curious name — the *Nabis*. Art historians, who see the Nabis' work as a special aspect of Post-Impressionism, have long resigned themselves to this purely conventional label. The word *Nabis* says next to nothing about the aims and methods of these artists, but probably on account of their very diversity it has proved impossible to replace the label by a more meaningful term, or at least one which fits better into the established scheme of things. The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg possesses a splendid collection of works by Bonnard and his friends, and a much smaller collection of no less artistic merit is housed in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. All these works are presented in this book.

An interest in Nabis painting arose very early in Russia. Here, as elsewhere in Europe, it emerged not among art lovers as a whole, but among a tiny group of art collectors who were ahead of the general public in their appreciation of new developments. Works by Bonnard, Denis and Vallotton found their way to Moscow, and later to St. Petersburg, soon after they had been painted, some of them even being specially commissioned. In those days the purchase by Russian collectors of new French painting was a defiance of what was accepted as "good taste". In contrast to earlier times, these new connoisseurs of painting came not from the aristocracy but from the merchant class. Several well-educated representatives of the new type of up-and-coming entrepreneurs, used to relying on their own judgement, also became highly active and independently-minded figures in the art market. Two of them, Sergei Shchukin (1854-1937) and Ivan Morozov (1871-1921)

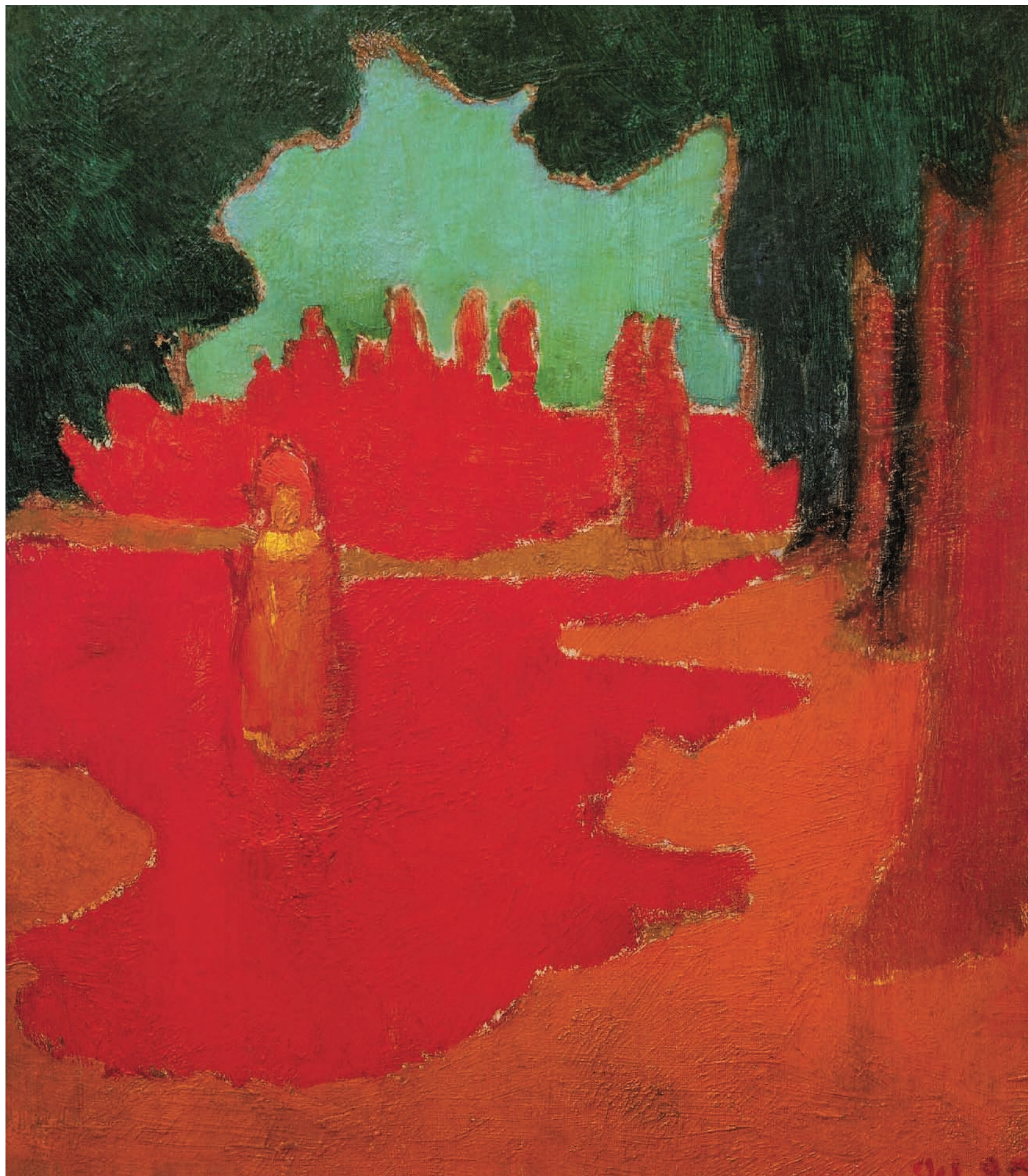
formed collections which at the beginning of the twentieth century ranked among the best in the world.

The name of Shchukin is probably more widely known, and this is not surprising: his boldness, seen by many of his contemporaries as mere folly, soon attracted attention. He had brought the most notable works of Henri Matisse, André Derain and Pablo Picasso to Moscow before Paris had had time to recover from the shock that they caused. Even today specialists are astonished by Shchukin's unerring taste and keen judgement. He proved able to appreciate Matisse and Picasso at a time when so-called connoisseurs still felt perplexed or even irritated by their paintings. The Nabis, however, attracted Shchukin to a lesser degree, perhaps because their work did not appear sufficiently revolutionary to him. He acquired one picture by Vuillard and several by Denis, among them the *Portrait of Marthe Denis, the Artist's Wife, Martha and Mary* and *The Visitation*. Later another canvas was added to these, *Figures in a Springtime Landscape (The Sacred Grove)*, one of the most ambitious and successful creations of European Symbolism, which was passed on to Sergei Shchukin by his elder brother Piotr. But Shchukin failed to notice Bonnard. Regarding Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin as the key-figures in Post-Impressionism, Shchukin — and he was not alone in this — saw the works of Bonnard and his friends as a phenomenon of minor importance.

He did in fact make one attempt to "get into" Bonnard. In 1899, he bought Bonnard's painting *Fiacre* at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery, but later he returned it. Today it is in the National Gallery in Washington. Shchukin used to say that a picture needed to be in his possession for some time before he made his final decision about it, and art dealers accepted his terms. The man who really appreciated the Nabis and who collected their pictures over a considerable period of time was Ivan Morozov. His taste for their work must have been

1. **Paul Sérusier**, *The Talisman*, 1888. Oil on wood, 27 x 21.5 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

2. **Maurice Denis**, *Sun Patches on the Terrace*, 1890.
Oil on cardboard, 24 x 20.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





3. Paul Gauguin, *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 72.2 x 91 cm. National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

4. Jan Verkade, *Decorative Landscape*, 1891-1892. Oil on canvas. Private collection.





cultivated by his elder brother Mikhail, one of the first outside France to appreciate their painting. Mikhail Morozov owned *Behind the Fence*, the first work by Bonnard to find its way to Russia. He also had in his collection Denis's *Mother and Child* and *The Encounter*. When in 1903 Mikhail Morozov's untimely death put an end to his activities as a collector, his younger brother took up collecting with redoubled energy, adding to his collection judiciously. Seeing in Bonnard and Denis the leading figures of the Nabis group, the best exponents of its artistic aims, he concentrated on their work. As a result, Bonnard and Denis were as well represented in his collection as the Impressionists, Cézanne and Gauguin.

After purchasing Denis's picture *Sacred Spring in Guidel* at the Salon des Indépendants in the spring of 1906, Morozov made a point of becoming acquainted with the artist. That summer he visited Denis at his home in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where he bought the as yet unfinished *Bacchus and Ariadne* and commissioned *Polyphemus* as a companion piece. In the same year, or at the beginning of the next, he placed his biggest order with Denis, *The Legend of Psyche*, a series of panels for his Moscow mansion in Prechistenka Street. At Morozov's invitation, Denis came to Moscow to install the panels and add the finishing touches. Relations between the patron and the artist became firm and friendly. Morozov sought the Frenchman's advice; at Denis's prompting, for example, Morozov purchased one of Cézanne's finest early works, *Girl at the Piano*. Denis introduced Morozov to Maillol. The result of this acquaintance was a commission for four large bronze figures which later adorned the same hall as Denis's decorative panels, superbly complementing them.

The second ensemble of decorative panels commissioned by Morozov is even more remarkable when seen today. Created by Bonnard, it comprises the triptych *Mediterranean* and the panels *Early Spring in the Countryside* and *Autumn*,



Fruit-Picking. At Morozov's suggestion Bonnard also painted the pair of works, *Morning in Paris* and *Evening in Paris*. Together with the triptych, these rank among Bonnard's greatest artistic achievements.

St. Petersburg had no collectors on the scale of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. Only Georges Haasen, who represented a Swiss chocolate firm in what was then the capital of Russia, collected new French painting. He was especially interested in artists like the Nabis group. Among other works, he had in his collection Bonnard's *The Seine near Vernon* and six paintings by Vallotton (all now in the Hermitage). Haasen knew Vallotton well: the artist stayed with him in St. Petersburg and

5. **Paul Sérusier**, *Old Breton Woman under a Tree*, c. 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré", Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

6. **Mogens Ballin**, *Breton Landscape*, c. 1891. Oil on paper. Musée départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré", Saint-Germain-en-Laye.







painted portraits of the businessman himself and of his wife. No complete list of the works in Haasen's collection has survived, but there is enough information to indicate that it was very well put together. The catalogue of the St. Petersburg exhibition held in 1912, *A Hundred Years of French Painting*, contains a number of works by Bonnard, Vuillard, Roussel and Vallotton from Haasen's collection that were not among those which entered the Hermitage in 1921.

There was one more Russian collector who showed interest in the Nabis, Victor Golubev, but he took up residence in Paris. The two canvases belonging to him at the 1912 St. Petersburg exhibition, Vuillard's *Autumn Landscape* and Denis's *St. George*, were actually sent from France. The exhibition betokened a genuine recognition of new French art: on display were the finest works by Manet, Renoir, Monet, Cézanne and Gauguin.

The salon idols, who still had many admirers among the public, were represented by only a few works, while there were twenty-four Renoirs, seventeen Cézannes and twenty-one Gauguins. The Nabis were, of course, represented on a more modest but still creditable scale: six paintings by Bonnard, five each by Roussel and Denis, four by Vuillard and two each by Vallotton and Sérusier. Their works effectively formed the final element in the exhibition. They could no longer be regarded as the last word in French art, but they were the latest thing considered acceptable by the organizers of this diverse artistic panorama which occupied over twenty rooms in Count Sumarokov-Elstone's house in Liteny Prospekt. This was undoubtedly one of the most significant art exhibitions of the early twentieth century, not only in Russia, but in the whole of Europe. Even today one cannot help marvelling at its scope and at the aptness in the choice of many works. At the same time the catalogue shows its organisers' desire to avoid excessive radicalism. It was, after all, a purely St. Petersburg affair, a joint venture of the magazine *Apollon* (Apollo) and the French Institute, which at that time was located in St. Petersburg. The Institute's director, Louis Réau, was a prominent art historian. The great Moscow collectors did not contribute to the exhibition, although Ivan Morozov was a member of its honorary committee.

7. Édouard Vuillard, *Chestnut Trees*. Distemper on cardboard, mounted on canvas, 110 x 70 cm. Private collection.

8. Ker Xavier Roussel, *Women in the Countryside*, c. 1893. Pastel on paper, 42 x 26 cm. Private collection, Paris.

9. Ker Xavier Roussel, *Garden*, 1894. Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas, 120 x 91.4 cm. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

10. Louis Comfort Tiffany, *Garden*, 1895. Made after the stained glass window from Ker Xavier Roussel. Private collection.





By that time in Moscow, where artistic life was far more turbulent than in St. Petersburg, painting of the type represented by the Nabis had been ousted by the more audacious and striking manifestations of the avant-garde, both Russian and foreign. Whereas at the 1908 *Golden Fleece* exhibition, Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, Sérusier and Roussel were well represented, the following year their pictures were no longer on show. However, the organizers of the 1909 exhibition included works by Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck and Braque. The *Izdebsky Salon*, a fairly large international exhibition arranged by Vladimir Izdebsky which in 1910 visited Odessa, Kiev, St. Petersburg and Riga, presented not only works by Matisse, Kees van Dongen, Vlaminck, Rouault and Braque, but also by Larionov, Kandinsky, Jawlensky, Bechtejeff, Altman and many others. In sharp contrast there were only a few Nabis paintings. Neither Russian nor Western European art lovers had turned their backs on the art of Bonnard and his companions, but it had receded into the background. The opinion took root that these artists were of minor importance, and several decades were to pass before this myth was finally dispelled. The reason for the rise of the myth was that the Nabis stood apart from the mainstream of the various antagonistic movements in art, torn by strife on the eve of the First World War. But Time, that great arbiter, lifted the veil of obscurity from the Nabis, once again revealing the merits of their art, and placing Bonnard among the most brilliant colourists that France has ever produced.

The generation of Bonnard and his companions came to the fore in artistic life at the close of the nineteenth century. Nurtured by the colourful era known as the *belle époque*, they themselves contributed much to it. The history of nineteenth-century French art may be divided up in different ways. If, however, one is guided by the most fundamental cultural distinctions, a pattern of three periods approximately equal in

11. Pierre Bonnard, *The Child with a Sandcastle*, c. 1894.
Distemper on canvas, 167 x 50 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

length can be drawn. The first, which began when the principles of Classicism still reigned supreme, saw the emergence of the Romantic movement. The second was dominated by Realism, which appeared sometimes on its own, sometimes in interaction with Romanticism and even with a form of Classicism lapsing into Academicism. The third period was marked by a greatly increased complexity in the problems tackled by the artists. Influences of earlier times could still be traced in the various artistic styles, but only to highlight the new and unusual artistic manifestations. The development of painting gathered an unprecedented momentum. Its idioms became enriched by numerous discoveries. Impressionism assumed the leading role in spite of the hostility shown towards it in official circles, by the general public, and by most painters.

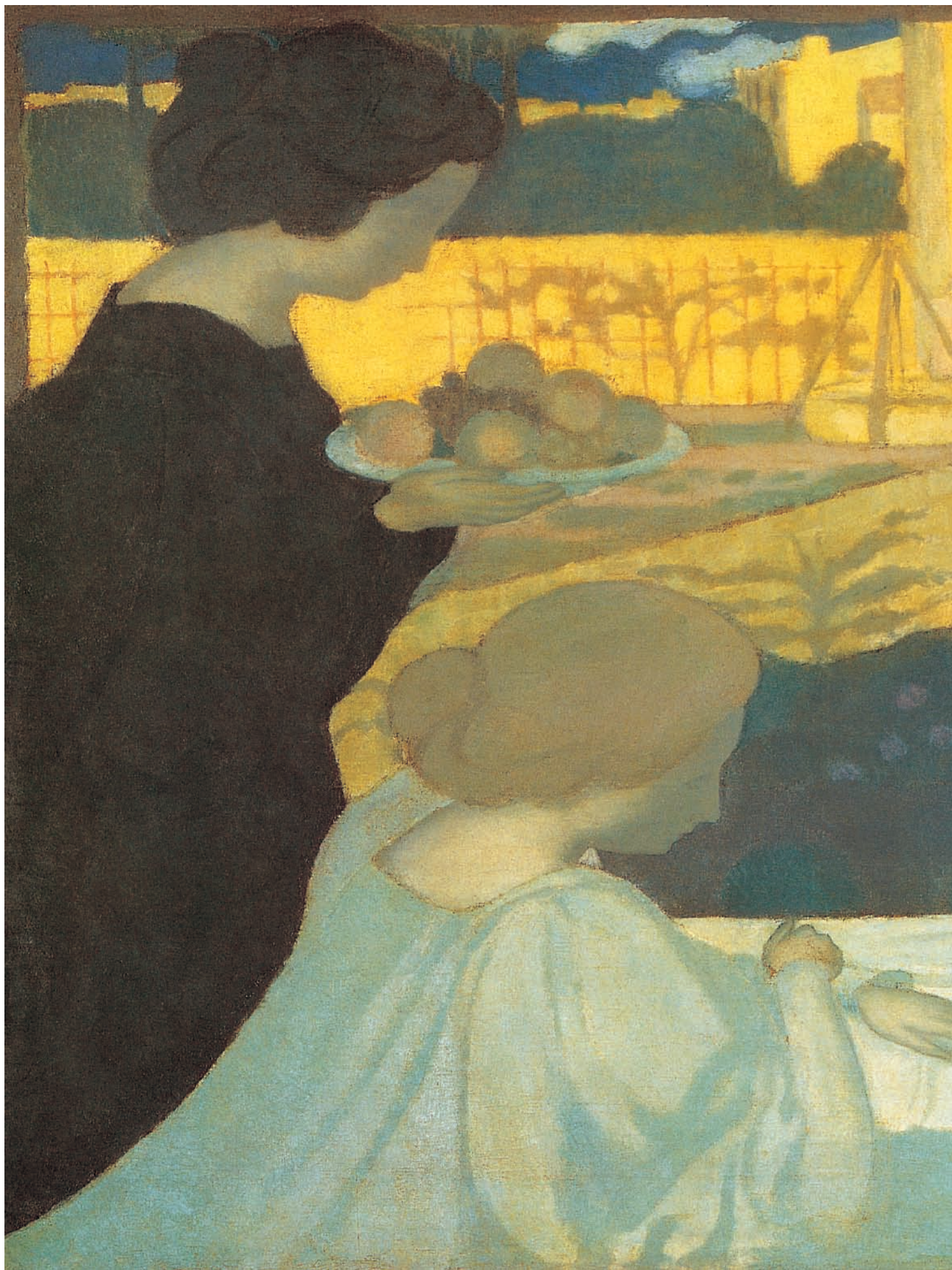
The last three decades of the nineteenth century were among the greatest and richest in French art. They were staggering in their volcanic creative activity. One brilliant constellation of artists was followed by the rise of another. Younger painters rapidly caught up with their older colleagues and competed with them. Moreover, the appearance of a dazzling new movement in art was not followed by a lull, a pause in development, which could have had a historical justification — to give that movement time to strengthen its influence. On the contrary, no sooner had the roar of one gigantic wave subsided, than another came rolling implacably behind it, and so on, wave after wave.

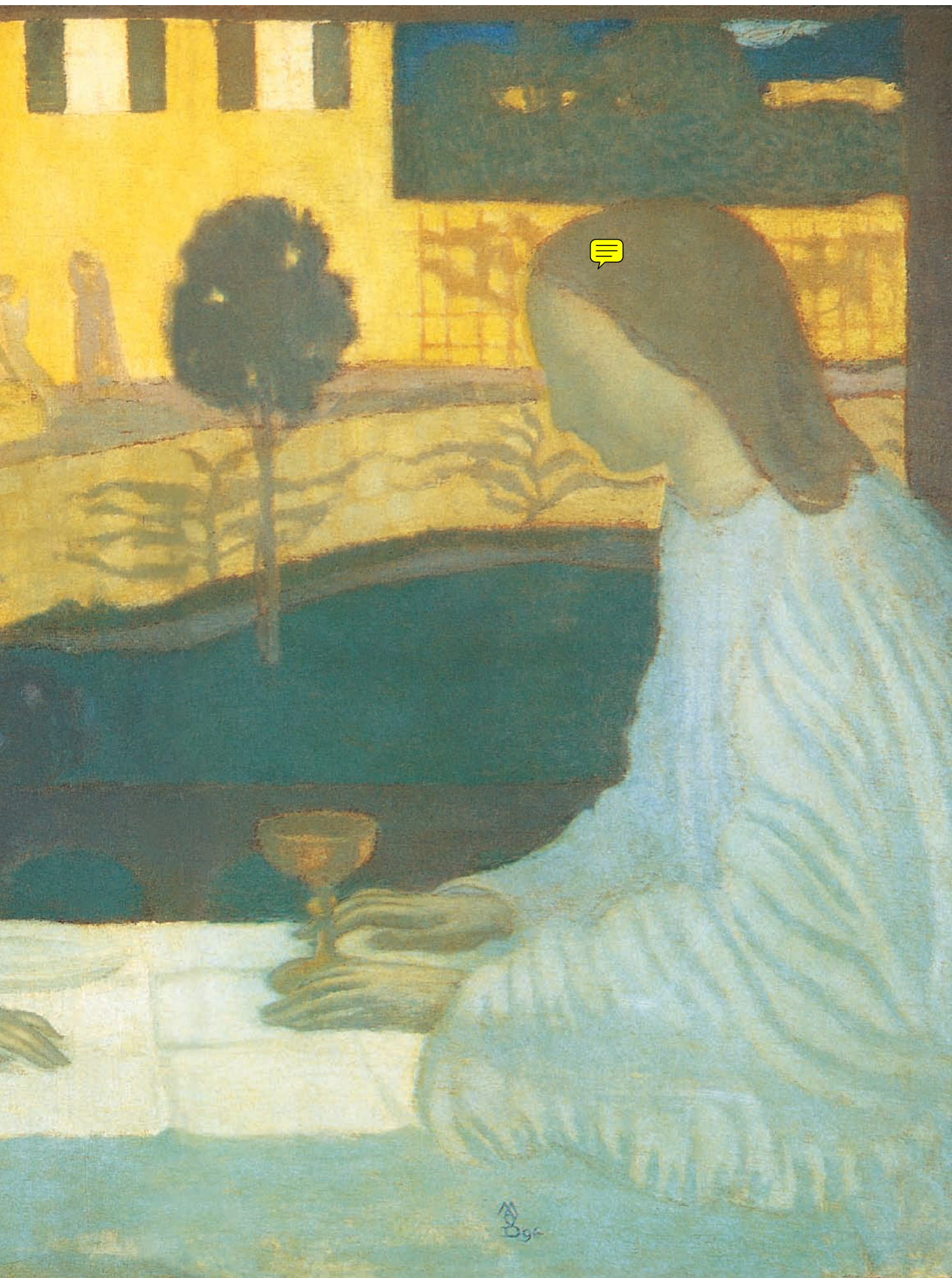
The main “disturber of the peace” in the 1860s was Édouard Manet. His works caused a revolution in painting, blazing the way for a new style — Impressionism. The 1870s were decisive years in the Impressionists’ battle to assert their new, unbiased approach to reality and their right to use bright, pure colours, wholly appropriate to the



12. **Paul Cézanne**, *The Four Seasons – Autumn* (detail), 1850-1860. Oil on canvas, 314 x 104 cm. Petit Palais – Musée des beaux-arts de la ville de Paris, Paris.

13. **Maurice Denis**, *Martha and Mary*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 77 x 116 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.







wonderful freshness of their perception of the world. The 1880s were marked by more developments. Proceeding from the discoveries of Monet and his fellow Impressionists, Seurat and Signac on the one hand, and Gauguin on the other, all mapped out entirely new directions in painting. The views of these artists were completely different. The “scholarly” approach of the first two Neo-Impressionists ran counter to the views of Gauguin and the Pont-Avon group of which he was the leader. These artists owed a great deal to medieval art. Meanwhile Vincent van Gogh, who had by that time moved from Holland to France, led the way in another direction: his main concern was to express his inner feelings. All these artists had moved a good distance away from Impressionism, yet each owed a great deal to the revolution that Manet had fomented. When Seurat and Gauguin exhibited their pictures at the last exhibition of the Impressionists held in 1886, their divergence was already clearly marked. Naturally, among the “apostates” one ought to name the two contemporaries of the Impressionists — Redon, and, above all, Cézanne, who from the start recognized not only the enormous merits of Impressionist painting, but also saw traits in it which threatened to lead to shallowness and to the rejection of the eternal truths of art.

Soon a new term — Post-Impressionism — made its appearance. It was not a very eloquent label, but it came to be widely used. The vagueness of the label was not accidental. Some of the French artists who were initially inspired by the Impressionistic view of the world later left Impressionism behind, each pursuing his own path. This gave rise to an unprecedented stylistic diversity which reached its peak between the late 1880s and the beginning of the twentieth century. No one name could possibly be adequate in this situation.



14. **Georges Lacombe**, *Isis*, c. 1895. Bas-relief in mahogany, 111.5 x 62 x 10.7 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

15. **Paul Cézanne**, *The Four Seasons – Spring* (detail), 1859-1860. Oil on canvas, 314 x 104 cm. Petit Palais – Musée des beaux-arts de la ville de Paris, Paris.

Even from anti-academic points of view, Impressionism could seem narrow and insufficient as a means of artistic expression, yet it still remained a force which no artist of talent, at least in France, could ignore. It was not only Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec who came to be regarded as Post-Impressionists, but also Redon and Cézanne, and even Matisse and Picasso. For example, in 1912 the last two artists displayed their work at the second exhibition of Post-Impressionists at the Grafton Gallery in London. More recently, however, art historians have tended to limit Post-Impressionism to the nineteenth century. The revolution caused by the Impressionists, and its aftermath, Post-Impressionism, became the most important forces in the development of art from the 1860s through to the 1890s, and it would probably be no exaggeration to say that they influenced artistic evolution throughout the twentieth century.

Any really creative artist living in Paris who embarked on his career in the late 1880s, when Impressionism was drawing to its close, was almost inevitably “doomed” to become a Post-Impressionist. So it is hardly surprising that a small group of artists, calling themselves the Nabis — Bonnard, Vuillard and Denis among them — readily joined this broad new movement which speedily gained authority among painters outside the academic circle. With the advent of the twentieth century, when the age of Post-Impressionism was approaching its end, these artists would be faced with the necessity of making a new choice: either to follow the style of their youth or to rally to the banners of new, more radical movements. But for the Nabis, the question never seriously arose. All their background and artistic experience made them little disposed towards Fauvism and even less towards Cubism or any other modern style. Bonnard was a little more than two years older than Matisse, Vuillard was even closer in age, and though they sincerely respected Matisse as an artist, they could not share his ideas. This does not mean that their

intention was to adhere assiduously to their earlier manner. They realized that by acting that way they would be doing no more than marking time and consequently condemning themselves to failure. The real alternative lay in each member of the group developing his own artistic personality. This was bound to conflict with the aspirations of the group as a whole and disrupt its joint efforts. The growing individuality in each artist’s work undermined the group’s unity. At the same time, this process clarified the position of these artists in the art world. It showed that some of them had become figures of European standing, while others were no more than members of a transient group.

Of course, the Nabis artists had never followed one particular style. Each member of the group pursued his own course, regardless of the stylistic, ideological and religious ideas of the others. In this respect the group was unique. This is not to say that the Nabis did not have a common artistic platform, as without one the group could hardly have formed and existed as long as it did.

The group came into being in 1888. The event was connected with the Académie Julian in Paris. The reader should not be misled by this high-sounding name: the word “Académie” was used in the French capital with reference to all sorts of private studios. Among them, the Académie Julian, founded in 1860, probably enjoyed the best reputation. Artists attended this studio because they could find a model there, and many prepared there for entrance examinations to the École des Beaux-Arts. The atmosphere in the studio was less formal than at the École, but the professors as authoritative; in fact, often enough the same academic celebrities taught at the Académie and the École. The students at the studio were a very mixed bag. Shared backgrounds, artistic temperament and talent very quickly drew them together into groups that came apart just as easily as they were formed. The centre of







attraction was Paul Sérusier. He was, at 25, older than his fellow-students, the head of the class and better educated than the rest. The painting exhibited at the 1888 Salon had gained him an honourable mention. With his inclination to discuss matters and his ability to express his ideas clearly and eloquently, he easily won listeners. The main subject of Sérusier's discourses was the experience he gained in Brittany from where he had returned in October 1888 deeply influenced by the ideas of Synthetism. He assumed the role of champion of "the last word" in painting, passed on to him by Gauguin at Pont-Avon.

Sérusier was completely under the spell of his encounter with Gauguin. But the most important thing was that he brought back with him *The Talisman* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

This small landscape study hurriedly painted on a piece of board was to become a true talisman for a small group of students at the Académie Julian. With a sacramental air, Sérusier showed the panel to Bonnard, Denis, Ibels and Ranson. Later Vuillard and Roussel joined "the initiated". The study, painted in the Bois d'Amour outside Pont-Avon, depicts autumnal trees reflected in a pond. Each area of colour in this work is given in such a generalized fashion that the object depicted is not easily recognized, and, turned upside down, the picture becomes an abstract. The study was made under the guidance of Gauguin, who demanded: "How do you see that tree? Is it green? Then choose the most beautiful green on your palette. And that shadow? Is it more like blue? Then don't hesitate to paint it with the purest blue possible."¹ The words are cited differently in different sources, but all versions

17. Georges Lacombe, *Red Pines*, 1894-1895. Egg tempera paint, 59 x 46 cm. Josefowitz Collection, Lausanne.

18. Paul Sérusier, *Breton Women, the Meeting in the Sacred Grove*, c. 1891-1893. Oil on canvas, 72 x 92 cm. Private collection.



contain the same main idea: an exhortation to simplify the methods of painting, beginning with the simplification of the artist's palette and an increase in its dynamism. "This is how we learned," recollected Denis, "that all works of art are a kind of transposition, a certain caricature, the passionate equivalent of an experienced sensation. This was the starting point of an evolution in which we at once became engaged."²

The seed had fallen upon fertile ground. Comparing *The Talisman* and the works of the Impressionists and their followers seen in the Durand-Ruel, Boussod and Valadon galleries with the popular paintings exhibited in the Musée du Luxembourg and the works of their own teachers, the young painters could not but fall under the spell of this new mode of painting, with its vitality and brilliant colours.

Of course, Sérusier and his attentive audience were by no means unanimous in their interpretation of the arguments of the leader of the Pont-Avon school. While for Sérusier the simplification of colour seemed a tempting gateway into the realm of symbols (and Denis was ready to agree with him), Bonnard and Vuillard, who did not wish to leave the precincts of painting as such, hoped that these devices would help to open up promising decorative resources. Though their own artistic experience was still rather limited, all of them were able to appreciate the beauty of resonant colours, no matter how unorthodox the means used to achieve them.

It so happened that the students of the Académie Julian who displayed the greatest talent in painting felt drawn towards one another and began by gathering round Sérusier. Among the other students, these young artists stood out with their superior cultural level; they were well-read, loved poetry and the theatre. This too helped to establish close ties between them. Soon they started meeting outside classes.

19. **Georges Lacombe**, *Breton and Breton Women*, 1894-1895. Sculpted polychromic wood, 33 x 14.5 cm. Private collection.

20. **Georges Lacombe**, *Harvestwomen*, 1894-1895. Egg tempera paint, 65 x 50 cm. Private collection.









21. **Georges Lacombe**, *The Ages of Life – Spring*, 1893-1894.
Egg tempera paint, 151 x 240 cm. Petit Palais – Musée des beaux-arts
de la ville de Paris, Paris.

Feeling that their association had a special significance, they decided to call themselves *les Nabis*. This name, a password for the group and a mystery for outsiders, was suggested by one of their friends, Auguste Cazalis, then a student at the School of Oriental Languages.

The meetings of the Nabis were characterized by lively conversations on a wide range of subjects, more often than not connected with painting or literature. It is true that Sérusier and, to a lesser extent, Denis were inclined to give themselves airs, but the rest preferred a merry atmosphere and enjoyed a good joke. This was quite natural: they were all young. On Saturdays they met in Ranson's studio, played charades (popular at the time), staged little puppet shows and read poetry. Once a month, and this with time became a ritual, they gathered in a small, modest restaurant called L'Os à Moelle (The Marrowbone). Each member of the group had a nickname: Sérusier, for example, was called "Nabi à la barbe rutilante" (Nabi with the sparkling beard), Denis bore the name "Nabi aux belles icônes" (Nabi of the beautiful icons), Bonnard's nickname was "Nabi japonard" (the Japanese Nabi), Vuillard's was "Zouave", Verkade's "Nabi obéliscal" (the "obeliscal" Nabi), and Vallotton, who joined the group in 1892, became "Nabi étranger" (the foreign Nabi).

From time to time the Nabis gathered in the editorial offices of the recently-founded magazines *Mercure de France* and *Revue Blanche* or in Le Barc de Boutteville's gallery, where at that time they usually exhibited their works. But their main meeting place remained Ranson's studio on the boulevard Montparnasse, which they styled "the Temple". The walls of the Temple were adorned with decorative pieces by Denis, Vuillard, Bonnard and Roussel. They were executed on paper and, unfortunately, have not survived. In 1891 Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Lugué-Poë rented a workshop in the rue Pigalle, which was frequented by other members of the Nabis

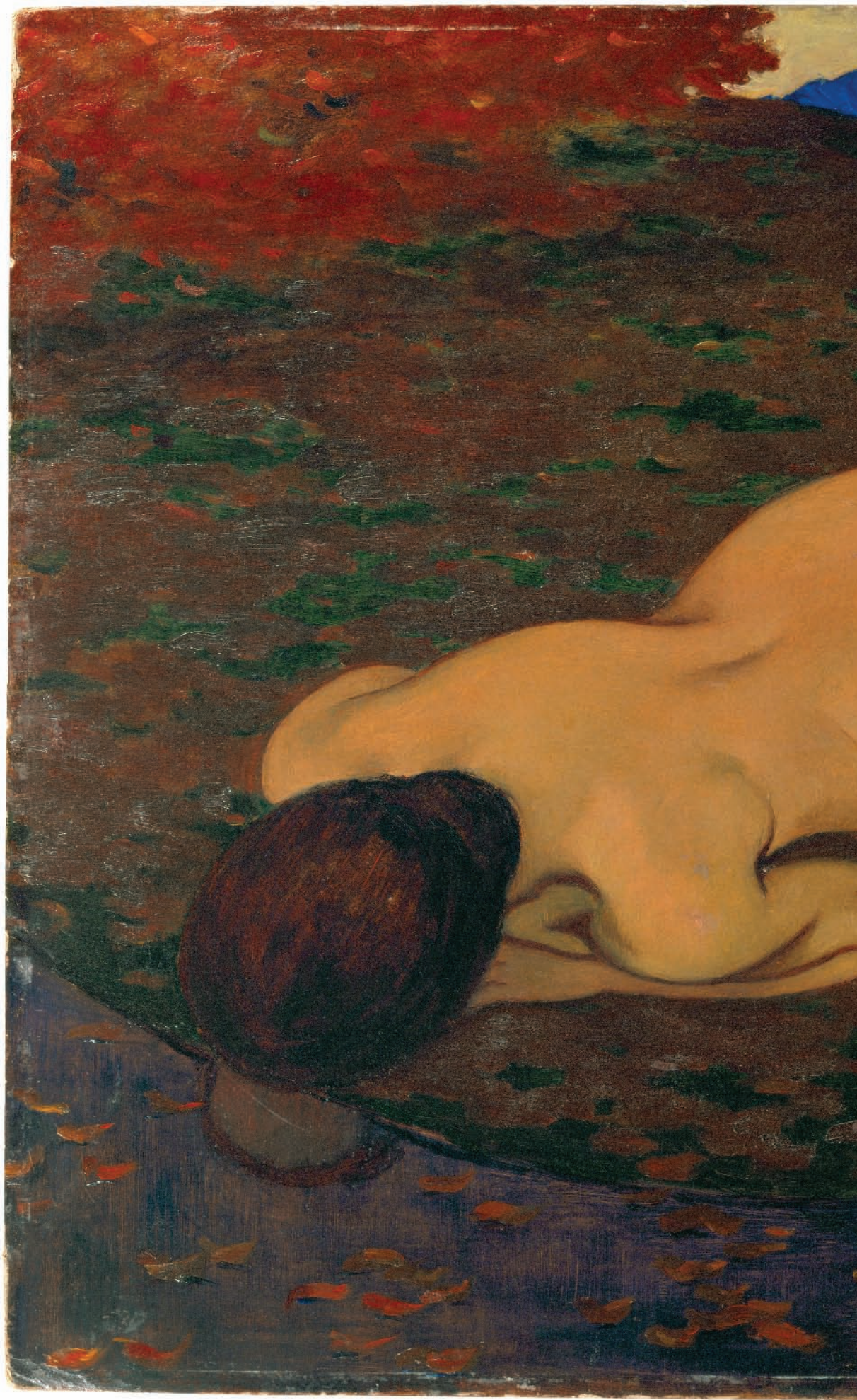
22. **Maurice Denis**, *Madame Ranson with Cat*, c. 1892. Oil on canvas.
Musée départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré", Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

circle. With the coming of spring, they spent Sundays at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, in Denis's house, or at l'Etang-la-Ville, with Roussel's family. Unlike the rest of the Nabis, Ranson and these two artists had married and settled down to a more or less steady home life. Even in summer the Nabis remained faithful to their fellowship: Sérusier, Verkade and Ballin, for instance, visited Brittany together. In 1895 Thadée Natanson, the publisher of the *Revue Blanche*, and his charming wife Misia, whom both Renoir and Bonnard painted many times, entertained Vuillard and Vallotton at their home in Valvin. The following year the couple moved to Villeneuve-sur-Yonne, where over the course of several years Bonnard, Vuillard, Roussel and also Toulouse-Lautrec were invited to their home. Members of the Nabis group often entertained Maillol, whom they held in great esteem. Three or four times they were visited by Gauguin. The Temple was frequented by the composers Chausson, Hermand and Claude Terrasse (Bonnard's brother-in-law). Denis introduced to the Nabis his fellow-student from the Lycée Condorcet, Lugné-Poë, who was soon to gain prominence on the French stage both as an actor and producer. Lugné-Poë had introduced the Parisian public to Ibsen, Strindberg and other outstanding dramatists of the time. Through him the Nabis entered the theatrical world. They designed stage sets and theatrical programmes for Lugné-Poë's productions. They even appeared on the stage as extras, taking part, for example, in the much talked about *Ubu Roi* by Jarry. Members of the Nabi group were personally acquainted and often friendly with many contemporary French authors — Alfred Jarry, Francis Jammes, Jules Renard, Tristan Bernard, Édouard Dujardin and André Gide — so it is hardly surprising that they illustrated their books. While at the Lycée, Maurice Denis became acquainted with Marcel Proust. He was also on close terms with André Gide in whose company he travelled all over Italy. Mallarmé taught English at the Lycée Condorcet. The Nabis greatly admired his poetry and some of them kept in touch with him after leaving the Lycée.

23. **Aristide Maillol**, *Spring*, 1896. Wood. Dina Vierny Collection, Paris.



24. **Félix Vallotton**, *Woman Relaxing*, 1899. Oil on canvas.
Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris.







More than half of the Nabis attended the Lycée Condorcet, undoubtedly one of the finest in Paris and perhaps the best as far as its humanities programme was concerned. It played an important role in fostering a taste for literature in its students. Curiously enough, not one of the Nabis had ever won a prize for art at the Lycée, while Vuillard and Roussel gained the first and second prizes for history. A shared interest in literature, history and aesthetics helped to form firm ties between people of very different convictions. The friendship which sprung up in their Lycée years proved stronger than the artistic and religious differences which arose later.

Their fellowship expressed itself at times through naive and even childish features, for example, the ritual formula, modelled on those of ancient fraternities, with which they finished their letters: “En ta paume, mon verbe et ma pensée” (My words and thoughts are in your palm). On occasion these words were reduced to an abbreviation: “E.T.P.M.V.E.M.P.” Whatever the reason, it is a fact that for many years their friendship was never dimmed by resentment, envy or estrangement.

In works on the history of art the Nabis are at times equated with other groups and movements which existed for a short period and then dissolved. This conception is fraught with inconsistencies. Can the Nabis circle be regarded as a distinct movement? Yes and no. Some common features may be traced in their work, but the kinship between them is at two removes, if not more. It is not by chance that at some recent exhibitions painters of this group have been ascribed to different movements. For example, works by Denis, Sérusier and even Vallotton were included in the widely representative exhibition of European Symbolism held in 1975-76 in Rotterdam, Brussels, Baden-Baden and Paris,²⁵ while neither Bonnard, Vuillard nor Roussel were featured. It is true that

25. **Pierre Bonnard**, *The Dressing Gown*, c. 1890. Cloth, 150 x 50 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

26. **Paul Ranson**, *Women in White*, c. 1895. Wool on canvas, needlepoint tapestry, 150 x 98 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.







27. **Paul Ranson**, *The Tiger*, 1893. Colour lithograph. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

28. **Maurice Denis**, *Bacchanalia*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 99.2 x 139.5 cm. Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo.

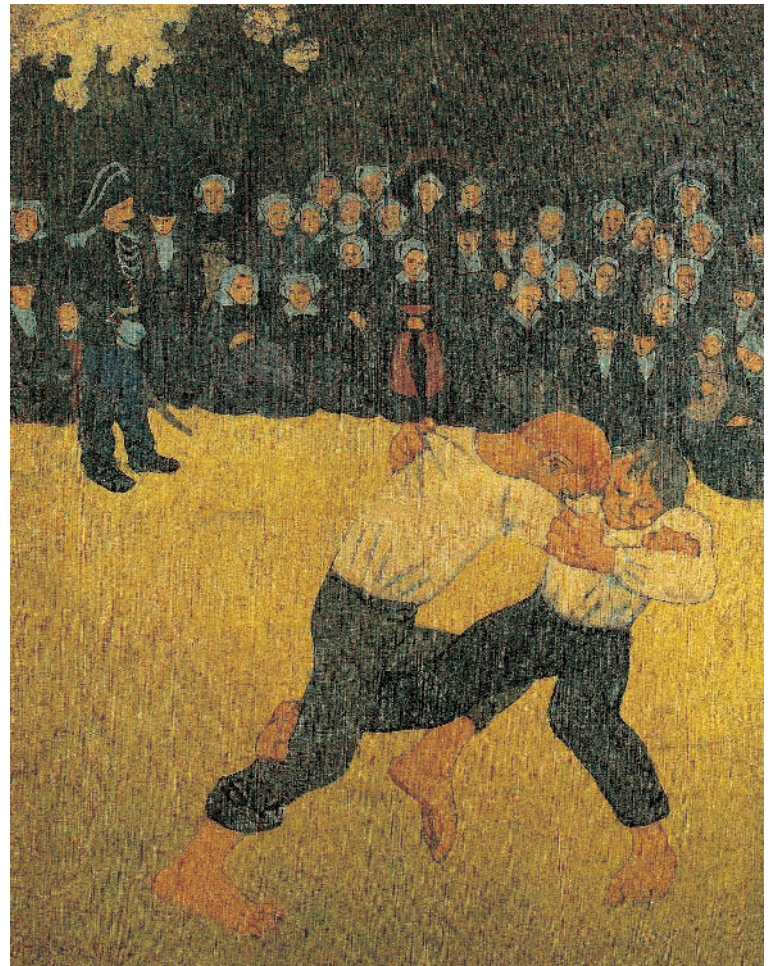


A.S. Belk

some traces of Symbolism may be found in the works of the last three painters, but they are so rare and so faint that these artists cannot possibly be regarded as Symbolists. However, Bonnard, Vuillard and Roussel always paid considerable attention to the painterly aspects of their work and so they had certain points of contact with the Fauves. That explains why their works are now and again shown at the same exhibitions. The exhibition of the Nabis and Fauves held in the Zurich Kunsthaus in 1983⁺ may serve as an example. It is noteworthy that paintings by Denis and Sérusier were not included in this exhibition.

The Nabis were not simply a group of artists using similar painterly devices and the same strategy in the struggle to exhibit their works, as was the case with the Neo-Impressionists or the Fauves. They were a kind of fraternity, hence their desire to be tolerant of each other despite the many differences between them. It is difficult for such a fraternity, based not on discipline but on shared aesthetic conceptions, to survive for long. All the more surprising, then, is the fact that the group continued to exist until 1900. Personal relationships and in certain cases family ties held the group together, though the activities of the group, or at least of some of its members, soon might well have appeared naive and even anachronistic.

In fact, the activities of the group were for most of the Nabis to some extent a kind of game, one that with time lost its attraction. Differences in temperament, in personal inclination and outlook were sooner or later bound to affect the relationship between the Nabis. True, they all worshipped Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, they loved Gauguin, sincerely admired such disparate artists as Cézanne and Van Gogh; they delighted in old stained-glass windows, Breton crucifixes and popular prints from Epinal (*images d'Epinal*);



they were all interested in folk legends, traditional country festivals and ancient rituals. Yet, though they shared these interests, each had his own preferences. A certain coolness was a required buffer between Sérusier, an ardent Catholic, and Roussel, a confirmed atheist. Neither was it easy for Sérusier, with his inclination to doctrinairism, to find a common language with Bonnard, who would never thrust his opinions upon others. Perhaps of no lesser importance was that whereas the former was almost devoid of a sense of humour, the latter was endowed with a very strong one.

29. **Henri-Gabriel Ibels**, *At the Circus*, 1893. Colour lithograph.
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

30. **Paul Sérusier**, *Bretons Wrestlers*, 1890-1891. Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

31. **Georges Lacombe**, *Death and Love*, 1894-1896. Bas-relief in walnut,
48.7 x 195.5 x 6 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.







While admiring Gauguin and medieval art, Degas and Japanese woodcut prints, each member of the Nabis group saw them in a different way. Here, preference was dictated by personal conviction and taste. These differences from the very beginning divided the group into two parties: Sérusier, Denis and Verkade wished to follow Gauguin and drew on the art of the Middle Ages, whereas Bonnard, Vuillard and Vallotton felt an affinity with Degas and Japanese artists. Thus the nicknames given to Bonnard and Denis, names which they readily accepted, reflected their aesthetic inclinations. The names in each case defined the source of their art and, ultimately, that of the two Nabis parties, one of which gravitated towards a vivid, dynamic representation of life, the

other towards a more religious, stylized and symbolic representation. Both wings agreed that art should not aim to copy nature. They saw it above all as “a means of expression”⁵ and recognized that there was “a close connection between form and emotion”.⁶ The theory of equivalences was the foundation of Nabis aesthetics. This may well provide the explanation for the respect which each member of the fraternity felt for the work of the others.

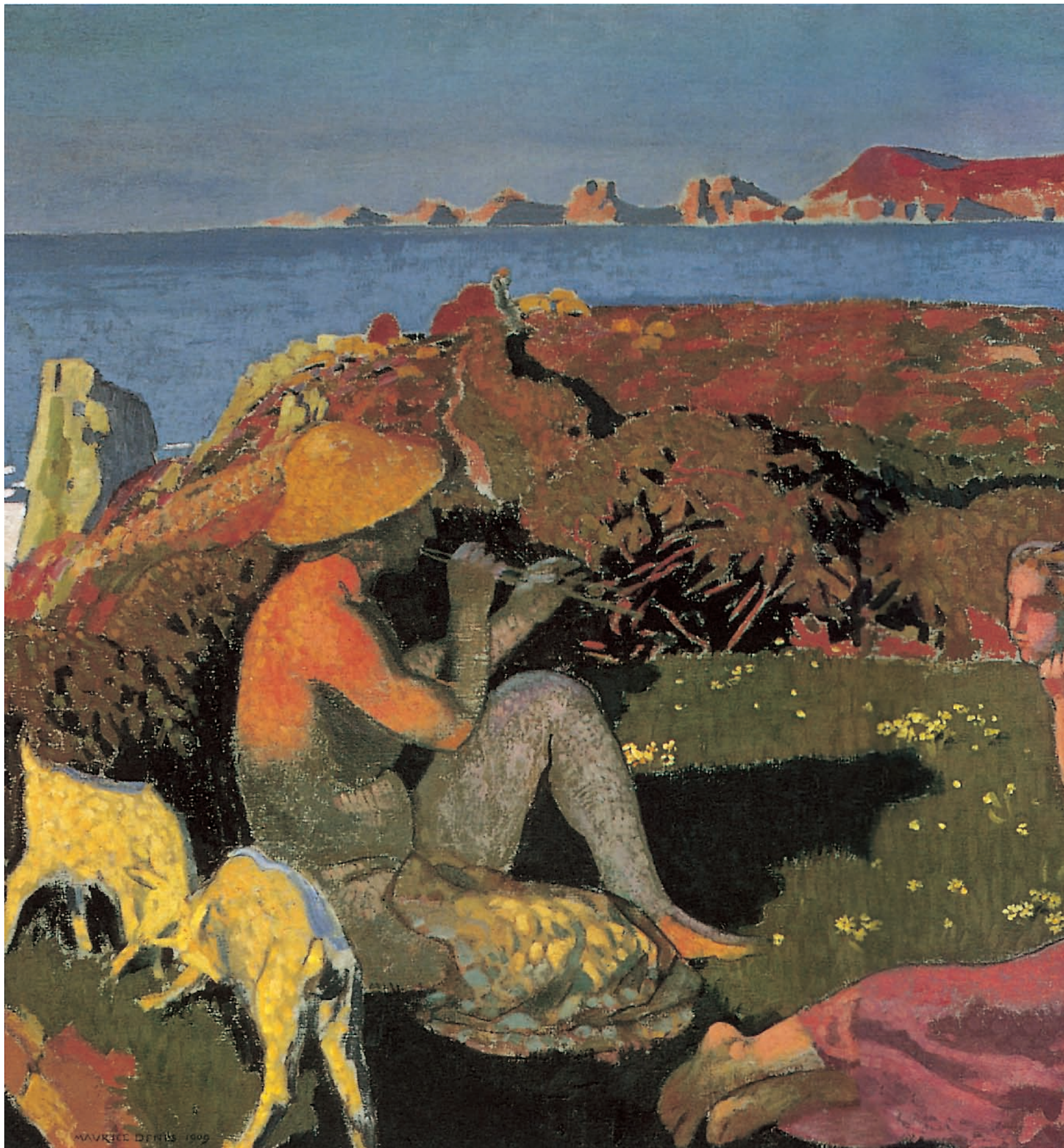
The fact that the Nabis regarded very different artists with equal esteem — Gauguin and Cézanne, Redon and Puvis de Chavannes — may be explained by their genuine respect for individuality. It is easy to see what attracted them to Odilon

32. **Henri Matisse**, *The Dance*, 1909-1910. Oil on canvas, 260 x 391 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

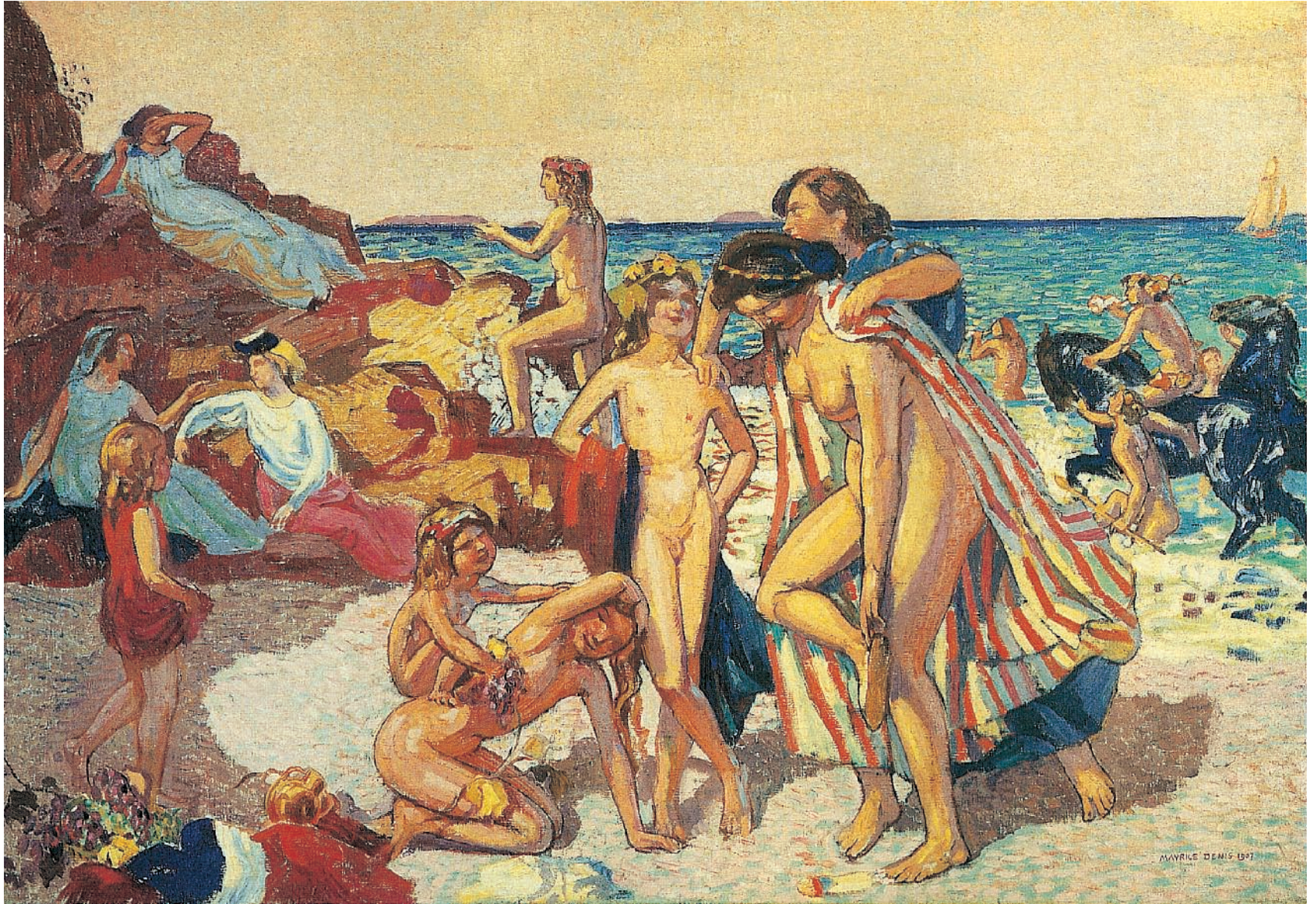
33. **Paul Ranson**, *Lustral* or *The Blue Bather*, 1891. Oil on canvas. Alain Lesieutre Gallery, Paris.

34. **Maurice Denis**, *Shepherds (The Green Seashore)*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 97 x 180 cm. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.









Redon, with his air of mystery and subtle colour nuances, or to Puvis de Chavannes, with his profound understanding of the essence of monumental painting. The works of the young Nabis from time to time betrayed a hint of the influence of these two artists. With Cézanne, whom they discovered very early, when his works could be found only in a small shop kept by Le Père Tanguy, the question becomes more difficult. Did he influence them? Neither Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis nor any other representative of the group can be considered followers of Cézanne; they moved in an entirely different direction from that taken by the vanguard Impressionist. Cézanne's work served them as an example of great skill. To be able to appreciate his art in the early 1890s, when, with the exception of a few close friends, art lovers saw his canvases as nothing but daubs, not only proved independent judgement, but also revealed an uncommonly high degree of painterly culture. It is thus not surprising that the writer Sâr Péladan, for example, an idol of Symbolism who was in great vogue about 1890, at least among a considerable section of the public, failed to impress the Nabis, although they themselves were by no means indifferent to Symbolism. They also remained unmoved by the English painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, who were much talked about in artistic circles throughout Europe.

The Nabis, particularly those who sided with Sérusier, doubtlessly shared some of the important ideas inherent in Symbolism. Since they discussed among themselves all notable artistic events in Paris, they were well acquainted not only with the work of Puvis de Chavannes, Redon and Gustave Moreau (whom they rated less highly, evidently because of his approach to colour), but also with the work of foreign Symbolists belonging to various trends. At the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 they would naturally have seen the work of the British artists Burne-Jones, Millais, Watts and Crane, and of the Italian Previati. Moreover, Burne-Jones was a regular

exhibitor at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts from the time of its foundation in 1890. In that year the Salon also featured works by the Belgian artist Leon Frédéric and the German Ludwig von Hofmann; in 1891, works by the Swiss artist Hodler and the Finn Gallen-Kallela. Foreign artists, including the Belgians Delville, Mellery and Khnopff, and the Dutchman Toorop, were represented in the salons of the "Rose + Croix", arranged by Péladan from 1892 to 1897.

The Nabis' lukewarm reaction to these Symbolists was no manifestation of patriotism. Rather they found their work lacking in artistic merit. The French artists who joined the Symbolist movement always paid special attention to the use of colour. Not simply in the work of Gauguin and Redon, whose achievements as colourists were so astonishing that this factor alone makes it impossible to regard their work solely within the framework of Symbolism, but also in that of less gifted artists such as Seguin, who was close to the Nabis. Other followers of Gauguin produced works characterized by a more complex painterly texture, and by more subtle and original colour harmonies. The understanding of the role of colour evinced by the British, German and Belgian Symbolists seemed to the Nabis narrow, or simply dull and academic.

Many aspects of non-academic art also remained alien to the Nabis from a purely colouristic point of view. They were never tempted, for example, to try their hand at Neo-Impressionism. The exponents of this style aimed at achieving the utmost intensity of light, close to reality, using the technique of separate dabs of paint and the optical mixing of pure spectral colours. Colour for the sake of light — that was never an issue for the Nabis, nor was the choice between colour and light. Colour invariably remained of paramount importance for this group of artists. Their colour schemes were most often based on subtle, even elusive gradations of tone, and were in themselves usually rather subdued.

The colour solutions characteristic of the Nabis may be explained by the artists' attitude towards what they depicted. This attitude was far from the immediacy of the first Impressionists. While rejecting the rapid, casual approach of Monet and Sisley, they remained faithful to accurate visual perception. Their preference was for the eternal rather than the transient. A painting by Bonnard, Vuillard or Denis is, of course, correlated to the object it depicts, but not with it alone. In their works one can always discover a number of subtle associations which place the picture in a definite artistic and historical context. Works by the Nabis are always decorative, and this precludes a naturalistic interpretation of them. At the same time, this decorativeness shows that these paintings belong to an artistic system which is structurally close to other systems. Those other systems may be far removed in time and space, but that fact is irrelevant to their art. In Bonnard's works we find parallels with Japanese prints, in Denis's with the murals of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.

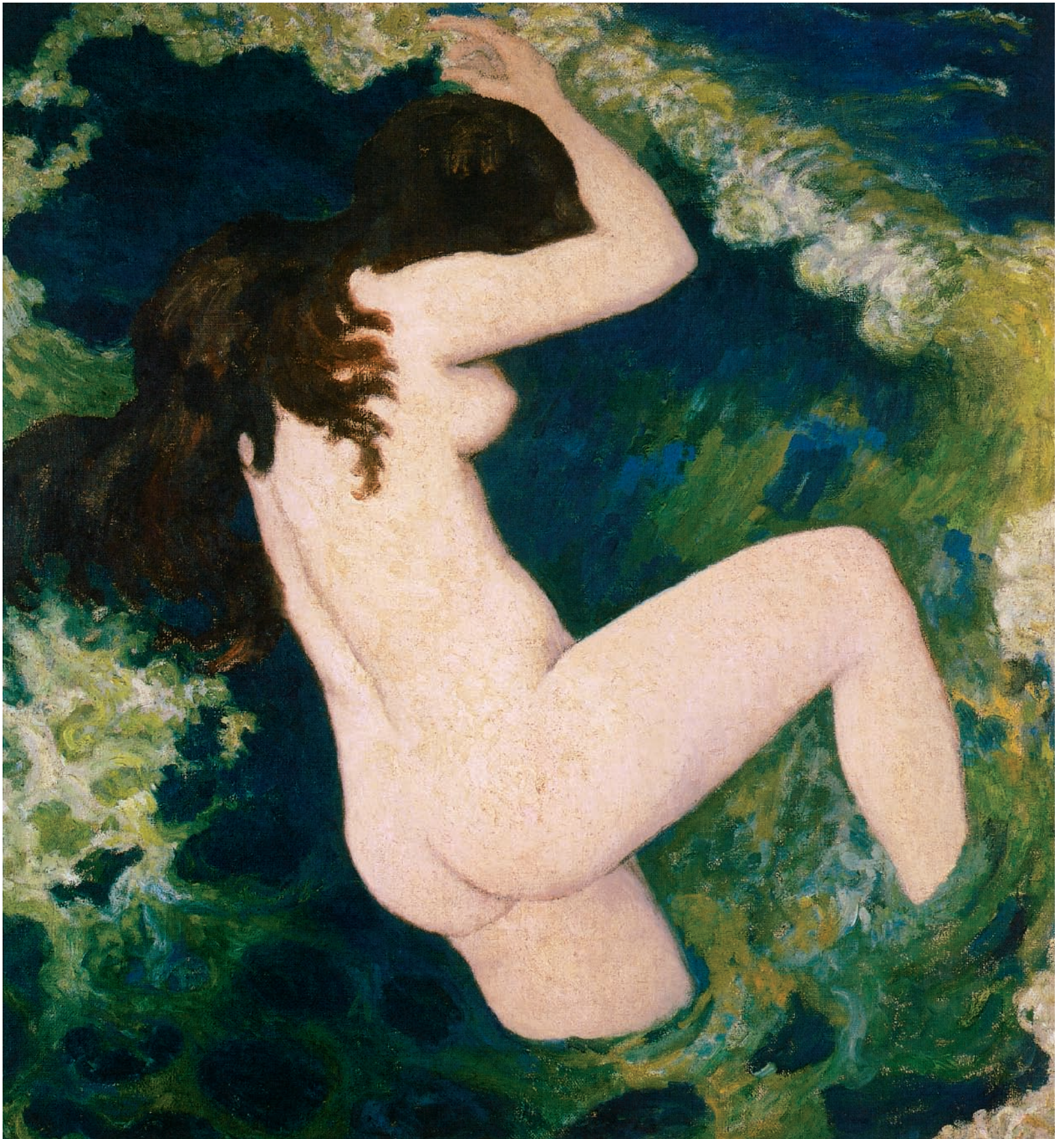
Such a tendency to look back may at its worst have led to mere stylization. However, Bonnard and Vuillard established fruitful links with earlier art. It was not a matter of iconographic borrowing, though this did take place, but rather a kind of compression of artistic significance: a work is seen not solely as a reflection of the reality surrounding the artist, but also in the context of a long-existing, well-developed tradition, at times very unexpected by the artist's contemporaries. Denis, the chief theoretician of the group, even invented a word to denote this phenomenon, Neo-Traditionalism. It is easy to see that Denis's art does indeed fall under this heading. The issue is more difficult with such artists as Vuillard, but in his work too, links with artistic traditions of the past are clearly evident. He owes a great debt to eighteenth-century art, to Japanese woodcuts and to highly decorative French printed cloths. These correlations reveal a

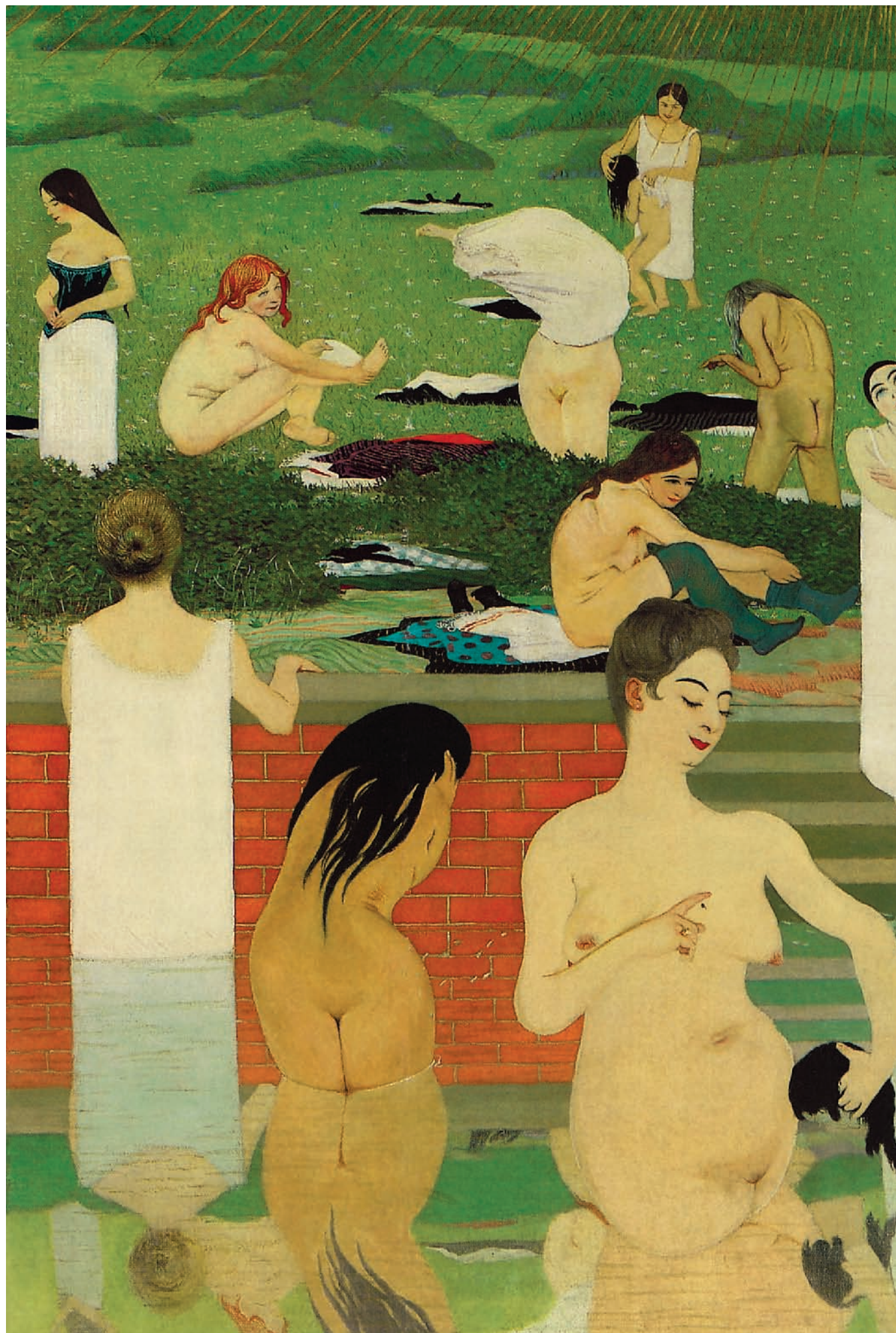
very important peculiarity of Nabis art: in comparison with the work of their immediate forerunners, it makes special demands on the viewer and requires a good knowledge of the history of art. An Impressionist picture is easily understood without this, as long as the viewer knows how to look at it.

A new understanding of the aims of painting, determined by a more complex approach to the inner meanings of the image, is one of the most distinctive marks of Post-Impressionism. In some cases the approach owed a great deal to the artistic systems of the East. Although oriental art was only one source of the stylistic changes taking place at that time, it is particularly clear that the Nabis, moving in the same direction as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Redon, and (partly) Toulouse-Lautrec, strove, in contrast to Impressionism, for a synthesis in art, a kind of synthesis which was entirely new in European art. The "synthetism" of Gauguin and other members of the Pont-Avon group, Redon's experiments which delighted Bonnard and his friends by "a unity of practically opposite qualities, the purest matter and extremely mystic expression",⁷ the visions of Gustave Moreau, usually deliberately theatrical — all these artistic manifestations at the end of the nineteenth century betrayed an anti-naturalistic mood. The Nabis inevitably came to share this mood, although their attitudes towards Redon and Moreau differed. It influenced their art considerably and gave rise to a situation where in a single painting vague allusions could unexpectedly be combined with almost poster-like abstractions. Courbet and the painters of the Barbizon school had avoided using images which could be interpreted in different ways: in short, images outside the world of painting. For the Nabis, on the other hand, the interplay of various styles and images of the past, from the *millefiori* glass of the late Middle Ages to the colour prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, motifs drawn from legends, mythology and the Gospels, all formed an integral part of their art. This tendency towards a synthesis of artistic

36. **Aristide Maillol**, *The Wave*, c. 1891. Oil on canvas, 95.5 x 89 cm. Musée Maillol, Paris.

37. **Félix Vallotton**, *The Saturday Evening Bath*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Kunsthau, Zürich.









concepts was entirely in keeping with the revival of the idea of combining painting with other arts and with architecture.

This idea was current all across Europe. It was not rejected by the academic and salon leaders, but what they offered was the construction of modern works of art based on copying Renaissance and Baroque examples, which merely led to a still-born “historicism”. The creative young artists of Paris were concerned with something entirely different. They dreamt of decorative and monumental painting which would absorb all the colouristic discoveries of the previous two decades. Later Verkade recalled: “Around 1890 a war-cry surged through the studios: ‘We’ve had enough of easel-paintings, down with useless furniture! Painting must not usurp a liberty which isolates it from other arts! There are no paintings, but only decorations!’”⁸ What were they to be like, these new decorations? Even beginners in painting realized that merely copying the Old Masters would be no better than the thoughtless transfer of the Impressionists’ brilliant colours onto walls. It was then that many artists’ eyes turned towards Puvis de Chavannes. The seventeen-year-old Denis wrote in his diary: “Yesterday I visited the exhibition of Puvis de Chavannes’ works. The calm, decorative aspect of his pictures is very beautiful: the colour of the walls is delightful, the harmonies of pale-yellow tones are superb. The composition is astonishingly well thought out and lofty; this suggests wonderful mastery. I am sure that above all it is the composition that influences the soul gently and mysteriously, elevating and soothing it.”⁹ Not only Puvis de Chavannes’ murals in the Pantheon but also his easel paintings were seen as a lesson in decorative art. Gauguin made a copy of his *Hope*, and later, on Tahiti, painted two versions of *A Poor Fisherman*, a work (now in the Musée d’Orsay, Paris) which was also copied by Maillol, who was close to the Nabis. Even many years later Anna Golubkina, advising her friend and fellow artist L. Gubina what to see in Paris in the short time at her disposal, said:



“Don’t linger in the Pantheon — just look on the right for Puvis de Chavannes’ *In the Luxembourg*, don’t forget Puvis de Chavannes’ *Poor Fisherman*.”¹⁰ It is worth noting that the study for this picture was among the early purchases made by Sergei Shchukin. The deliberately restrained work of Puvis de Chavannes, by no means as daring in colour as the canvases of Manet, Monet or Degas, was destined to become a kind of banner for the following generation of artists. This generation dreamt of murals, of an “eternal” type of art; the young painters were fascinated by the promise which Puvis de Chavannes’ painting held; they saw that contemporary easel painting could stimulate meditation on life, breaking through the realm of purely visual facts. Maurice Denis, who loved to express himself in the language of a manifesto, formulated the aesthetic credo of his milieu in the following way: “We insist on the idea that the visible is a manifestation of the invisible, that forms and colours are indications of the state of our soul.”¹¹

38. Aristide Maillol, *Bather or The Wave*, 1899. Needlepoint tapestry, 101.5 x 92.5 cm.

39. Aristide Maillol, *Bather or The Wave*, 1896. Plaster relief, 93 x 103 x 25 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

The kind of painting the Nabis evolved was an art with a complex orientation. Individual traits became more accentuated. Each artist strove to establish a more direct relationship with life without divorcing the external and the commonplace from the spiritual. The idea of merging art and life, the intrusion of art into life, inspired many artists and writers throughout Europe. This was most marked in Symbolism, determining many of its merits and its failures. But for other artists too, who were on the immediate fringes of Symbolism, this idea proved important and fruitful.

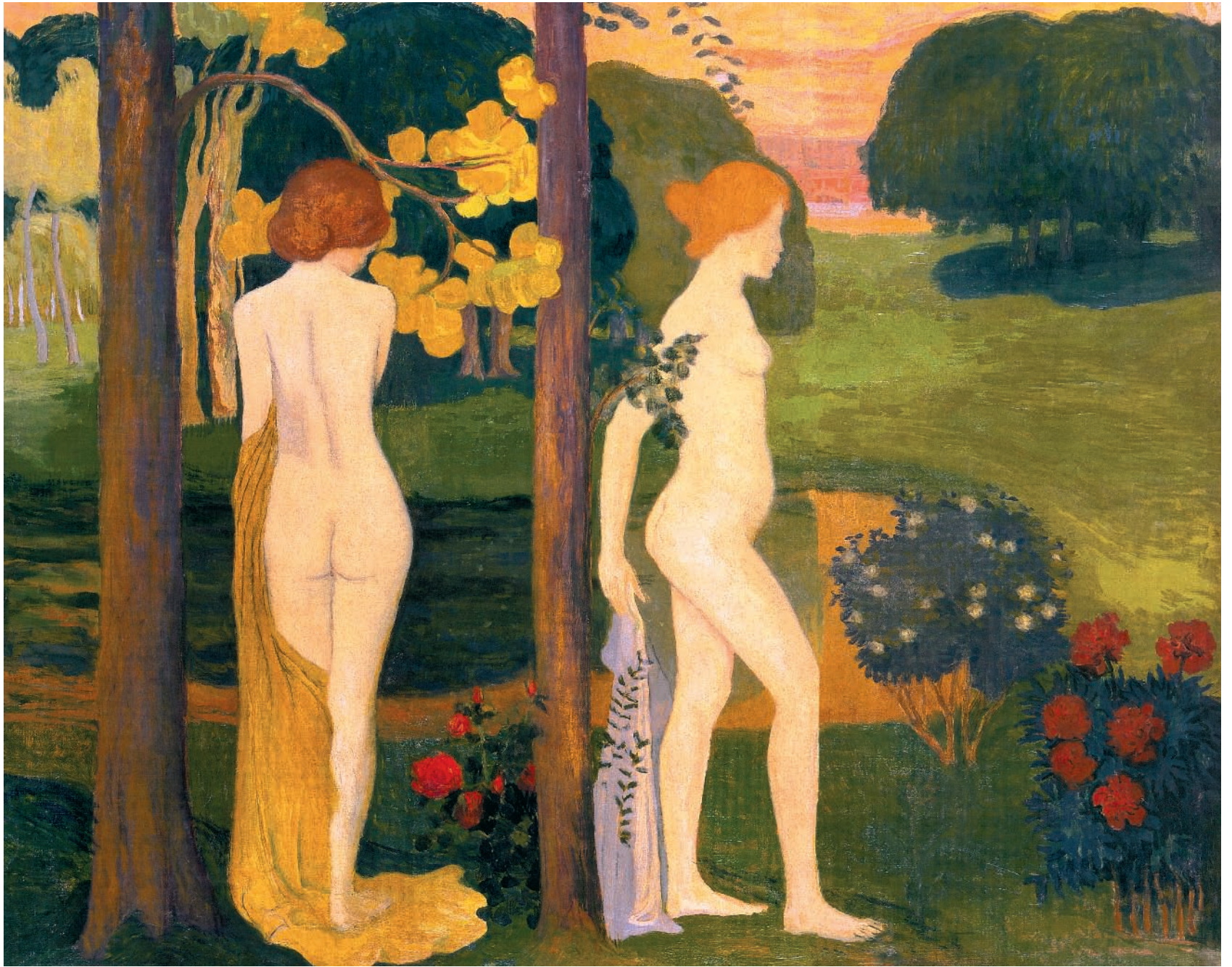
The words of Vladislav Khodasevich concerning the Russian Symbolist poets apply equally well to the Nabis: "Life here was very specific ... Here they tried to turn art into reality and reality into art. Events in real life ... were never seen as simply belonging to life: they at once became part of the inner world and part of creative work. And the other way round: something written by any of them became part of life for everyone. So, reality and literature were created by the collective efforts of the forces — at times hostile to each other, but united even in hostility — of all those who happened to find themselves part of this extraordinary life ... Incessant enthusiasm, continuous movement was all that was required from anyone who entered this order (and in a sense Symbolism was an order), the aim did not matter. All roads were open, and there was only one requirement — to move as quickly as possible and as far as possible. That was their only dogma. You could worship God or the Devil. You could be obsessed by anything you liked. The sole condition was that you be obsessed completely."¹²

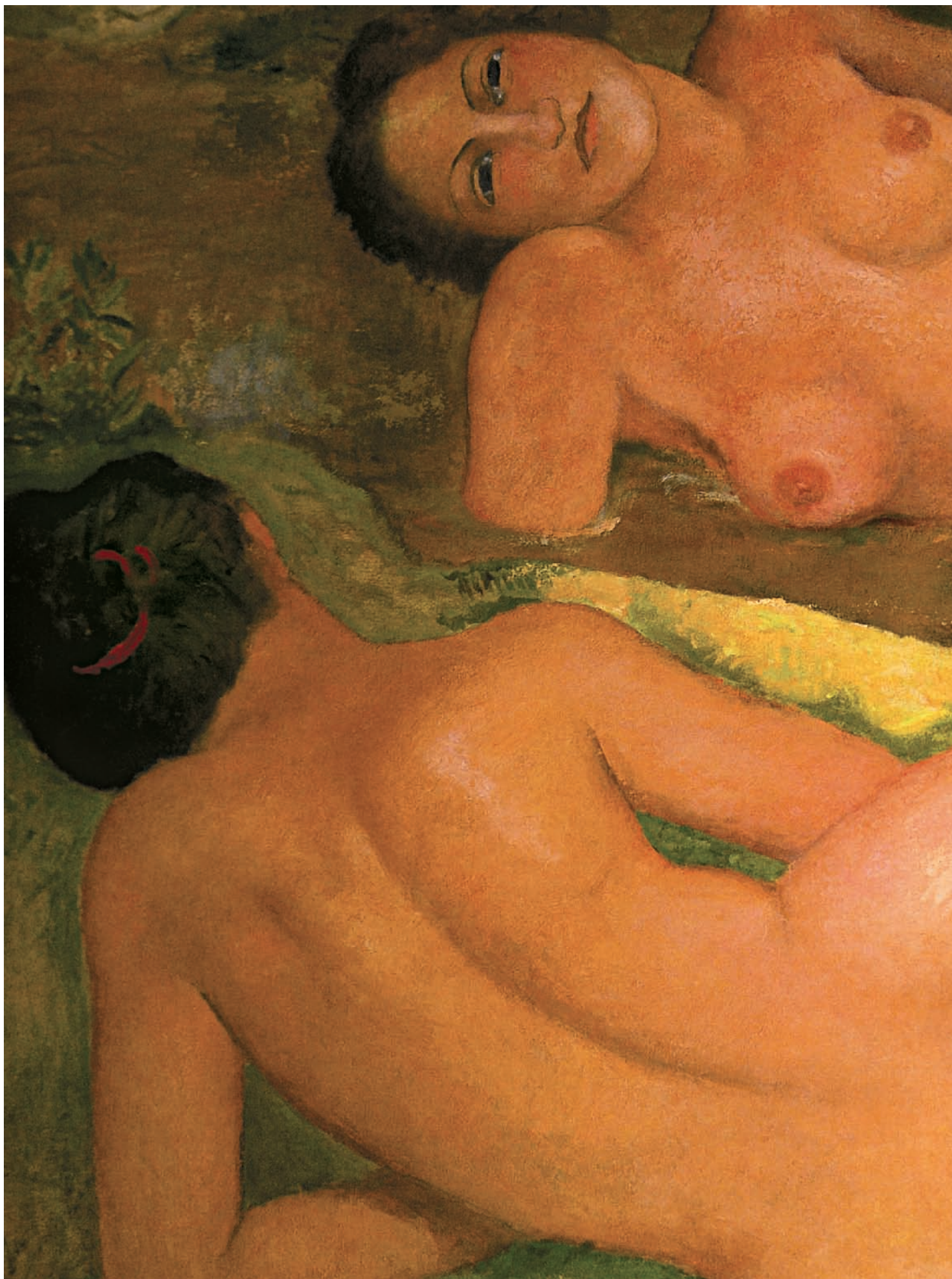
The attitude of rejection here, natural for a writer of the following post-Symbolist age, only serves to highlight the

expressively acute definition of the main "dogma". Without taking into account this insistent cult of the creative personality, it is hardly possible to explain the peaceful coexistence of artists so different in temperament, frame of mind, aesthetic views and historical preferences as we find among the Nabis and among other groups at the close of the nineteenth century. The idea of self-development postulated by the Nabis from the outset inexorably generated centrifugal tendencies in their artistic work. Understandably, therefore, with the advent of the twentieth century the divergence of positions among the by now former members of the group became more marked. Since painting always remained of paramount importance for them, each member either gained or lost in authority depending on his achievements in that field. After more than a decade from the time the group formed, the standing of each of its members had become clear. Bonnard, Vuillard and Denis stood out not only as representatives of very different trends, but also as the most gifted among the Nabis. And as the century advanced, the amazing originality of the most significant artist of the group, Bonnard, became even more evident. Today there can be no doubt that he ranks among the most remarkable artists of the twentieth century. His canvases reflect his own time, as do those of other artists of his circle. Painting had made itself the image of the age. The image had many facets: poetic and simple, full of wonder in Bonnard's work; excessively ornamental and therefore somewhat mysterious in Vuillard's; voluptuously dream-like in Denis's; somewhat bitter and acerbic in Vallotton's. One point ought to be clarified here: in Bonnard's work, the transient, belonging to the receding past, is in some unfathomable way fused with the eternal, belonging to no particular age. It is that which sets Bonnard apart from the other Nabis.

40. **Aristide Maillol**, *Two Nudes in a Landscape*, c. 1890-1895.
Oil on canvas, 97 x 122 cm. Petit Palais – Musée des beaux-arts de la ville de Paris, Paris.

41. **Aristide Maillol**, *The Two Bathers* or *Dina's Back and Profil*, 1938.
Oil on canvas. Musée Maillol, Paris.









Major Artists





Félix VALLOTTON

(1865-1925)

The “foreign Nabi” stood out among the members of the group, not so much because of his nationality – he was Swiss – as because of his manner of painting, which was quite unlike that of his fellow artists. For this reason some critics have regarded his affiliation with the Nabis as purely formal. For instance Charles Chassé, whose book on the Nabis was published in Switzerland, the artist’s homeland,¹⁹ scarcely mentions Vallotton, whereas he sets aside whole chapters to artists who did not belong to this group at all and played a lesser part in the history of painting at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the Nabis must have had their reasons for admitting the newcomer from Lausanne into their circle, even if they did hesitate over it.

All the Nabis’ first efforts were remarkable for their maturity, but Vallotton achieved mastery even sooner than the others. His style was established very early and remained practically unchanged. While Bonnard’s fledgling canvases did not contain the promise of his later works, Vallotton displayed his talent to the full at the very outset of his career. As a boy of sixteen he amazed his teachers in Lausanne with

42. Félix Vallotton, *Street Scene in Paris*. Gouache on cardboard.

43. Félix Vallotton, *Sleep*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 113.5 x 162.5 cm.
Musée d’Art et d’Histoire, Geneva.



decade in Paris. He had to do odd jobs like the restoration and reproduction of engravings; he also contributed to fashion magazines and various humorous publications. A measure of fame finally came to him with his woodcuts, daring and generalized in manner, devoid of any half-tones. His portraits, landscapes, street and genre scenes revealing aspects of bourgeois life that society preferred to keep hidden are always extremely stark and highly caustic. In the 1890s Vallotton produced far more woodcuts than paintings.

As far back as 1885, when Vallotton first showed his works at the Salon des Artistes Français, they drew the attention of art critics. However, both at that time and for years to come, progressive artists who advocated the supremacy of pictorial effect and the unrestrained use of colour looked on his manner as something retrograde. “Vallotton’s paintings are anti-picturesque,” Signac wrote in his diary in April 1898. “This sensible young man is wrong in thinking that he is endowed with a talent for painting. He thinks that by employing a calculated and conservative technique he is imitating Holbein and Ingres, but he only succeeds in imitating Bouguereau’s worst pupils. The result is ungainly and unintelligent. However, Vallotton is undoubtedly endowed with intelligence and a sense of the beautiful, which is confirmed by his woodcuts.”¹⁴

a study of an old man’s head, executed with a sure hand. Soon afterwards he moved to Paris. His *Self-Portrait at Seventeen* (1882, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne) was probably painted at that time. This picture is remarkable for the masterful handling of minute details and their balanced arrangement. The artist makes no attempt at pictorial effects. The portrait is austere and somewhat reserved, as was the painter himself. Looking out at us from the canvas is a boy who seems too serious for his age, assertive and independent in his judgement. Vallotton had a hard time during his first

Indeed, at first sight Vallotton’s paintings and woodcuts might have been executed by two different artists. His paintings are rather meticulous, whereas the woodcuts retain only the major details, with everything that is of minor importance absorbed by blackness. Yet they do have something in common: the immaculate draughtsmanship, the decorative and generalizing quality of line, which, according to the prominent early twentieth-century art critic Jacques Rivière, “enlaces” the form. Also, like the black patches in his woodcuts, colour in his paintings is distributed in extensive

44. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Young Girls by the Seaside*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 205 x 154 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

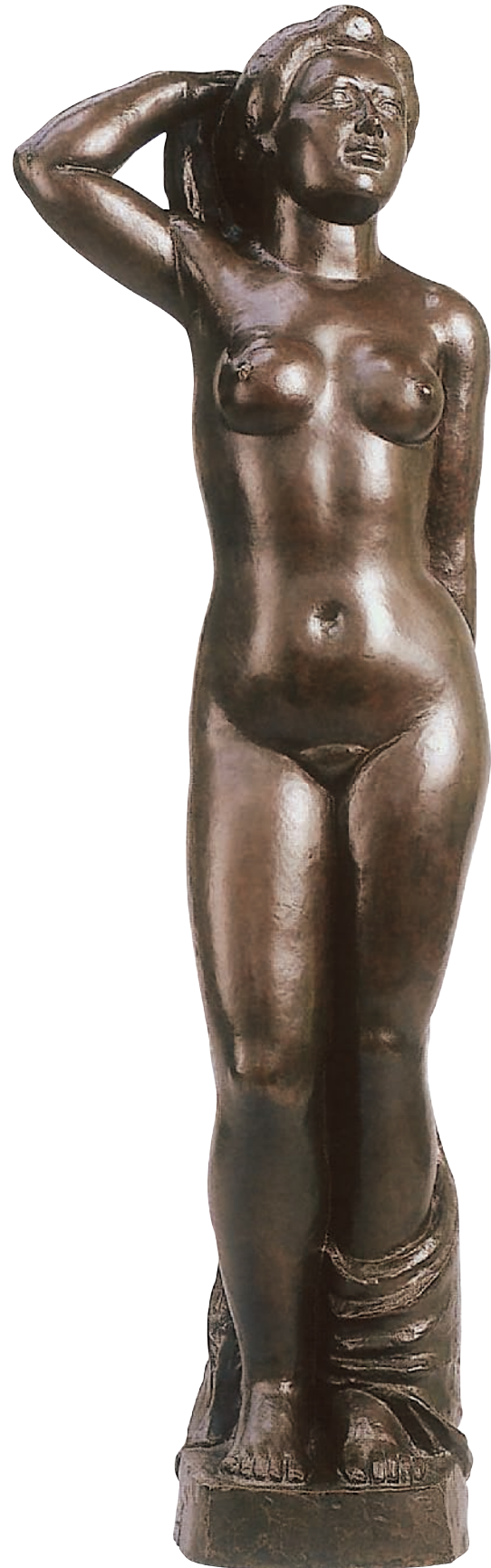
45. Félix Vallotton, *The Taking of Europe*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Kunstmuseum, Bern.





zones, within which the individual brushstroke, regarded as the main unit and measure of painterly activity, is scarcely detectable. Signac, who could not bear smoothness and “blew up” his surfaces with divided strokes, regarded Vallotton’s brushwork as the complete antithesis of his own style and, indeed, of everything that derived from Impressionism. But the young Swiss, who had arrived in Paris when the Impressionists were still striving for recognition, did not know them, or at least had no wish to do so. That was not because he was wholly “indoctrinated” by Jules Lefebvre, Bouguereau and Boulanger at the Académie Julian; in fact, he preferred going to the Louvre and making copies of Antonello da Messina, Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer. “I have been thinking about the Italian Primitivists,” he wrote in May 1893 in the *Gazette de Lausanne*, to which he contributed regularly, “and particularly about those wonderful unknown artists in the German museums; those exquisite masters, whose brilliant ideas, put down on canvas in perfect form, have an immediate impact even today, four centuries later, yet they did not even think to sign their names for our benefit.”¹⁵ Not only did he practise journalism, but he was also the author of three novels and six plays. In Germany or Switzerland the kind of painting cultivated by Vallotton would probably have been recognized more easily. But even in Paris it gradually found supporters. From 1899 onwards Vallotton devoted most of his time to painting. His efforts were encouraged by his wife, Gabrielle Rodrigues-Henriques (née Bernheim Jeune), a widow who had three children from her first marriage. Gabrielle was a good match: as well as being quite prosperous herself, she connected him with a major firm of art dealers.

As a painter Vallotton was amazingly prolific. He compiled a list of 1,587 of his paintings in the *Livre de raison*, which he kept from 1885 until his death, sure proof of his methodical nature. Considering that there were nonetheless inevitable



46. **Félix Vallotton**, *Woman with Black Hat*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 65 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

47. **Aristide Maillol**, *Standing Bather*, 1900. Bronze, 78 x 25 x 15 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





48. Félix Vallotton, *Portrait of Madame Haasen*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

49. Félix Vallotton, *Portrait of Georges Haasen*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 81.7 x 100.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

omissions, while sometimes the same entry covers several variants of a work and, above all, remembering his meticulous manner of execution, it must be conceded that Vallotton was an extraordinarily hard-working artist.

Vallotton's first efforts were limited to portraits, very conscientiously executed and painted from nature. Subsequently his range expanded with *portraits décoratifs*, usually invented, and portraits with genre elements. Vallotton's portraiture of the 1890s often displays a tendency towards narrative, and he appears to have been a storyteller with keen insight, his irony usually bordering on the malicious. When he sets down his glimpses of Paris life on canvas, his paintings come to resemble woodcuts, for they treat similar subjects in an expressive, not to say Expressionistic, manner. They also reveal what united Vallotton with the rest of the Nabis: his compositional and decorative ingenuity. *Concert* (1895, Private Collection), for instance, is close to Bonnard's work, even down to employing the same type of decorative motifs, though the Frenchman's smile is superseded by the sarcasm of the Swiss. Vallotton's genre paintings are for the most part set in an interior: he showed an obvious preference for closed spaces. In some portraits dating from the early years of the twentieth century the role of the interior is so significant that it is no longer a mere setting. At that time, the interior as subject matter in its own right captured the artist's interest, though it was later superseded by female nudes and mythological and allegorical subjects. Vallotton never gave up portraiture and also would turn quite often to still life. The essence of Vallotton's painting is splendidly revealed by his interiors: spick and span, motionless, *nature morte* in the literal sense of the word. The human figures are just as much material objects in these *nature morte* interiors as the beds and the wardrobes. The mesmeric registration of objects, an almost judicially precise record of early twentieth-century life, seems to conceal a

melancholy which is on the point of developing into a fatalistic indifference. Yet, what Vallotton depicted was not somebody else's life, but his own, and the figures were people he himself was close to. The interior of his home in Paris found its way into a series of paintings conceived as modern versions of de Hooch or Janssen. However, the artist's irony precludes the heartfelt warmth that cheered the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch masters. Jean Cassou saw one of the major traits of Vallotton's nature as being the "bourgeois anarchism" which was most strikingly revealed in his literary activities. What Cassou said about Vallotton's novels holds true for his interiors and many of his other pictures. "His novels do indeed give us the key. We discern mixed feelings in them: on the one hand, a bitter and grumbling spite towards bourgeois society that is paltry, ridiculous and reactionary; on the other hand, a no less reactionary pleasure at belonging to it."¹⁶ Sarcasm is generally found where the human element is dominant. When Vallotton turns to landscape painting, he appears in a different light. Here he is at his most Nabis, with his highly decorative effects and stylistic allusions typical of all the members of the group. Vallotton's attitude, however, still remains estranged. There is something of toyland in his *Landscape in Normandy*, one of his best landscapes. Vallotton seems to hint, by employing this "playful" approach, that he is acquainted with Japanese art, but chooses to stick with the Europeans in his modelling, adding just a touch of Japanese flavour. He is alive to Cézanne's work and even makes use of his "plunging perspective" method, with the foreground rather than the background dramatically foreshortened, but the spirit of the Cézanne landscape is alien to him: his neat little cows could not graze in it. What they need is a cultivated countryside. Vallotton was a rare type of professional, non-Salon artist: he did not shrink from banal, almost pastoral motifs, although he managed to do without the traditional shepherds and shepherdesses. He never shunned deliberately poetic motifs like a pink sunset, nor

50. **Félix Vallotton**, *The Dinner*, 1900. Oil on cardboard, 55 x 86.8 cm.
Kirov Regional Museum of Fine Art, Kirov.

51. **Félix Vallotton**, *The Visit, Interior Blue Sofa*, 1899.
Tempera on cardboard, 55 x 87 cm. Kunsthaus, Zürich.









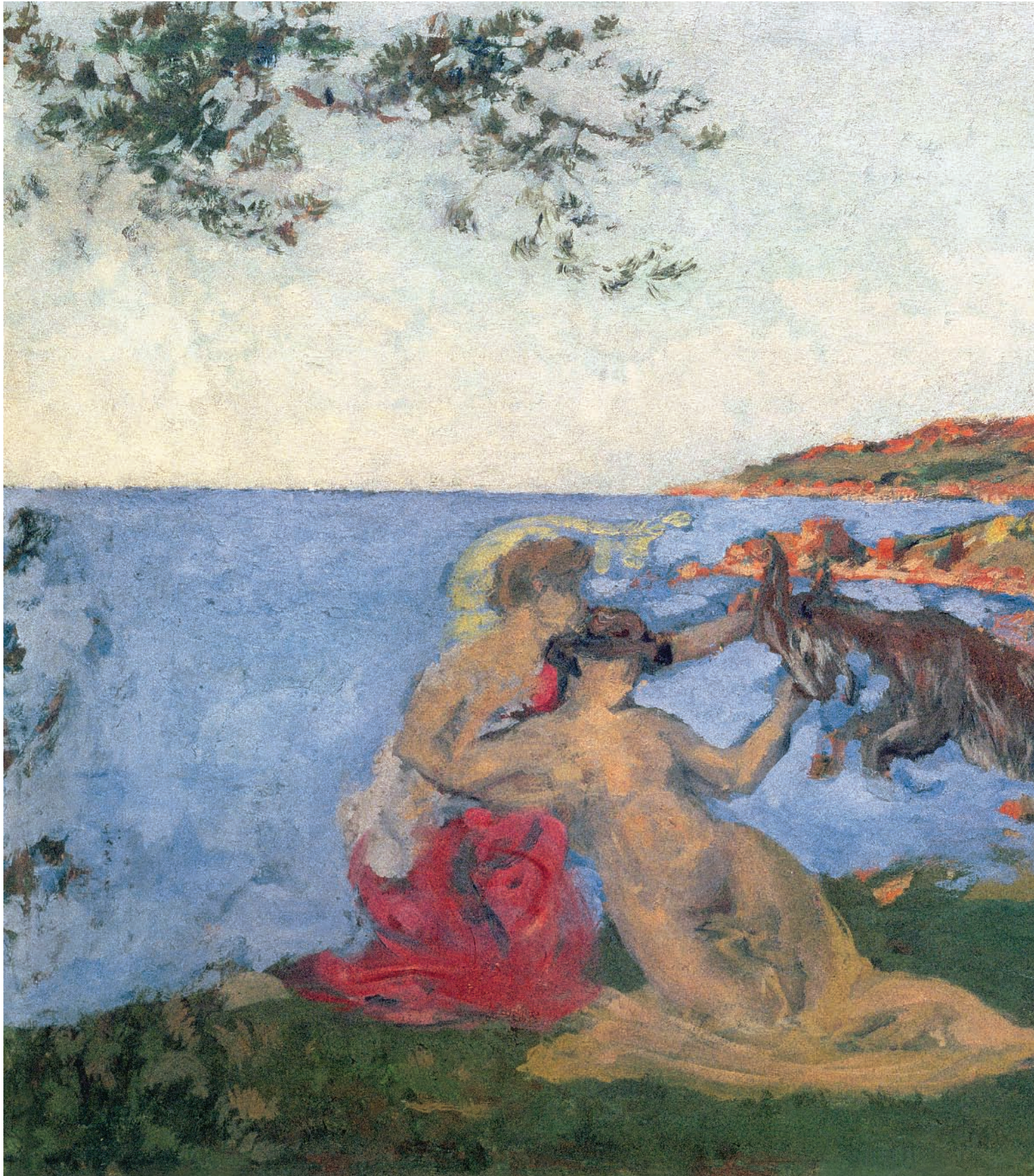
old-fashioned compositions with the emphasis on the middle. In this latter respect *Landscape in Normandy* is comparable with the works of the Barbizon school. A great museum-goer and frequenter of art exhibitions since his young days, Vallotton was able to use an intonation he caught or a gesture he observed to his own end. This was not imitation — if it were so, there would not be the hints of parody — but a means of self-expression. In playing with a certain device, Vallotton was not afraid of looking old-fashioned and so becoming an object of ridicule. A keen sense of the present time, which he possessed to an exceptional extent, allowed him to transform a weary device. His *Portrait of a Woman (Woman Wearing a Hat)* is undoubtedly a parody, combining the almost uncombinable: the striking turn of the half-clothed figure and a plain, dull face topped with an elaborate flowery hat. The painter's eye seems dispassionate, yet something personal comes across in his attitude to the woman. Annette Vaillant recollected that Vallotton's Calvinist exterior concealed a strange Ingres-like sensuousness.¹⁷ But the intimate effect of the portrait is extinguished by mockery, noticeable even in the range of colours, which is limited here and clearly imitates that of journeyman Salon painters. On the other hand, the portraits of Haasen and his wife demonstrate that Vallotton was capable, when he chose, of being a painter of gala portraits. His impartiality here is almost like that of a camera. Perhaps because these portraits were commissioned, he does not seem to want anything more than an outward likeness; not a single brushstroke betrays his attitude towards the model, nor, indeed, any attitude at all. It is significant that the background details in the portrait of Haasen are far more interesting artistically than the human figure. Vallotton's art is indispensable to any student of life in that period: the accuracy of his details never needs to be questioned; the design, mood and, with rare exception, bitter astringency of his work set him apart not only among the Nabis but among other contemporaries too. His deliberate objectivity and



52. **Félix Vallotton**, *Interior*, 1903-1904. Oil on cardboard, 61.5 x 56 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

emphatically dispassionate observation expressed in meticulous draughtsmanship and inexpressive texture link him not only with the Naturalism of the nineteenth century, but also with the tendencies of the twentieth. It is natural, therefore, that public interest in his work has tended to grow whenever there was a turn towards the concrete, material aspect in the arts, be it in the 1920s, with their renewed materialism, or the 1970s, with their hyper-realism and other semi-naturalistic trends.

53. **Édouard Vuillard**, *Vallotton and Misia in the Dining Room, rue Saint-Florentin*, 1899. Oil on cardboard. Collection William Kelly Simpson.





Ker Xavier ROUSSEL

(1867-1944)

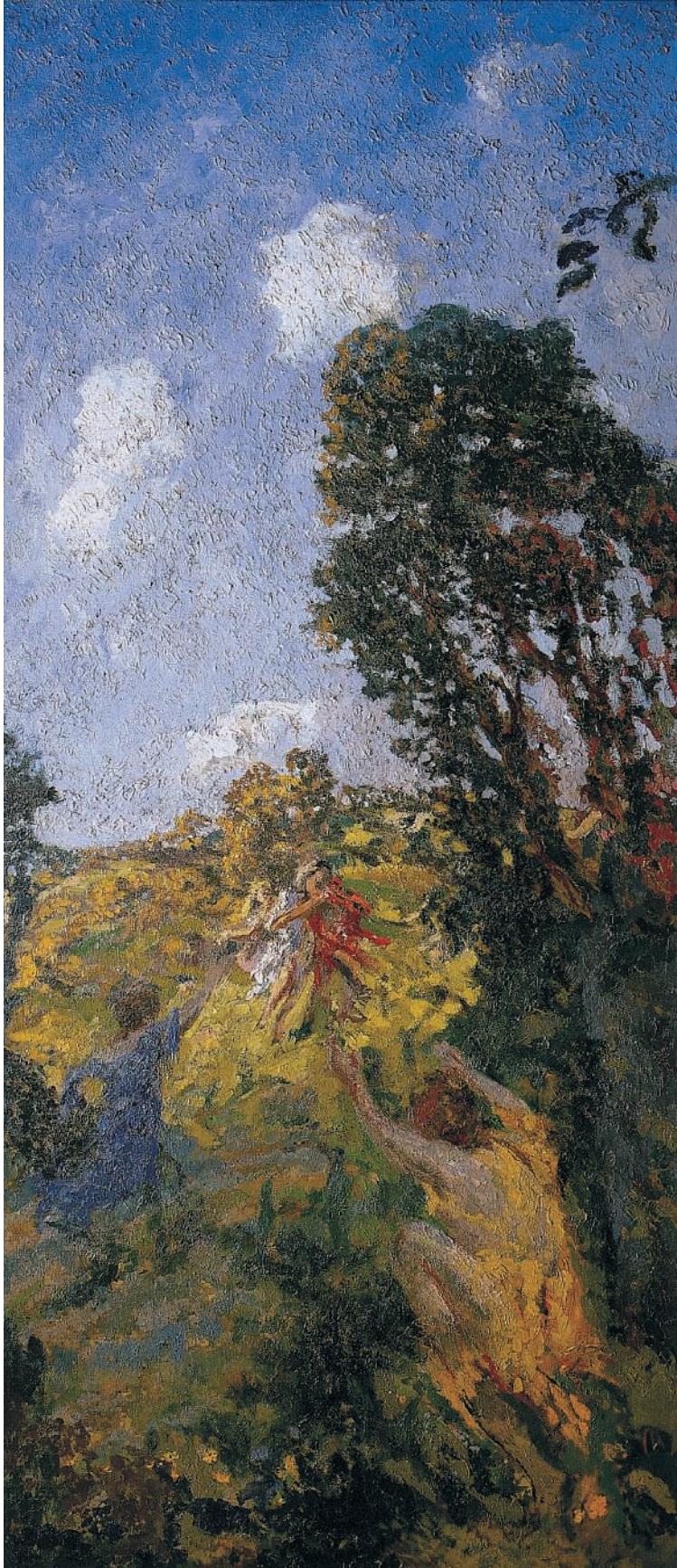
Roussel was born into the family of a well-known Paris physician who worshipped the arts and had a wide circle of acquaintances among artists. Dr. Roussel entrusted his son's artistic training to a friend of his, Maillard, winner of the Prix de Rome. Maillard's studio had once belonged to Delacroix, so Roussel would often hear the great Romantic's name mentioned there, and was to be influenced by his vigorous colours in the years to come, although Maillard himself was entirely committed to the academic manner of painting. Vuillard, Roussel's fellow student at the Lycée, followed suit and began studying under Maillard also. It was with Vuillard's family that Roussel found refuge when his parents separated, and he subsequently married Vuillard's sister.

The 1890s saw a strong similarity between the creative activities of Roussel and Vuillard. Roussel, like Vuillard, began by painting meticulous still lifes and making sketches of figures, though he was totally indifferent to interiors. Compared to Vuillard, he was more easily influenced, more dependent on Japanese art and the work of Puvis de Chavannes. The early years of the twentieth century were the crucial point in his career, when the themes of his painting, as well as compositional and pictorial devices, were being established.

54. Ker Xavier Roussel, *Mythological Subject*, c. 1903. Oil on cardboard, 47 x 62 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.







The subjects of Roussel's art were shaped by his literary tastes. In his younger days he used to carry a book of Virgil's poetry about with him, and a great many of his mature canvases seem to have been inspired by the *Bucolics*. As for contemporary poets, he had the greatest admiration for Mallarmé, and was particularly impressed by his *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. When he was teaching at the Académie Ranson, he would bring with him a volume of Mallarmé and read out poems to his students, believing that they would stir their imagination better than any instruction or exhortation. The motifs of his own art were chiefly fauns and nymphs, Bacchanal dances and pastoral idylls. Roussel obviously strove to create a modern version of the "historical landscape", not anaemic or sugary-sweet, like the works of the Salon *maîtres*, but vigorous and genuinely picturesque, and it was for that reason that he shared Cézanne's esteem for Poussin. He was also fascinated by Cross, whose pictures were a luscious blend of myth and reality. In 1906, Roussel and Denis visited Provence and made pilgrimages to Cézanne in Aix and Cross in Saint-Clair. This trip became an important landmark in Roussel's career. Making a record of their visit to Cézanne, Denis wrote that his studio was adorned with a reproduction of Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*. This painting provided a major starting point for Roussel. It is not known whether they spoke of Poussin at their meeting, but we do know that Cézanne's thoughts often turned to Poussin. His cherished ambition was to enliven Poussin by making use of a natural setting, or to transform him in concord with nature. In fact, Roussel had conceived the same idea long before the visit to Cézanne. In March 1898 Denis wrote in his diary: "Roussel says he wonders what made Poussin modify his beautiful sketches in such a way that the paintings turned out to be quite unlike the sketches."¹⁸

These modifications were chiefly the consequence of the artist's ideas not finding their ultimate expression until he put the finishing touches to his work whilst turning a sketch into

55. Ker Xavier Roussel, *The Triumph of Ceres (Rural Festival)*, 1911-1913. Oil on canvas, 164 x 123 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

56. Ker Xavier Roussel, *The Triumph of Bacchus (Rural Festival)*, 1911-1913. Oil on canvas, 116.5 x 119.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

a picture. The point is that the Old Masters had a desire to be understood by their customers and other people sharing the same views, whereas the pioneers of new art who worked at the time of conflict between the Salon and avant-garde artists used to look down on the general public and remained distrustful of the masses. Of course, Poussin knew the worth of natural, free-and-easy brushwork and application of colours, but for him these values were not decisive, much less the only condition for creating a work of art. Late nineteenth-century artists were preoccupied with the idea of spontaneity, but they found themselves obliged to follow the precepts of the Old Masters when dealing with vast spaces, especially in decorative and monumental compositions. However, to do so did not necessarily mean to accept those precepts wholeheartedly. It was the urge for artistic spontaneity that made Roussel re-paint the finished canvases time and again, not necessarily improving the original version.

On the other hand, Roussel's ardent nature and individualism might well have been what kept him from resorting to banal stylization. Was it chance that politically he tended towards anarchism? He was keenly aware of the poetic quality of Mediterranean myths. As early as the 1890s, Roussel was painting landscapes with nude and half-clothed figures, in which the line between myth and reality was practically obliterated. His pastoral scenes are far from being a mere play of imagination; they look amazingly true to life and are capable therefore of striking a humorous note.

Roussel's Arcadia is indeed sparkling with the vivid colours of the French Mediterranean wielded by an artist inspired with a profound love for nature. A joyful eulogy in praise of the abundant south and life itself is to be found in Roussel's *Rural Festival*, permeated with the sweeping and exultant spirit of the ancient pagan world.

57. **Ker Xavier Roussel**, *The Abduction of the Daughter of Leucippus*, 1911.
Oil on canvas, 430 x 240 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

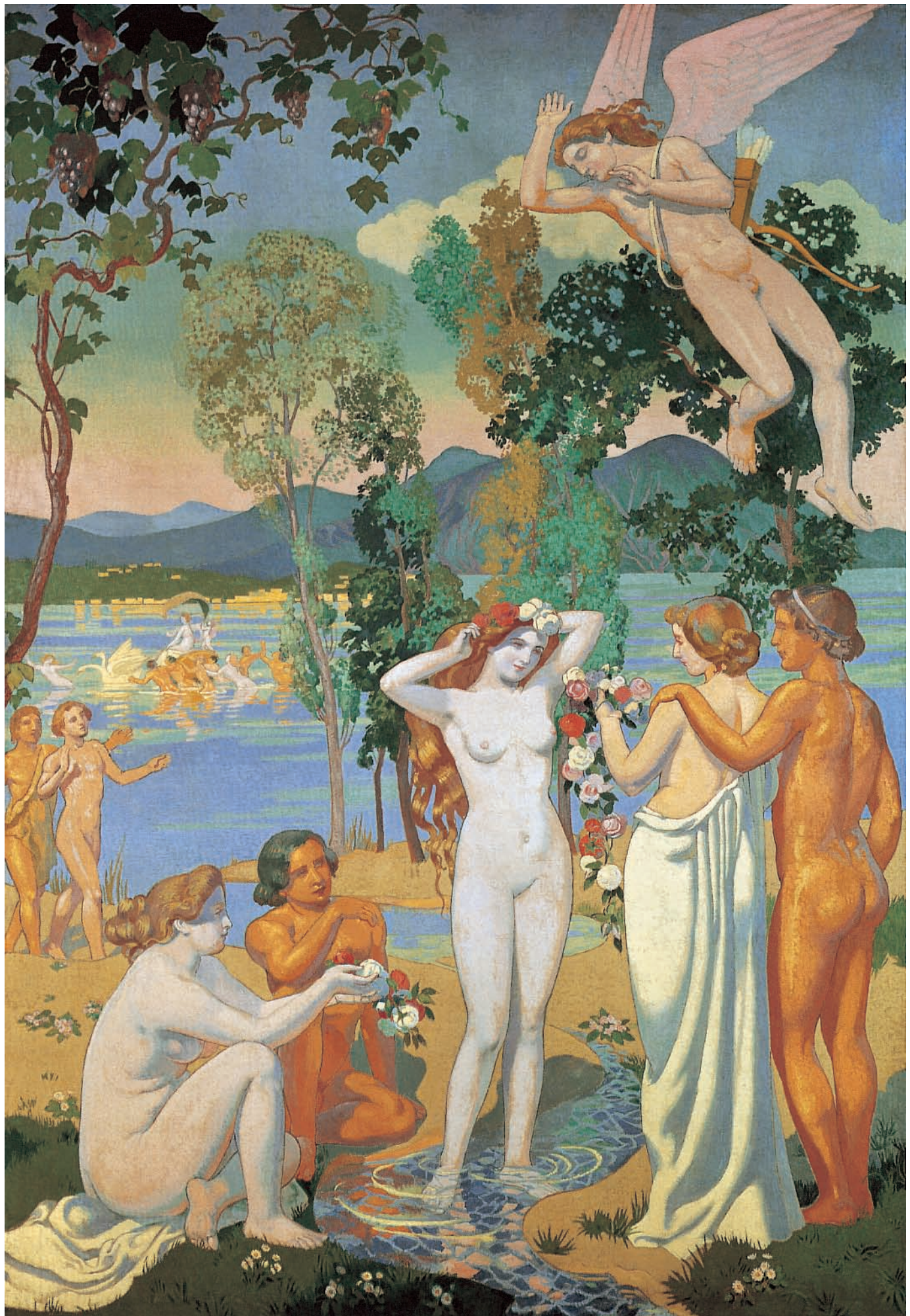
58. **Ker Xavier Roussel**, *The Sleep of Narcissus*, 1912-1915.
Oil on canvas, 171 x 75 cm. Private collection, Paris.





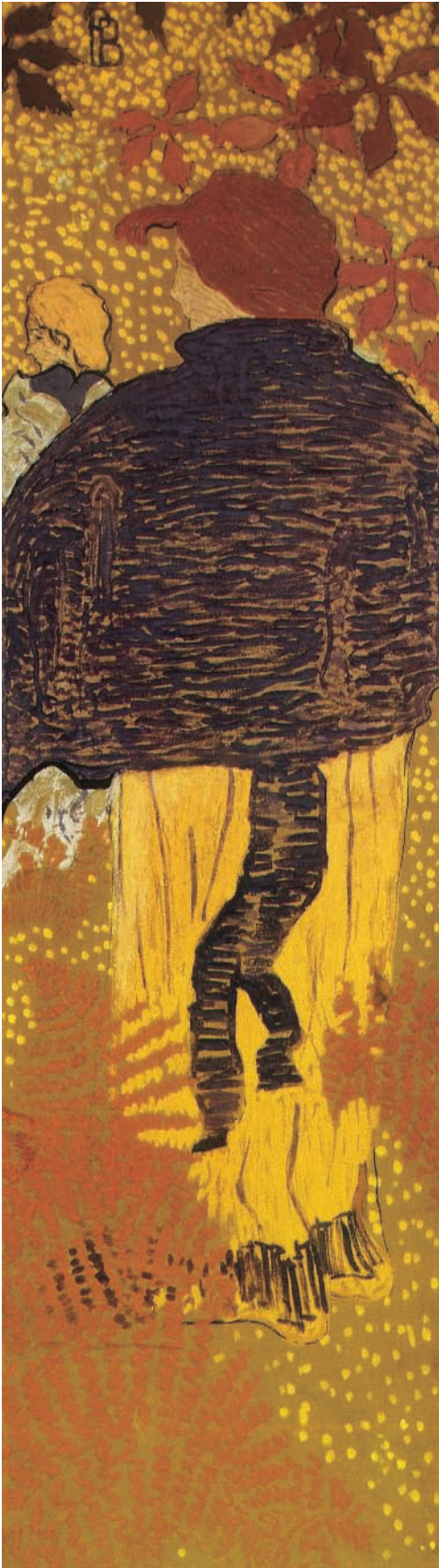
59. **Ker Xavier Roussel**, *Spring*, 1915. Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 100 x 65 cm. Neffe-Degandt, London.

60. **Maurice Denis**, *The Flying Cupid is Struck by Psyche's Beauty*, 1907. One of the five main decorative panels *The Legend of Psyche*. Oil on canvas, 394 x 269.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





Pierre BONNARD (1867-1947)



In October 1947 the Musée de l'Orangerie arranged a large posthumous exhibition of Bonnard's work. Towards the close of the year, an article devoted to this exhibition appeared on the first page of the latest issue of the authoritative periodical *Cahiers d'Art*. The publisher, Christian Zervos, gave his short article the title *Pierre Bonnard, est-il un grand peintre?* (Is Pierre Bonnard a Great Artist?) In the opening paragraph Zervos remarked on the scope of the exhibition, since previously Bonnard's work could be judged only from a small number of minor exhibitions. But, he went on, the exhibition had disappointed him: the achievements of this artist were not sufficient for a whole exhibition to be devoted to his work. "Let us not forget that the early years of Bonnard's career were lit by the wonderful light of Impressionism. In some respects he was the last bearer of that aesthetic. But he was a weak bearer, devoid of great talent. That is hardly surprising. Weak-willed, and insufficiently original, he was unable to give a new impulse to Impressionism, to place a foundation of craftsmanship under its elements, or even to give Impressionism a new twist. Though he was convinced that in art one should not be guided by mere sensations like the Impressionists, he was unable to

61. Pierre Bonnard, *Women in the Garden*, 1891. Distemper on canvas, 160 x 48 cm (each panel). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

infuse spiritual values into painting. He knew that the aims of art were no longer those of recreating reality, but he found no strength to create it, as did other artists of his time who were lucky enough to rebel against Impressionism at once. In Bonnard's works Impressionism becomes insipid and falls into decline."¹⁹ It is unlikely that Zervos was guided by any personal animus. He merely acted as the mouthpiece of the avant-garde, with its logic asserting that all the history of modern art consisted of radical movements which succeeded one another, each creating new worlds less and less related to reality. The history of modern art seen as a chronicle of avant-garde movements left little space for Bonnard and other artists of his kind. Bonnard himself never strove to attract attention and kept away altogether from the raging battles of his time. Besides, he did not usually stay in Paris for any length of time and rarely exhibited his work. Of course, not all avant-garde artists shared Zervos's opinions. Picasso, for example, rated Bonnard's art highly – in contrast to his own admirer, the same Zervos, who had published a complete catalogue of his paintings and drawings. When Matisse set eyes on that issue of *Cahiers d'Art*, he flew into a rage and wrote in the margin in a bold hand: "Yes! I maintain that Bonnard is a great artist for our time and, naturally, for posterity. Henri Matisse, Jan. 1948."²⁰ Matisse was right. By the middle of the century Bonnard's art was already attracting young artists far more than was the case in, say, the 1920s or 1930s. Fame had dealt strangely with Bonnard. He managed to establish his reputation immediately. He never experienced poverty or rejection, unlike the leading figures of new painting who were recognized only late in life or posthumously — the usual fate of avant-garde artists in the first half of the twentieth century. The common concept of *peintre maudit* (the accursed artist), a bohemian pauper who is not recognized and who readily breaks established standards, does not apply to Bonnard. His paintings sold well. Quite early in his career he found admirers, both artists and collectors.

However, they were not numerous. General recognition, much as he deserved it, did not come to him for a considerable time. Why was it that throughout his long life Bonnard failed to attract the public sufficiently? Reasons may be found in his nature and his way of life. Bonnard rarely appeared in public, even avoiding exhibitions. For example, when the Salon d'Automne expressed a desire in 1946 to arrange a large retrospective exhibition of his work, Bonnard responded to this idea in the following way: "A retrospective exhibition? Am I dead then?" Another reason lay in Bonnard's art itself: not given to striking effects, it did not evoke an immediate response in the viewer. The subtleties of his work called for an enlightened audience. There is one further reason for the public's cool attitude towards Bonnard. His life was very ordinary; there was nothing in it to attract general interest. In this respect, it could not be compared with the life of Van Gogh, Gauguin or Toulouse-Lautrec. Bonnard's life was not the stuff legends are made of. And a nice legend is what is needed by the public, which easily creates idols today of those to whom it was indifferent or even hostile only the day before. But time does its work. The attitude towards Bonnard's art has changed noticeably in recent years. The large personal exhibitions which took place in 1984–85 in Paris, Washington, Zurich and Frankfurt-am-Main had considerable success and became important cultural events.

What was Pierre Bonnard's life like? He spent his early youth at Fontenay-aux-Roses near Paris. His father was a department head at the War Ministry, and the family hoped that Pierre would follow in his father's footsteps. His first impulse, born of his background, led him to the Law School, but it very soon began to wane. He started visiting the Académie Julian and later the École des Beaux-Arts more often than the Law School. The cherished dream of every student of the École was the Prix de Rome. Bonnard studied at the École for about a year and left it when he failed to win

62. **Maurice Denis**, *Screen with Doves*, c. 1896.
Four-panel screen. Oil on canvas, 164 x 54 cm (each panel).
Private collection, Paris.





63. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Corner of Paris*, c. 1905. Oil on cardboard pasted on parquet panel, 49.2 x 51.8 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

the coveted prize. His *Triumph of Mordecai*, a picture on a set subject which he submitted for the competition, was not considered to be serious enough. Bonnard's career as an artist began in the summer of 1888 with small landscapes painted in a manner which had little in common with the precepts of the École des Beaux-Arts. They were executed at Grand-Lemps in the Dauphiné. Bonnard's friends — Sérusier, Denis, Roussel and Vuillard — thought highly of these works. Made in the environs of Grand-Lemps, the studies were simple and fresh in colour and betrayed a poetic view of nature reminiscent of Corot's. Dissatisfied with the teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts and at the Académie Julian, Bonnard and Vuillard continued their education independently. They zealously visited museums. During the first ten years of their friendship, hardly a day went by when they did not see each other.

The Nabis group, assembled by Paul Sérusier, comprised several members from the Académie Julian. In refusing to comply with the rules of Impressionism, these artists claimed instead to be largely influenced by Gauguin. Their name, derived from the Hebrew *Nahbi*, signifies a prophet or a visionary, thus symbolizing their will to discover the sacred nature of writing. They were largely influenced by Japanese art, most notably wood engravings, as well as popular and primitive art and the art of the symbolic artist, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Although they all differed considerably from one another, there were two lines of thought in particular on which they all agreed; firstly, subjective misinterpretation, born within the artist's emotions accentuating certain aspects of the subject that is being depicted, and secondly, objective misinterpretation ensuring the depiction finds its place in the fundamental order of the work. Their art is characterized by an absence of perspective and the use of pure tones and shades. They would all attempt to overcome the barrier between easel painting and decorative art, experimenting with illustration, wallpaper, stained-glass



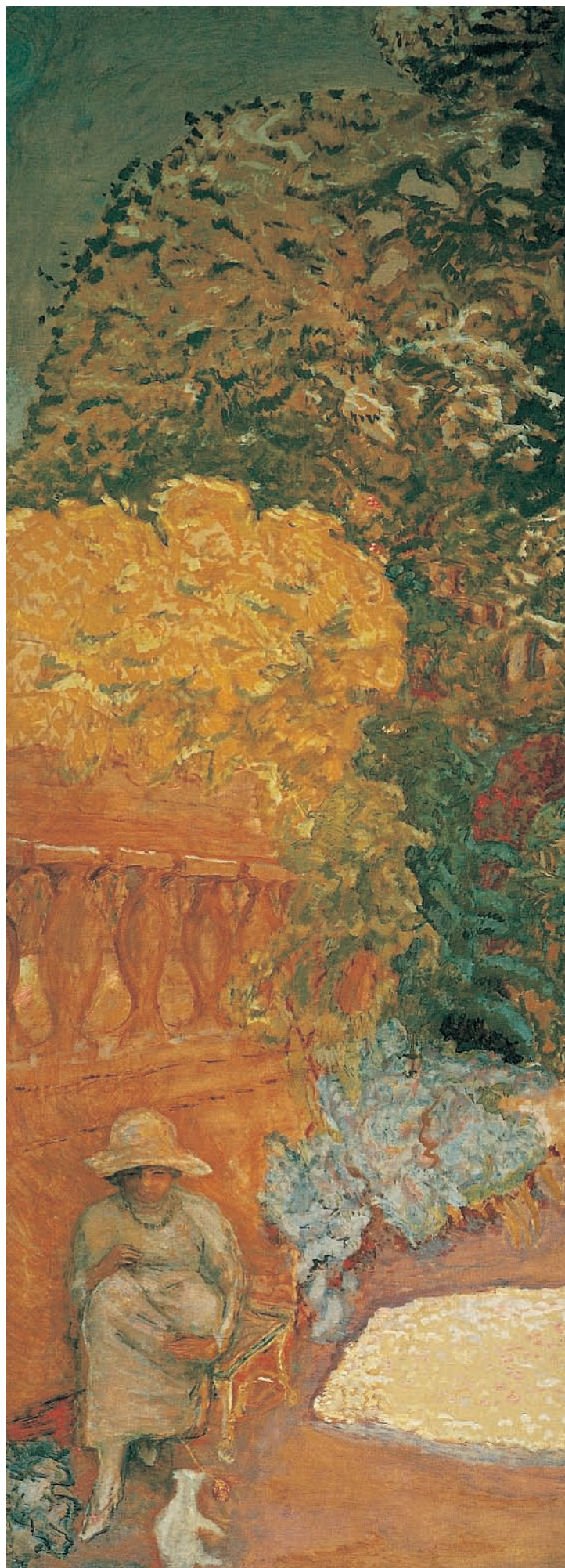
windows, tapestry, furnishings, etc. The Nabis group united artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Félix Ker Xavier Roussel, Georges Lacombe, the sculptor Aristide Maillol and even Maurice Denis, who claimed that “before a painting is turned into a battle horse, a naked woman, or becomes any sort of trivial detail, it is essentially just a flat surface covered with colours that are assembled in a certain order.” And yet they addressed one another with the formal *vous*, while Bonnard addressed other members of the Nabis group with *tu*.

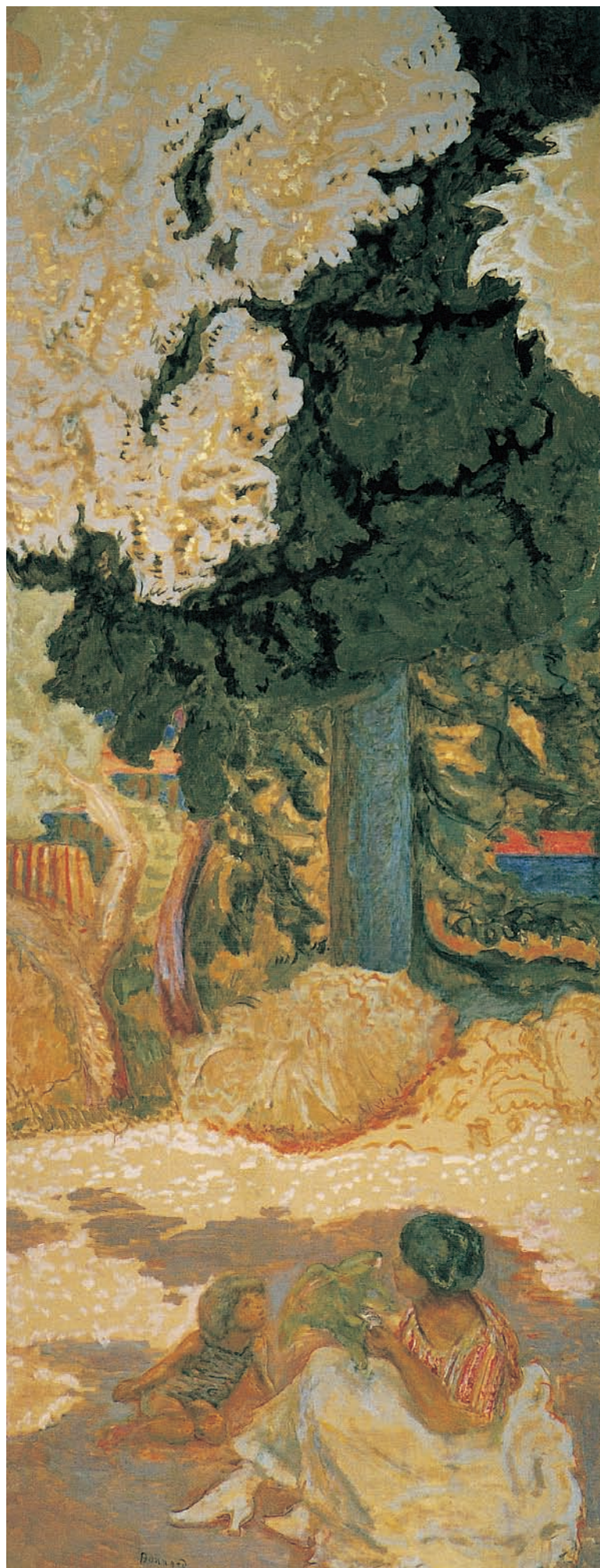
In the 1890s, Bonnard was by no means a recluse. He loved to go for long walks with Roussel, even listening with pleasure to Denis's lengthy tirades, although he remained rather taciturn himself. He was sociable in the best sense of the word. One of his humorous reminiscent drawings (1910) shows the Place Clichy, the centre of the quarter where young artists,

64. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Tugboat at Vernon*, c. 1928. Oil on canvas, 56 x 60 cm. Private collection.

65. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Mediterranean. Triptych*, 1911.

Oil on canvas (relined), 407 x 152 cm; 407 x 152 cm; 407 x 152 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.





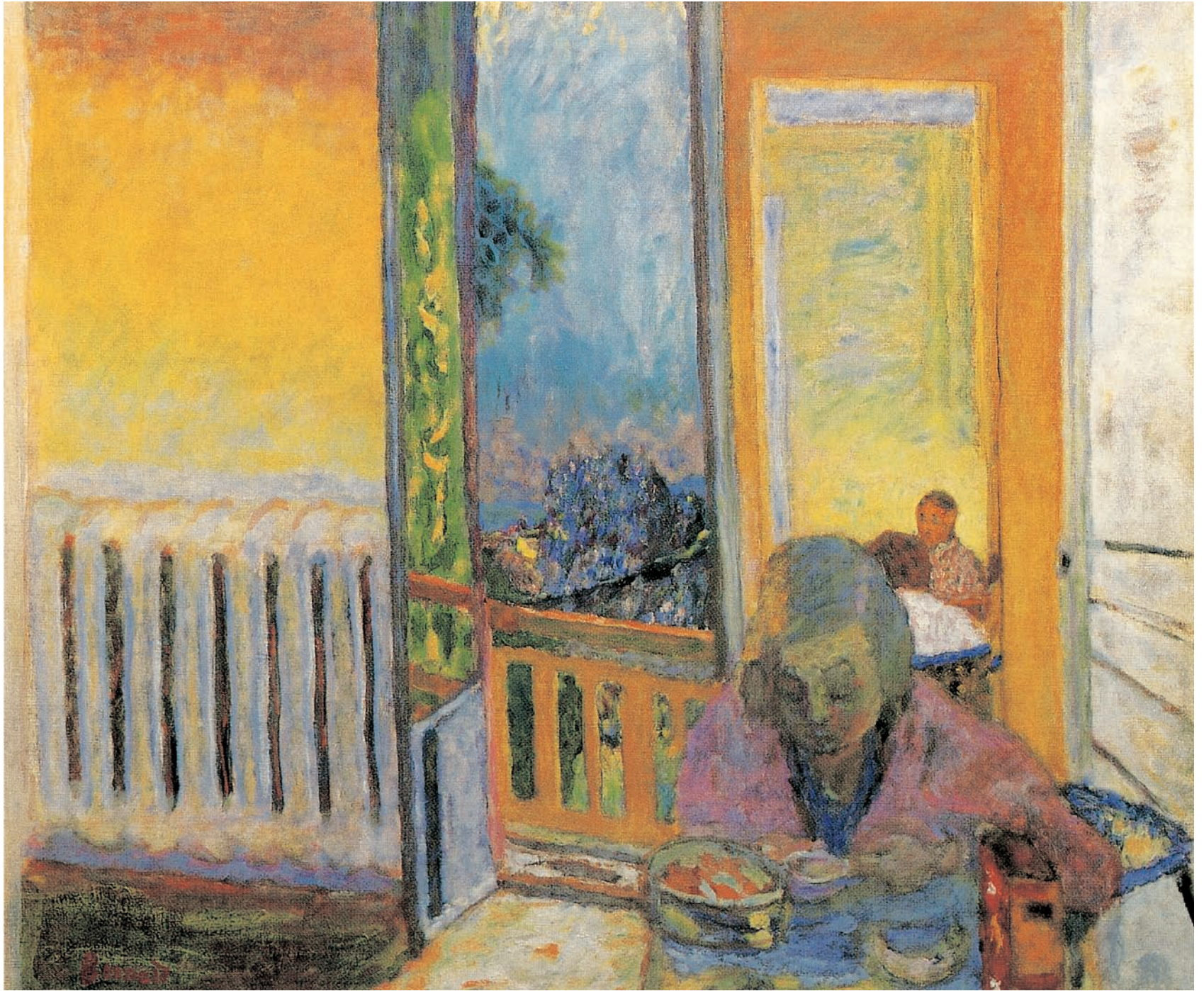


light-hearted and somewhat bohemian, usually congregated. Bonnard, Vuillard and Roussel are unhurriedly crossing the square. Some distance away, Denis is bustling along with a folder under his arm. Towards them, from the opposite direction, comes Toulouse-Lautrec, swinging a thick walking-stick. Toulouse-Lautrec was well disposed towards Bonnard and Vuillard. From time to time he would take their paintings, hire a carriage and drive to the art-dealers whom he knew personally. It was not easy to get them interested, though. Toulouse-Lautrec greatly admired Bonnard's poster *France-Champagne* published in 1891. Bonnard took the artist to his printer, Ancours, in whose shop Toulouse-Lautrec's *Moulin Rouge* was printed later the same year, followed by his other

famous posters. The poster *France-Champagne*, commissioned by the wine dealer Debray in 1889, was to play a special role in Bonnard's life. This work brought him his first emoluments. The sum was miserably small compared with the earnings of the then much feted artist Jean Meissonnier, but it convinced Bonnard that painting could provide him with a living. This small success coincided with failure in his university examinations. Perhaps he was deliberately burning his boats, abandoning a career in business for the sake of art. On 9th March 1891 he wrote to his mother: "I won't be able to see my poster on the walls just yet. It will only appear at the end of the month. But as I finger the hundred francs in my pocket, I must admit I feel proud."²¹

66. Félix Vallotton, *Woman at a Piano*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 43.5 x 57 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

67. Pierre Bonnard, *Breakfast by the Radiator*, c. 1930. Oil on canvas, 74 x 84 cm. Private collection.





At about the same time he sent five pictures to the Salon des Indépendants. At the close of 1891 he exhibited his works together with Toulouse-Lautrec, Bernard, Anquetin and Denis at Le Barc de Boutteville's. When a journalist from *Echo de Paris*, who interviewed the artists at the exhibition, asked Bonnard to name his favourite painters, he declined to do so. He said that he did not belong to any school. His idea was to bring off something of his own and he was trying to forget all that he had been taught at the École des Beaux-Arts.

One more event in 1891 played an important role in Bonnard's life. The journal *Revue Blanche* moved its editorial office from Brussels to Paris. Bonnard and other members of the Nabis group soon established a good relationship with the publisher Thadée Natanson, another former student of the Lycée Condorcet. Natanson managed to get the most gifted artists, writers and musicians to work for him. The frontispieces of the journal were designed by Bonnard and Vuillard; inside there were the latest poems of Mallarmé, works by Marcel Proust, Strindberg, Oscar Wilde and Maxim Gorky. Debussy also contributed and literary critics discussed the works of Leo Tolstoy. Natanson himself devoted his first article to Utamaro and Hiroshige. Without exaggeration, the *Revue Blanche* was the best French cultural periodical of the 1890s. The atmosphere in its editorial office, which the Nabis often visited, was stimulating. Natanson's personal support for the artists was also of no small importance. He was as young as the artists whom he backed and was not afraid to follow his own inclinations. Even Natanson's friends later admitted that at times they had doubts whether they could trust a person who decorated his home with works by Bonnard and Vuillard.

Natanson's printed reminiscences of Bonnard give perhaps one of the best pen-portraits of the artist. "Bonnard, when I first met him, was a gaunt young man who sometimes stooped.



He had very white slightly protruding front teeth, was timid and short-sighted. His dark brown rather thin side-whiskers curled slightly; perched on his nose, very close to his eyes with dark pupils, was a small pince-nez in an iron frame, as was the fashion at the close of the nineteenth century. He spoke little, but was always ready to show the portrait of his fat grandmother in whose house he lived when he first came to Paris. The portrait had been painted in the Dauphiné and depicted the old lady with several white hens pecking at some feed close to her skirts. My new friend behaved in a very

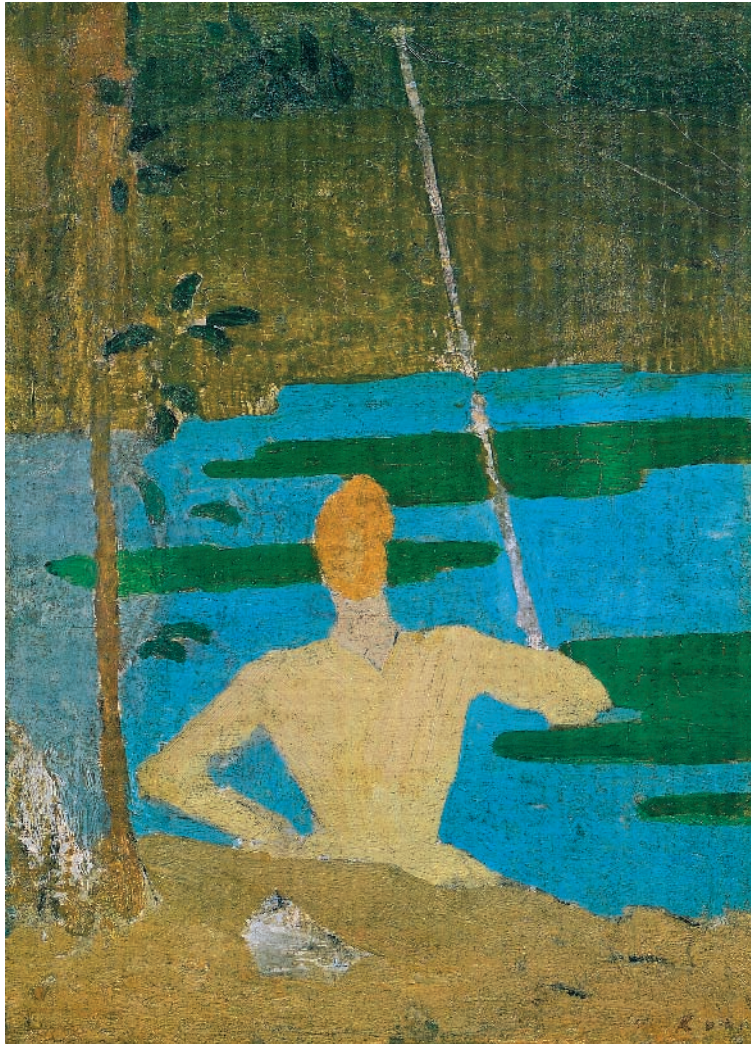
68. **Aristide Maillol**, *Portrait of Miss Jeanne Farail*, 1888-1889. Oil on canvas, 150 x 103 cm. Musée Maillol, Paris.

69. **Aristide Maillol**, *Lady with a Sunshade*, 1891-1892. Oil on canvas, 190 x 149 cm. Musée Maillol, Paris.

70. **Georges Lacombe**, *The Blue Sea*. Tempera on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes.







guarded manner when it came to discussing theories in painting, but he readily spoke about Japanese prints of which he was very fond. At that time such a taste could be easily satisfied. He also preferred checked fabrics far more than any other kind. His smile, with his white teeth showing slightly, was so winning that you wanted to see it again and to hold on to it. You wanted to catch the moment when it appeared. Bonnard smiled out of politeness, because of his shyness, but once he had tamed his smile, so to speak, he was no longer inhibited, and it was as if a tensioned spring had unwound...

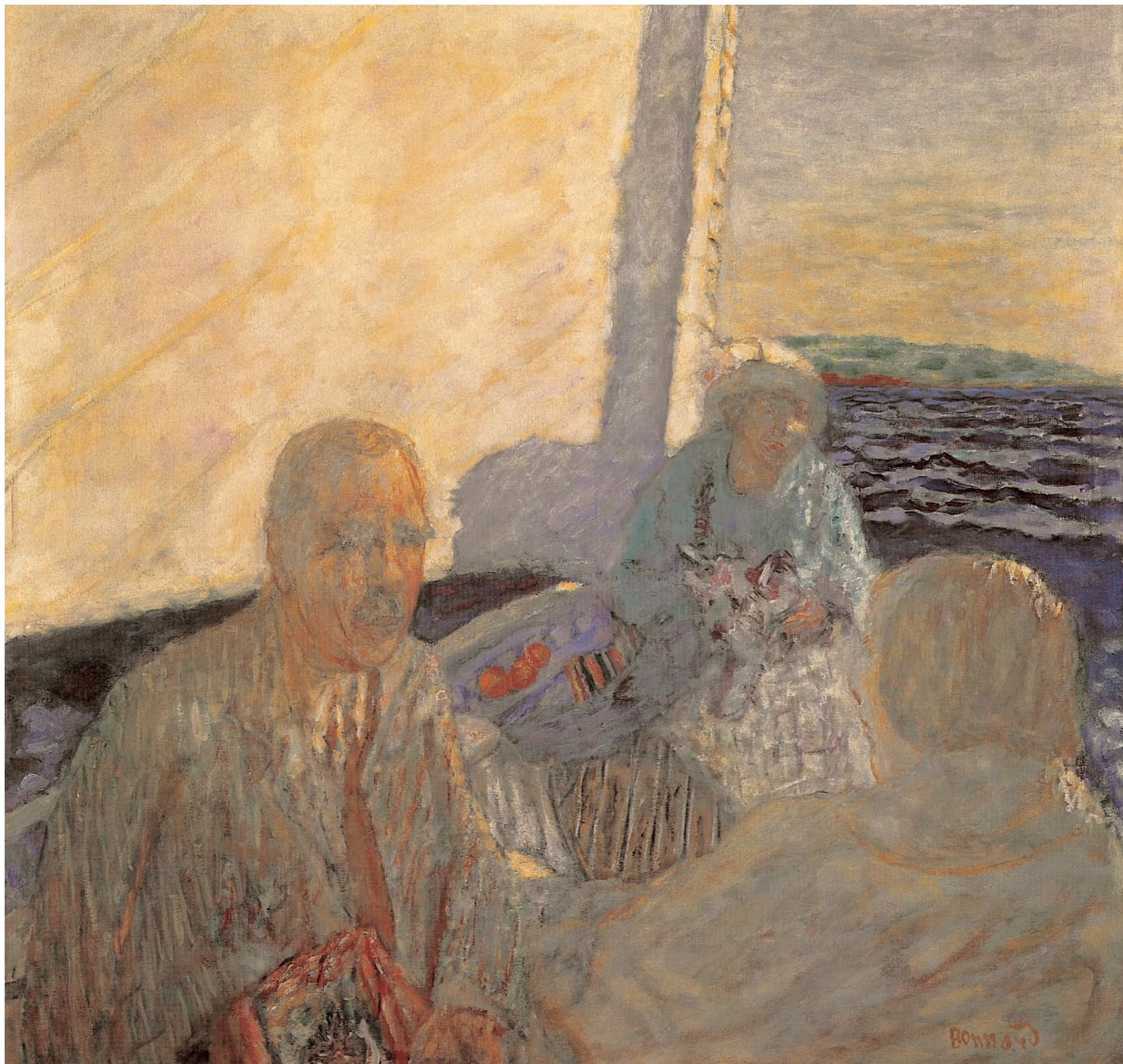
71. Ker Xavier Roussel, *The Fisherman*. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Bonnard hardly changed from the early days of our friendship. He rarely livened up, even more rarely expressed his mind openly, avoiding any possible chance of letting his feelings come out into the open.”²²

“He was the humorist among us,” Lugné-Poë recalled. “His light-hearted jollity and wit can be seen in his canvases.”²³ “Wonderfully gifted, but too intelligent to let us feel his superiority, he was able to hide the spark of genius within him,”²⁴ was Verkade’s recollection of him. Bonnard’s humour was perhaps not always taken as harmless. The Russian artist Alexander Benois said that his acquaintance with the painter in the late 1890s was short-lived because Bonnard’s specifically French *esprit gouaillieur* (mocking wit) made him feel ill at ease.²⁵ But Benois’s reaction is exceptional. There was nothing of the born joker about Bonnard, and as he grew older he became increasingly reserved, even somewhat distrustful of others. In fact, throughout his life, even when he was a member of the Nabis group, he required the company of others less than his own; or rather what he needed was to be left alone with his art. Natanson was right when he said that Bonnard’s misanthropy sprang from his innate kindness.²⁶ But even in his youth Bonnard was probably a more complex personality than he seemed to his friends. His reserve and reticence hid traits which one could hardly suspect. In his *Self Portrait* painted in 1889 (Private Collection, Paris), we see not a light-minded wit, but a watchful, diffident young man. The still eyes hide thoughts one does not usually share with others. His acquaintances saw him as a fine, jolly fellow, and that was true enough. But was that all? With age, other hidden features of his nature became more evident. At thirty, when Benois met him, he was a different man from the one he was at the age of twenty: he was less light-hearted and showed less desire to surprise with paradoxes. So many of his early compositions were deliberately paradoxical.

72. Pierre Bonnard, *The Yellow Boat*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 58 x 76 cm. Private collection.







In 1891 Bonnard told a correspondent from the *Echo de Paris* that painting should be predominantly decorative, that the disposition of lines revealed true talent. Three or four years later he began to move away from intricate decorative effects and deliberate complexity towards a greater liberation of colour and a living texture in painting, as well as towards its inner integrity. This was a turning point in his career, but it did not occur suddenly. Changes in Bonnard's painterly manner accumulated gradually, and for this reason it is impossible to draw a dividing line between one period and another. But changes did take place. When

looking at a picture executed in the new manner, one cannot help feeling that it is not so much a different picture as the earlier one transformed, but that the newer picture represents a deeper understanding of what the artist was doing before. While developing his talent, Bonnard at the same time remained true to himself. His art always expressed his invariable loyalty to himself and to his views on life. Throughout the sixty years of his career he remained true to the subjects of his youth, but none of his works is mere dreary repetition. His artistic individuality is easily recognizable in each new work.

73. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Sailing (The Hahnloser Family)*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 98 x 103 cm. Private collection, Switzerland.

74. **Berthe Morisot**, *On the Lake in the Bois de Boulogne*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 60 x 73 cm. Private collection.



75. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Poor Fisherman*, 1881.
Oil on canvas, 155.5 x 192.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



76. Félix Vallotton, *A Port*, 1901. Oil on cardboard, 57 x 62 cm.
The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

Bonnard's intonations often have humorous overtones. Benois saw this as the source of the superficiality for which he reproached the artist.²⁷ There might have been an element of truth in this, if Bonnard's humour were present in all circumstances. But he used humour only when he wanted to avoid the direct expression of emotions. In a way, his special form of tact was akin to that of Chekhov. Though there was never any personal contact between these two men, they had much in common. Bonnard always added a touch of humour when he depicted children. The ploy reliably protected him against the excessive sentimentality often observed in this genre.

Bonnard had no children of his own. For many years he led a bachelor's life. This seemed not to worry him in the least. If, however, one looks at his works as a kind of diary, a rather different picture emerges. In the 1890s and 1900s he often depicted scenes of quiet domestic bliss. These scenes — the feeding of a baby, children bathing, playing or going for walks, a corner of a garden, a cosy interior — are both poignant and amusing. Of course, these aspects of life attracted the other Nabis, too, which was in keeping with the times. But in Bonnard's work these motifs are not treated with stressed indifference, as in Vallotton's. Bonnard does not conceal the fact that he finds them attractive. Yet it is not easy to discern a longing for family life in his work. One might suggest it, but without much confidence. Bonnard seems to remind himself, as always with humour, that family life is undoubtedly emotionally pleasant, but there is much in it that is monotonous and even absurd — a truly Chekhovian attitude. The many commonplace situations treated on account of banality with a degree of humour are summed up in the monumental portrait of the Terrasse family, a work unprecedented in European art. Bonnard gave the picture the title *The Terrasse Family (L'Après-midi bourgeoise)*. It was painted in 1900 and is now in the Bernheim-Jeune collection in Paris (another version is in the Stuttgart State Gallery). The

title parodies Mallarmé's eclogue *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. The artist had affection for his characters, and not only because they were his relatives (Bonnard's sister Andrée was married to the composer Claude Terrasse). Yet, he depicted the dozen or so of them in an ironical parade of provincial idleness, in all its grandeur and its absurdity.

Around the same time Bonnard painted his *Man and Woman* (1900, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), a work with a psychological "dramatism" quite unexpected of the artist. The psychological aspect of the work is not a piece of fiction or illustration of the then fashionable subject of the conflict between the sexes; it is a self-portrait of the artist with Marthe, his constant companion and model, in every respect a deeply personal work. Of course, this painting is not typical of Bonnard: there is no irony here, and we are witnessing a dramatic episode easily identified as biographical. Both this work and the portrait of the Terrasse family are worthy of attention, because they show Bonnard not only as a subtle painter but also as a very complex personality. Meeting Marthe brought many changes to Bonnard's life. This girl, who had come to Paris in search of work and a new life, did not belong to the same social milieu as Bonnard, and in comparison with him and his friends she was practically uneducated. Yet, she became the artist's muse. In her, Bonnard found an inexhaustible source of inspiration. She did not sit specially for him, and "there was no need for this because she was constantly with him. Her movements flowed one from another with a naturalness that can be neither learnt nor forgotten. Some of Bonnard's most brilliant pictures were prompted by some pose of her body which he had noticed."²⁸ The presence of Marthe, the mistress of the house, is unexpectedly revealed in *Mirror in the Dressing-Room*, now in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. In the mirror we can see the reflection of a small room in which Marthe is drinking coffee, completely ignoring the model who is in the

77. Pierre Bonnard, *The Cherry Tart*, 1908.
Oil on canvas, 115 x 123 cm. Private collection.





78. Claude Monet, *The Luncheon on the Grass*, 1866.
Oil on canvas, 130 x 181 cm. The Pushkin State Museum
of Fine Arts, Moscow.



79. Pierre Bonnard, *The Gardener*, 1908.
Oil on canvas, 85 x 93 cm. Private collection.



act of removing her clothes. They say that it was Bonnard's wife who compelled him to lead a secluded life, striving by one means or another to keep him away from his friends and from Paris. With the years she indeed became an intolerable person. But there is no evidence that Bonnard ever complained or expressed dissatisfaction. He was a patient man, and his love was a wise one. Perhaps he lacked firmness of character. "He was always afraid of her, her tactless behaviour," Matisse recalled. "She tried to cut him off from everyone. True, she received me, saying, 'Oh, Matisse is only concerned with his painting.' I suppose she thought I wasn't dangerous."²⁹

Bonnard's friends were definitely convinced that he was under Marthe's thumb. But in actual fact he submitted himself to the imperatives of his art, and Marthe never infringed upon them. He found it convenient to live in rural solitude and devote all his time to his work. After the First World War, when he visited Paris, he never spent more than two months in any year in the capital. "I go there to see what's happening, to compare my painting with that of other artists. In Paris, I am a critic, I can't work there. There is too much noise, too many distractions. I know that other artists become accustomed to that kind of life. I find it difficult."³⁰ Bonnard had indeed

80. Édouard Vuillard, *In the Garden*, 1899. Tempera on cardboard, 51 x 83 cm. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.



changed; he seemed to have forgotten what fascination the rush and bustle of Paris had once held for him. Bonnard visited many foreign countries, but his travels left no noticeable traces in his art, which had grown on French soil, in a French atmosphere. Paris and the Ile-de-France, Normandy, the Dauphiné, and the Côte d'Azur were the places where Bonnard worked. In summer he usually went to some little town or village in one of these French provinces. He was particularly fond of Vernon and Le Cannet. Bonnard was an artist of unusual integrity. A scholar attempting to divide his work into periods would find himself faced with a formidable

task. His early works are marked by a deliberate decorativeness, while towards the close of his life his paintings become more expressive; at times this expressiveness is accompanied by dramatic overtones. However, it is impossible to establish a point when one tendency exhausts itself and another becomes a dominant feature of his art. One is forced inevitably to the conclusion that the whole of Bonnard's enormous legacy constitutes a single period.³¹ The works painted between 1888 and 1890, about fifteen in all (earlier works have not come down to us), already clearly indicate which genres the artist preferred: landscapes, still lifes and

81. Ker Xavier Roussel, *Conversation on a Terrace*, 1893.
Oil on canvas, 39.5 x 60 cm. Private collection.



portraits. They also include his panel *The Dressing Gown* (1889, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which is as decorative as a textile, and spontaneous, lively compositions containing human figures — the type favoured by the Impressionists. An example of the latter is *Street* (1889, Milliner collection, Paris), the first of the artist's small genre scenes set in Paris, each of which is unique in its own way. This picture is the prototype for *Morning in Paris* and *Evening in Paris*, paintings now in the Hermitage.

Street and another painting of this period, *Woman in the Garden* (Private Collection, Paris), show that Bonnard not only was well acquainted with Impressionism, but that he ventured into its territory as a polemist rather than a timid pupil: here, characteristic Impressionist motifs are treated in a far from Impressionistic manner. It was only a short time before Bonnard painted these pictures that the Nabis learned the lesson taught by Gauguin. However, Bonnard and Vuillard were influenced to a lesser degree by Gauguin than their companions. While sharing Gauguin's opposition to Renoir, Pissarro and Raffaëlli, Bonnard and Vuillard drew support not from Gauguin but from oriental art, mainly from Japanese prints. French artists had become interested in Japanese art even before Bonnard was born. The influence may be traced to Manet's work and particularly to all the early works of the Impressionists. Originally it was no more than a taste for the exotic, but in the latter part of the 1880s this interest became more profound, and France was swept by a real wave of enthusiasm for Japanese art. Comparing French paintings of that period with Japanese prints, art historians have discovered that Monet, Degas, Redon, Gauguin, Seurat, Signac and others borrowed both motifs and elements of composition from these prints. Van Gogh painted his own versions of Japanese prints. He even went to Provence hoping to find a second Japan there. To one degree or another, all the Nabis used devices prompted by Japanese woodcuts. Yet it was no coincidence that one of

them was singled out for the nickname “the Highly Nipponised Nabi” (Nabi Très Japonard). It is quite reasonable to link Bonnard's early urban scenes, including his *Street*, and the works not only of the Impressionists, but also of Japanese artists — all the more so because the Impressionists themselves had been influenced by Japanese art. A painter of the city, Bonnard undoubtedly owed a debt to Hiroshige and Kiyonaga.

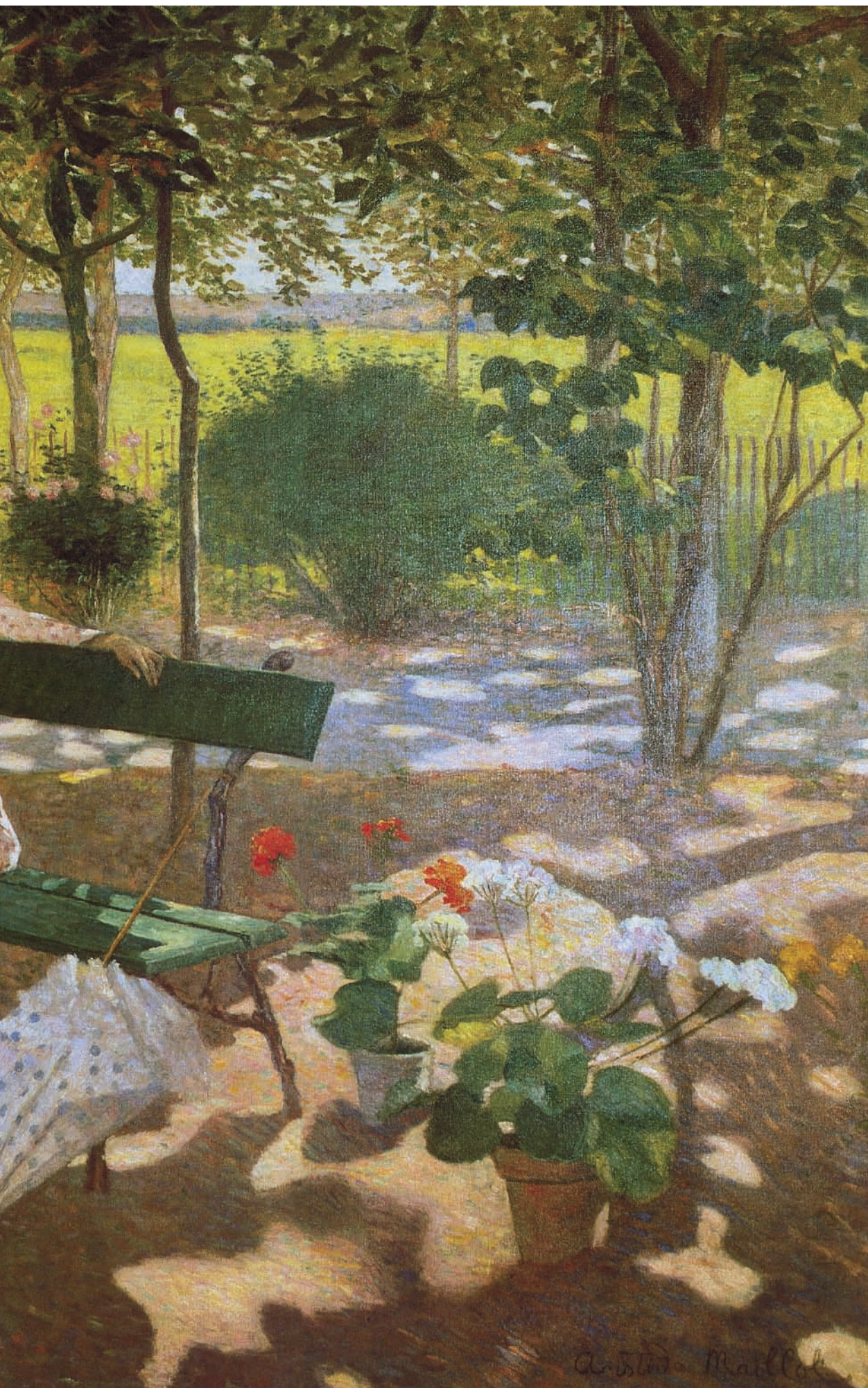
Japanese prints were by no means a rarity in Paris when Bonnard studied at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts. An exhibition of Japanese art was held at the École itself in 1890 and there can be little doubt that Bonnard was among its most frequent visitors. Japanese prints were cheap enough for Bonnard and his companions to be able to buy the odd one. Naturally, these were the latest prints, which differed considerably from the originals. In his old age Matisse would recall: “I knew the Japanese only from copies and prints of poor quality which could be bought in the rue de Seine by the entrance of the shops selling engravings. Bonnard said that he did the same and added that he was rather disappointed when he saw the originals. This may be explained by the foxiness and faded colours of the early print-runs. Perhaps if we had seen the originals first, we would not have been as impressed as by the later prints.”⁸²

“When I came upon these somewhat crude popular pictures,” Bonnard said, “I realized that colour could express anything without resort to relief or modelling. It seemed to me that one could render light, shape, typical properties by colour alone, dispensing with values.”⁸³ In order to understand Bonnard's first creative endeavours, it is essential to know that he, like the other members of the Nabis group, considered Japanese prints to be examples of folk art. At that time, he thought of creating not masterpieces for museums but popular art suitable for reproduction; in other words, something that was to an extent mass art. “During that period,

82. Édouard Vuillard, *Place Vintimille*, 1911. Distemper on paper laid down on canvas overall, 230 x 60 cm (each panel). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

83. Aristide Maillol, *Lady Sitting with a Sunshade*, c. 1892. Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Musée Maillol, Paris.







I myself shared the opinion that artists should produce works which the general public could afford and which would be of use in everyday life: prints, furniture, fans, screens and so on.”⁸⁴

Only a few of Bonnard’s undertakings in the field of applied arts actually came to fruition. Among them were a stained-glass panel called *Motherhood*, which Tiffany’s made from his cartoon, and several screens, some of them painted, others decorated with colour lithographs. These screens and

the design for a small cupboard with figures of two frisky dogs — probably Bonnard’s only attempt to try his hand at furniture — clearly reveal a Japanese influence. Japanese prototypes are also in evidence in Bonnard’s lithographs. Even his earliest print, *A Family Scene* (1893), immediately brings to mind Utamaro, Sharaku and Kunisada. The works of these Japanese artists taught Bonnard the kind of stark simplicity and refinement that he could never have acquired at the École des Beaux-Arts. Above all, they taught him to abandon the

84. Pierre Bonnard, *Place Clichy*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 139 x 205 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts et d’Archéologie, Besançon.

85. Pierre Bonnard, *Flower-Seller*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 105 x 117 cm. Private collection.





86. Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street. Rainy Day*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 212.2 x 276.2 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.



87. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Pont du Carrousel in Paris*, c. 1903.
Oil on canvas, 72.4 x 99.4 cm. Gift from Mr. and Mrs. Sidney
F. Brody, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles.



88. Édouard Vuillard, *Place Vintimille*, 1916. Distemper on canvas, 162.6 x 228.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

ideas of perspective. He had been taught to be bold in composition, to build up his picture as an arrangement of flat silhouettes, to appreciate the expressive power of a generalized patch of colour, at times unexpectedly giving close-up views and at times, on the contrary, arranging the composition in a frieze-like manner. The free and at the same time energetic use of colour in Japanese woodcuts also brought Europe much, both in graphic art and in painting. "As for painting," Bonnard wrote to Soares, "I learned a lot working in colour lithography. You discover a great deal when you explore the relationship between different tones, with only four or five colours at your disposal, placing them next to or over one another."⁸⁹

Incidentally, even before Bonnard turned to lithography, he tried to make do with a limited number of colours, applying them in a flat manner. The most telling example of this practice is *The Parade Ground* (1890, Private Collection, Paris). It would be hard to find a small painting in the battle genre to match this picture for richness of colour and decorativeness, although the work both belongs to and, with its Japanese features, parodies the genre.

With time the colours in Bonnard's paintings became more and more subdued. To some extent this was probably due to his work in lithography. By the middle of the 1890s the artist obviously began to prefer colour combinations in which grey and brown tones predominated. Vuillard was moving in the same direction.

A typical example of this manner is Bonnard's *Behind the Fence* (1895, Hermitage, St. Petersburg). What is particularly interesting about this picture? It does not depict an amusing incident; the fine draughtsmanship is absent. We see some very ordinary brown-coloured houses, dark winter tree-trunks, and a monotonous fence running across the whole

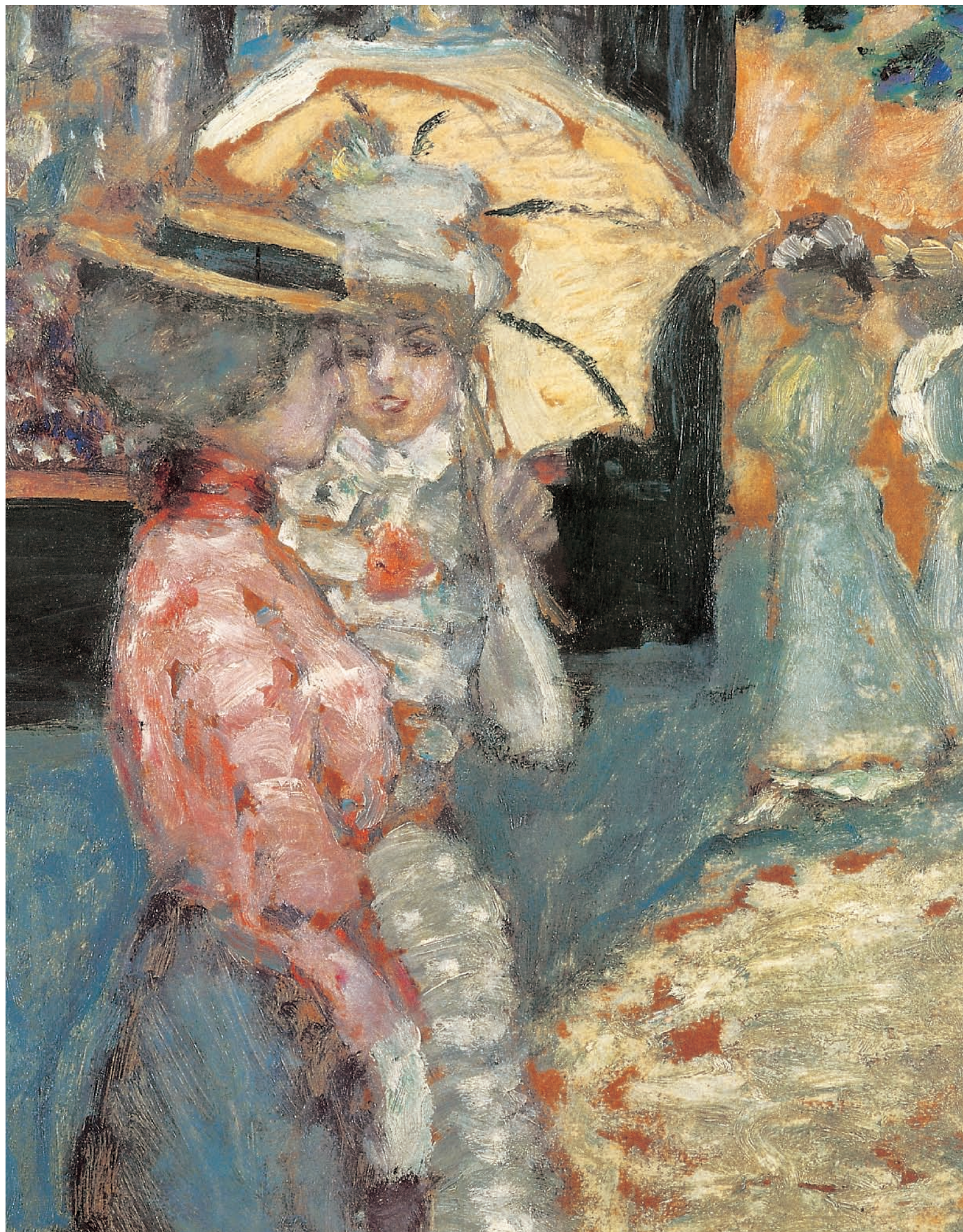
composition. The viewer does not immediately notice behind this fence the solitary figure of a woman, who for some unknown reason has come out into the cold. Only the white splotches of snow which has just fallen and is already beginning to melt enliven the scene that does not catch the eye at all. Has this woman come out to call in a child still playing in the gathering twilight? Perhaps. She is not dressed to go far in such weather. But all these thoughts are unlikely to enter the viewer's mind. The painting is too generalized to enable us to read something in the woman's face. The main thing is, however, that the artist does not assert that the scene he presents has some kind of narrative to it. It is just an unassuming corner in the outskirts of Paris made beautiful by the subdued colouring of the picture, with its shimmering grey tones.

Although Bonnard's painting lacks bright colour accents, it is nevertheless highly decorative. This effect is primarily achieved by the fence with its diagonal lines. As early as the 1890s, the artist was fond of compositions where prominence was given to grids of lines crossing at right angles. Usually this is seen in a woman's dress, sometimes in a scarf. (Let us recall that Natanson specially noted Bonnard's love of checked fabrics). The artist's innate talent as a decorator revealed itself above all in the way he carefully managed tension in a picture, skilfully alternating active, checked areas with calm, empty spaces. Art historians often look on the use of checked areas in Bonnard's early work as an extreme manifestation of his Japonism. We can, indeed, find something similar in Japanese prints, but the artist did not invent ornaments, rather he was stimulated when in the real world he came across the things he liked. (His sister Andrée also loved checked fabrics: the pattern of her tartan dress, in which blue and red predominated, determined the main colour characteristics of a whole painting.) There should be no doubt that the very ordinary fence depicted in the picture *Behind the Fence* really existed.

89. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Place Clichy* or *Two Elegant Ladies*, 1905. Oil on board, 73 x 62 cm. Private collection.

90. **Pierre Bonnard**, *The Stroll*, c. 1900. Oil on canvas, 38 x 31 cm. Private collection.





"You know, there is nothing in Bonnard's work that has not come from observation," Natanson noted.³⁶

The middle of the 1890s saw a gradual change in Bonnard's art. Having begun as a convinced Post-Impressionist, he now moved closer to the Impressionists, above all to Degas. In 1894, he painted a series of pictures devoted to horse-racing; in 1896, he turned to scenes in cafés and portrayed ballet-dancers; in 1897, he produced several circus scenes. The influence of Degas is evident in all these works. Bonnard did not reject the conventions of Japanese art, but adapted them to serve his own purposes in his increasingly more realistic approach to the object of representation, his rendering of light, air and the depth of space. Pissarro, who had expressed dissatisfaction with Bonnard's early work, now voiced a different opinion in a letter to his son. In 1898, Bonnard received a letter from Renoir following the publication of Peter Nansen's novel *Marie*. Renoir expressed his admiration for Bonnard's illustrations for the book: "You possess the gift of charming. Do not neglect it. You will come across more powerful painters, but your gift is precious."³⁷ When staying in the south, Bonnard made a point of visiting Cagnes to call on the old master. The little painting with a dedication, which Renoir gave him, was Bonnard's pride and joy, and one of his most cherished possessions. When Bonnard moved to Vernon, he struck up a closer acquaintance with Claude Monet who lived in Giverny only a few miles away. Bonnard went to Giverny to enjoy Monet's beautiful garden, to look at the landscapes with water lilies on which the leader of the Impressionists was then working, and to see again the canvases by Delacroix, Corot, Cézanne and Renoir in his collection. From time to time Monet's car drove up to Bonnard's house, which was called "Ma Roulotte" (my gypsy-wagon), so that Monet could see Bonnard's latest work. They spoke little, but Bonnard was content with a smile or an

encouraging gesture from Monet. Bonnard continued seeing Monet and Renoir in later years, long after these two very discriminating elder masters had recognized their younger colleague as a painter of considerable standing. At the turn of the century Bonnard seems to have been at a crossroads. He might have continued his experiments in decorative painting. He might have concentrated his attention on an ironical and psychological approach to the subject, not unlike that of Toulouse-Lautrec. (His *Terrasse Family* provides an excellent example of his capacity in that direction.) He might have yielded to the temptations of sensual subjects exemplified by the series of nudes he painted in 1899-1900. He might have focused on portraiture: his few efforts in that line reveal him as an astute student of the human soul. In fact, however, most of the works he created at that time and in the following decade show no marked preference for any one of these traditional genres. Nor do they show any extreme tendency in the treatment of the motif whether decorative, naturalistic or psychological. Later Bonnard would write to the art critic Georges Besson: "I am drifting between the intimate and the decorative."³⁸ Only a small number of Bonnard's works produced in the 1890s and 1900s may be unreservedly classified as belonging to one particular genre: portrait, nude or landscape. His landscapes, for instance, generally contain people who figure as importantly in the picture as the surrounding scenery. Looking at his townscapes one tends to wonder what attracted the artist more — the Parisian streets or their colourful crowds. In the majority of cases Bonnard does not single out either. The artist treats the streets with their specifically Parisian hustle and bustle and wealth of colour as a mixture of landscape and genre scene forming a single whole. With Bonnard's indoor scenes, we seem to face the same question. It is far from easy to decide whether we are looking at a depiction of a room enlivened by the presence of a human figure, or a genre scene where the interior serves as a background.

91. **Pierre Bonnard**, *The Cab Horse*, 1895. Oil on wood, 29.7 x 40 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.



92. **Pierre Bonnard**, Poster for "*La Revue Blanche*", 1894.
Lithograph in black, gray, beige and brown-pink, 58.7 x 78.2 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

93. **Pierre Bonnard**, *France-Champagne*, 1891. Lithograph in 3 colours,
78 x 50 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Reims.

LA REVUE B

PARAIT CHAQUE MOIS
EN LIVRAISONS DE 100 PAGES
le n° 1 fr. BUREAUX 1 rue Laffitte
EN VENTE PARTOUT

Blanche
La
revue

La
revue blanche

La
blanche

La
revue bl

Blanche

La
vue blanch

La
revue blanche

blanche

blanche

La

La
revue blanc

La
revue bl

blanch

La
revue blanche

blanche

La
revue blanche

La
revue blanche

La

blanch

La
revue blanche

La

revue blanche

La
revue blanche

La
revue blanche

La
revue

La
revue blanc

blanche

La
revue blanche

1. L.H.

BOURBON
94

La
revue blanche

Imp. Edw. Ancourt PARIS

FRANCE CHAMPAGNE

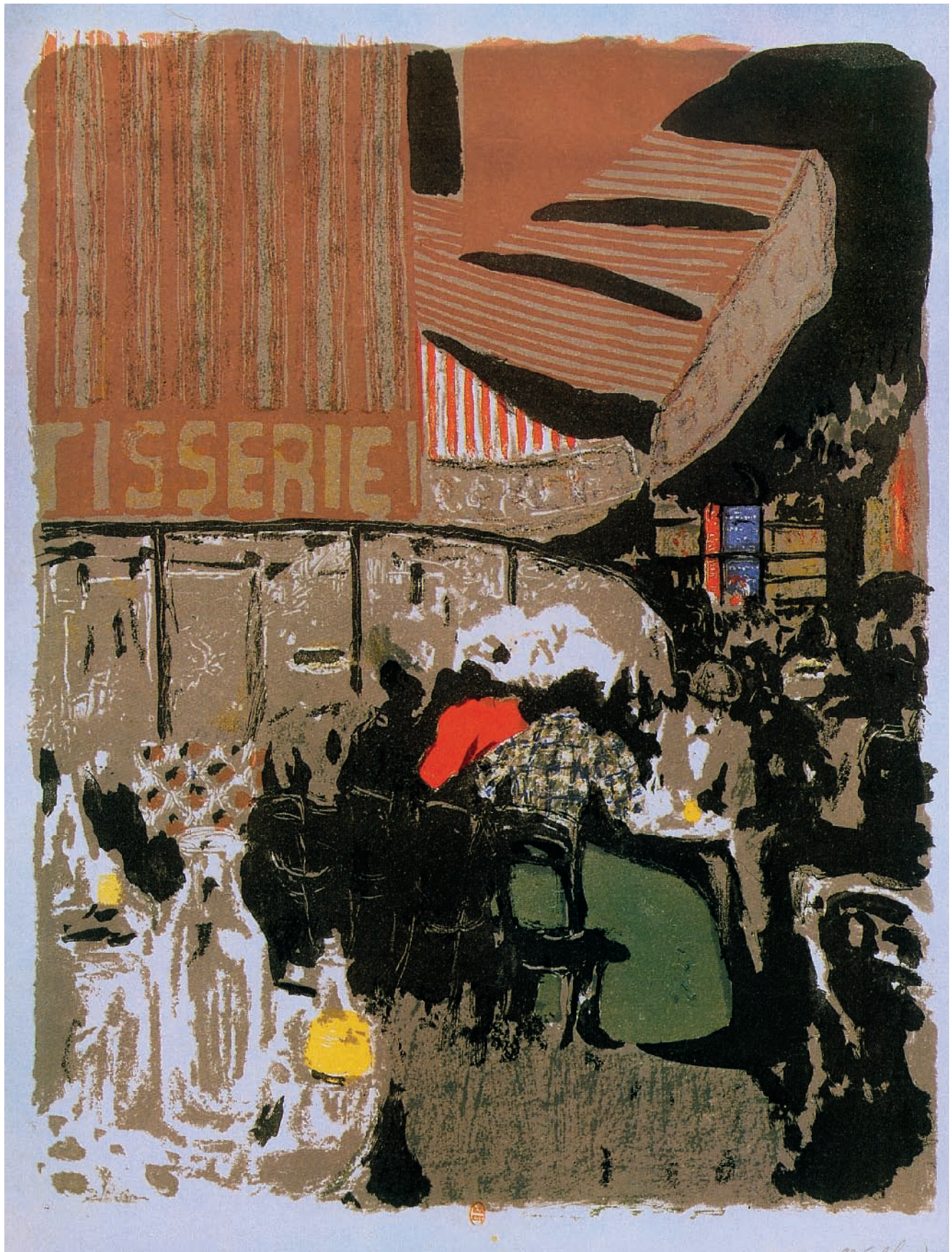


E. DEBRAY
PROPRIÉTAIRE

LA HAUBETTE-TINQUEUX-LEZ-REIMS

BUREAU DE REPRÉSENTATIONS

8, RUE DE L'ISLY PARIS





It was, in fact, quite natural for Bonnard to combine several genres in one picture. An excellent example of this is his *Mirror in the Dressing-Room* (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow). The painting is considered a still life, but the elements of interior, portrait and nude are stronger than they should be in that case. This places the work in a class of its own among European painting of the early twentieth century. During this period Bonnard drew noticeably closer to the Impressionists. In their works, particularly in Degas, he found numerous examples of an unorthodox attitude to genres. His affinity with the Impressionists expressed itself in the fact that landscape, which always predominated in Impressionist art, became an ever more important element of his painting. Moreover, it is also important to note that in his landscapes Bonnard no longer strove after decorative effect, or at least that was no longer his main objective. His *Landscape in the Dauphiné* in the Hermitage resembles a casual, Impressionistic-style “snapshot view”. The composition does not appear to follow a preconceived scheme and it is easy to imagine how it continues on either side. The painting has none of the earlier flatness; the eye is led far into the distance. The landscape, however, lacks the Impressionist luminosity. Unlike the Impressionists, for whom light was of paramount importance, Bonnard valued colour above all. The *Landscape in the Dauphiné* does not attract

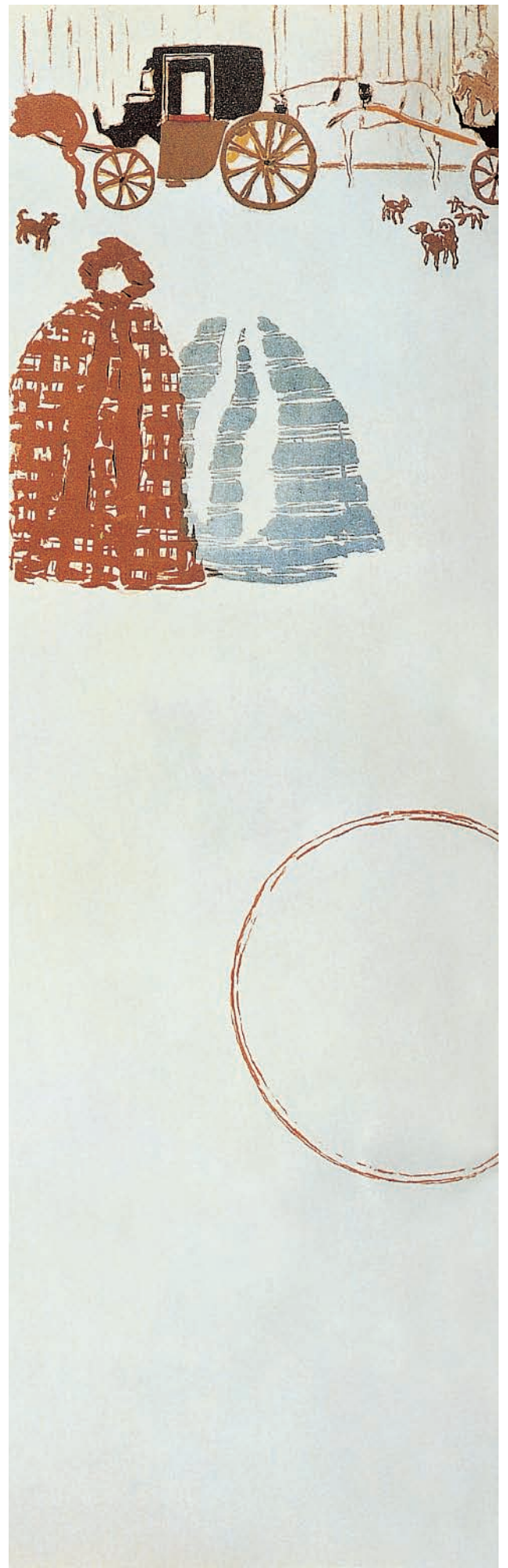
attention immediately. It takes time to appreciate the modest beauty of the rather dirty green colours. Bonnard managed to catch the hues of the somewhat prosaic Dauphiné countryside, seen, as it were, through the eyes of a peasant. That is not to say that the treatment of the subject reflects the usual aesthetic tastes of peasants, who would probably not like the landscape. It is more the psychological aspect, a specific sense of place. To some degree, at least, Bonnard perceives the world as it is seen by his characters themselves — in the case of this painting by peasants working in the fields on a rainy autumn day.

Another illustration of Bonnard’s ability to look at whatever he was depicting through the eyes of his characters is his townscape *A Corner of Paris*. In the centre of the composition is a small group of children out for a walk. The ingenuous curiosity and wonder with which they see the surrounding world is echoed by the bright posters pasted on a large board. The humorous notes discernible in paintings like *A Corner of Paris* are absent in the landscapes containing no human figures, such as the two paintings of the Seine near Vernon, one now in Moscow, the other in St. Petersburg. It is noteworthy that landscapes of this type are both more lyrical and less decorative. In general, Bonnard’s works are usually more decorative when they contain human figures.

94. Édouard Vuillard, *The Pastry Shop*. Lithograph. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

95. Édouard Vuillard, *In the Garden, at the Vallottons*, 1900. Oil on cardboard, 26.8 x 111 cm. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

96. Pierre Bonnard, *Nursemaid’s Promenade, Frieze of Carriages*, 1894. Colour lithograph, 136.6 x 48.3 cm; 136.2 x 47.7 cm; 136.1 x 48.5 cm; 136.1 x 145.9 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.







It was when Bonnard was working on *A Corner of Paris* that the Fauves caught the public eye. Bonnard's paintings were less bright than the works of the Impressionists; next to the garish creations of the Fauves, constructed on a rolling crescendo of colours, they looked utterly faded, even timid. This impression was, of course, deceptive, and Matisse, the leader of the Fauves, was well aware of this. But the public and even the critics found it difficult to discern the quiet melody of

Bonnard's painting among the deafening trumpets of the Fauves. It would be wrong to suggest that Bonnard was not influenced at all by Henri Matisse and his friends. The Parisian series he produced for Ivan Morozov in 1911 was painted in more vivid colours than *A Corner of Paris*, but Bonnard could never have become a follower of Matisse; his temperament and the circumstances of his artistic development, very different from those of the Fauves, precluded that.

97. **Pierre Bonnard**, *The Grands Boulevards*, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 27 x 33.6 cm. Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury Collection.

98. **Pierre Bonnard**, *The Little Laundry Girl*, 1896. Lithograph in 5 colours, 30 x 19 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.





It was not only Bonnard's tendency to approach his subject intimately that made him reject the scarcity of artistic means to which Matisse and Picasso had come in the first decade of the twentieth century, and which had brought them worldwide recognition as the trend-setters in contemporary art. Bonnard did not consider Impressionism entirely passé, yet he wrote, "When my friends and I decided to follow the Impressionists, attempting to develop their achievements, we strove to overcome their *naturalistic conception* of colour. Art is not copying nature. We were more mindful of composition. We felt that colour should be used more effectively as a means of expression. But artistic development had gained such momentum that society was ripe to accept Cubism and Surrealism long before we had achieved our goal. We found ourselves in an uncertain position."⁹⁹

It is hardly surprising that at the beginning of the twentieth century the young artists who joined the avant-garde considered the work of Bonnard and other artists of his circle rather old-fashioned and dull. They were completely overwhelmed by Matisse's *Red Room* and *The Dance* and by Picasso's Cubist experiments. Bonnard's *Mirror in the Dressing-Room* was painted at the time when Matisse and Picasso were creating some of their famous still lifes, including Picasso's *Composition with a Skull*, now in the Hermitage collection, and Matisse's *Red Room*, which is halfway to being a still life. Comparing all these works, one is bound to appreciate Matisse's and Picasso's unusual boldness, yet one is also sure to realize how much painting would have lost without Bonnard, already outside the mainstream of artistic development.

Mirror in the Dressing-Room is a wonderful illustration of how Bonnard used the lessons learned from the Impressionists, and from Degas in particular. At the same time it exemplifies the complete subordination of

Impressionistic elements to a deeply individual and in essence non-Impressionistic conception. It would hardly be justified to speak here of the relationship between a pupil and his teachers. *Mirror in the Dressing-Room* clearly shows that structurally Bonnard's work was far more complicated than that of the Impressionists. Never in any of their still lifes did the Impressionists use so many motifs as well as compositional and spatial devices forming one integral whole, nor did they ever place such surprisingly diverse objects in apposition.

When Impressionism was in its heyday, Renoir painted an unusual still-life, *A Bunch of Flowers in front of a Mirror* (1876, Private Collection, Paris). Looking at this fleeting vision of bright flowers, one finds it difficult to tell which of the two bunches is real; and the painter took pleasure in exploiting this effect. In Bonnard's work the mirror plays a different role. It has already been stated that no other feature reveals Bonnard's divergence from the Impressionists as clearly as his fondness for using a mirror in his compositions.⁴⁰ The rectangle of the mirror breaks the surface of the wall in practically the same way as an open window. Compositions containing open windows, so beloved of the Romantics, are easily understood. An open window leads the eye into the depths, giving added impetus to the view, while a mirror seems to cast the eye back into the space behind the viewer. The viewer feels himself to be not in front of the scene, but inside it. It takes some time to comprehend the relative positions of all the elements in the composition: those reflected in the mirror and thus behind the viewer, and those which are beside the mirror and hence facing the viewer.

A human presence is sensed in Bonnard's still lifes even when they contain no human figure. But the most important detail of the Moscow still life is the fact that the mirror —

99. Pierre Bonnard, *The Children's Lunch*, c. 1906. Oil on wood, 25 x 33.5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy.



in the centre of the composition, and also its brightest spot — reflects the model with the artist's wife unconcernedly drinking her coffee. Thus this still life does not merely represent various toilet paraphernalia, but tells the viewer something about the artist, whose studio and living-room were one and whose creative activity was more than just a

job of work. The mirror is an age-old element of the *vanitas* type of still life traditionally linked with the motif of a nude figure. Bonnard, however, did not attempt to build up an allegory. The mirror gave him an opportunity to correlate the details reflected in it (his wife Marthe, the cup in her hand, the model) with the various articles on the washstand. With this diversity of details, colour gains a special significance. Soft, muted tones predominate. On the back of the picture Bonnard wrote: "Do not varnish." The matt effect is very important in this picture. Without it the expressive range of bluish-grey tones would have lost its wonderful subtlety and richness. It is colour that ennobles articles in Bonnard's still life. Natanson recollected that Bonnard took great delight in watching reflections in a mirror as it, "like him, gave its caress to objects".⁴¹

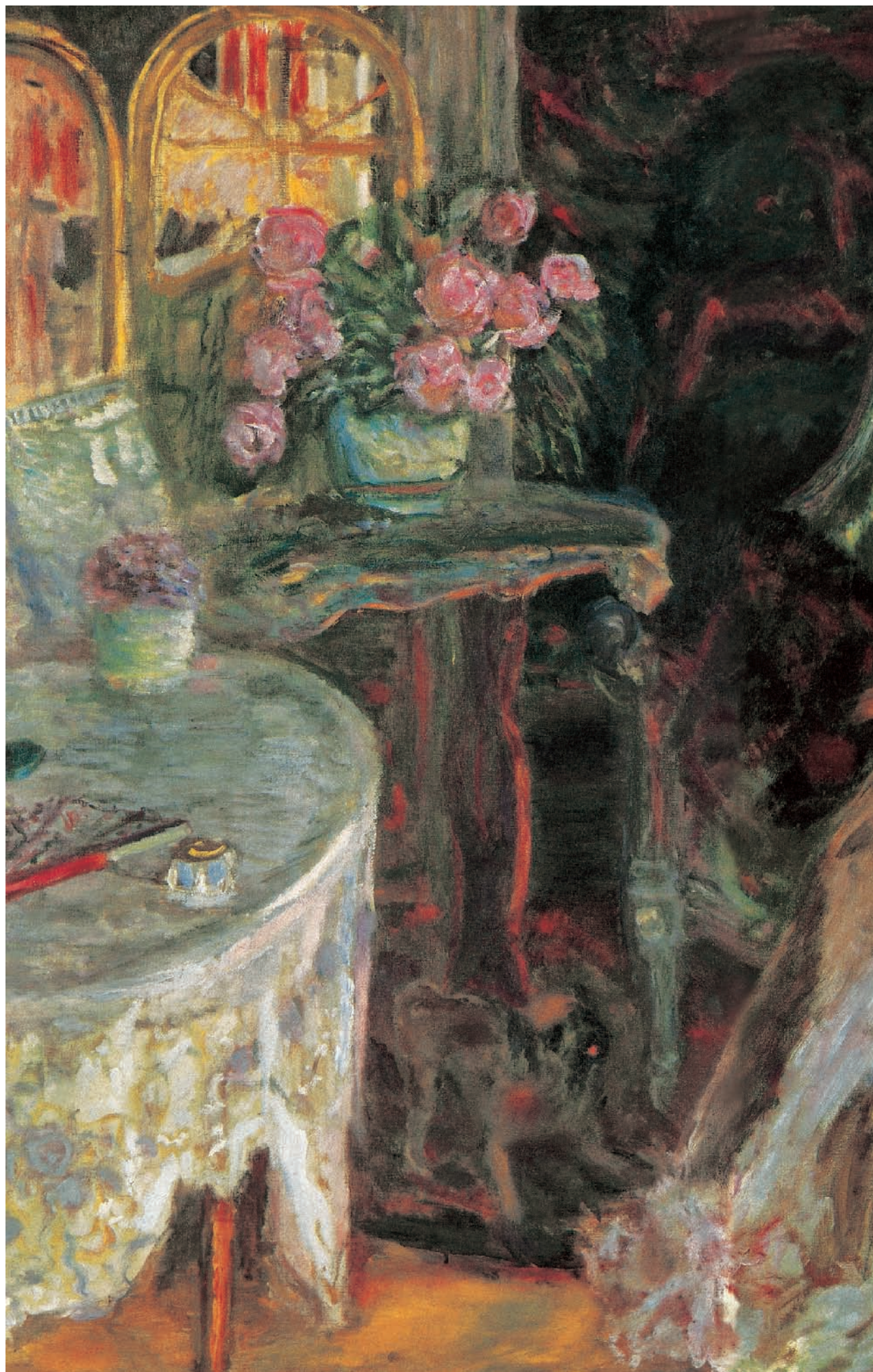
The Moscow still life belongs to a series of ten pictures painted by Bonnard over a span of eight years. In the first two canvases — *Girl drying Herself* and *The Toilette* (1907, Private Collection) — the most important elements are the nude figures, while the dressing-table and mirror serve merely as a background. In the next picture, *Nude against the Light* (1908, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), Bonnard depicted a young girl looking at herself in a mirror with its "Japanese" frame, already familiar from the Moscow still life, though the composition is more complicated. The painting may with equal justification be regarded as "a nude" or "an interior", since the details of the room are more than merely a background for the figure. Together with the girl they form part of a colourful spectacle. Comparing this picture with the *Mirror in the Dressing-Room*, one can understand why Bonnard painted the latter in greyish-blue colours. In *Nude against the Light*, a window is seen in the middle, while in *Mirror*, where the same room is depicted, the window takes up only a narrow strip of the picture.

100. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Family Scene*, 1893. Colour lithograph, 31 x 18 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

101. **Maurice Denis**, *Mother and Child*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 45 x 38.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

102. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Misia with Roses*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 112 x 146.5 cm. Private collection.









Consequently all the objects in the first still life, the table and the wall with the mirror, are seen in backlighting. A further development along these lines may be observed in *The Toilette* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which may be viewed as a preliminary version of the Moscow still life. Here Bonnard draws even closer to a still life free of the former limitations of the genre. In 1909, 1913 and 1914 Bonnard again returned to the mirror motif. In the *Dressing-Table with a Bunch of Red and Yellow Flowers* (1913), the size and the basic features of the composition are the same as in the *Mirror in the Dressing-Room*, but the colour scheme determined by the inclusion of the flowers is different. The next composition, *The Toilette* (1914, Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts), is no longer a still life but a pure interior with the same dressing-table. However, the window next to it has gone.

Depicting objects which were always at hand or turning to outdoor scenes, Bonnard did not strive to recapture an immediate impression. As a rule, he started working on his painting only when such impressions had taken root in his mind and passed through the filter of his memory. Feeling no obligation to reproduce an object of his observation precisely, he included in his pictures only that aspect of it which could be subordinated to the imperatives of art. In this way he made every area of his canvases rich in texture and colour.

The impact Bonnard's works have on the viewer does not rest solely on his ability to reveal the most painterly aspect of an ordinary object, but also on the hidden metaphorical and universal meaning of the colours he used. For this reason, Bonnard never tired of depicting the same objects, and turned again and again to the same motifs. Of course, this practice never amounted to mere repetition. His way towards revealing the beauty inherent in any object lay

primarily through the rich expressive resources of colour, making a metaphorical link with what is precious. Bonnard believed that "a picture is a patchwork of colours which when combined with each other, in the final analysis form an object in such a way as to allow the eye to glide freely over it without encountering obstacles."⁴² Bonnard delighted in walking the tightrope between stylized decorative abstraction and unstylized realism. His *Landscape with a Goods Train* (*Train and Fishing Boats*) provides a typical example. Each detail of the landscape may puzzle the viewer. It takes time to identify the tree in the right lower corner for what it is or the vineyard on the left. All details are governed by the ensemble of tones. That is why Bonnard is inevitably vague. It is as if he was reproducing the impression of a person walking down a path or, perhaps, looking at the scene from a moving train. For instance, it takes time to make out the fascinating figure of a little girl. This "sketchy" manner of painting is very characteristic of Bonnard. He tends to avoid a close scrutiny of his characters. Looking at the *Landscape with a Goods Train*, the viewer finds himself drawn into a system of resemblances. In pictorial terms, as well as by some inner meaning, the head of the little girl, the clump of trees, the puffs of smoke coming from the engine and the barges, and the clouds are linked in a common chain. For all the relative nature of brushstrokes, or, perhaps, because of it, the viewer is made to feel himself inside the picture, as in the *Mirror in the Dressing-Room*. For this reason too, the foreground is more blurred than the rest of the picture. Here, in a panoramic landscape, Bonnard retains the intimacy typical of his work. The *Landscape with a Goods Train* and *Early Spring* (*Little Fauns*) address the viewer in the artist's usual quiet tones. They are imbued with his unique brand of lyricism and winning archness. With an ease typical of him, Bonnard introduces a group of fauns into his landscape, figures which could never have appeared in the canvases of the

103. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Misia*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 145 x 114 cm.
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.



104. Édouard Vuillard, *Oval Negligee*, c. 1891. Oil on cardboard.
Private collection.

105. Pierre Bonnard, *The Red Garters*, c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm.
Private collection.





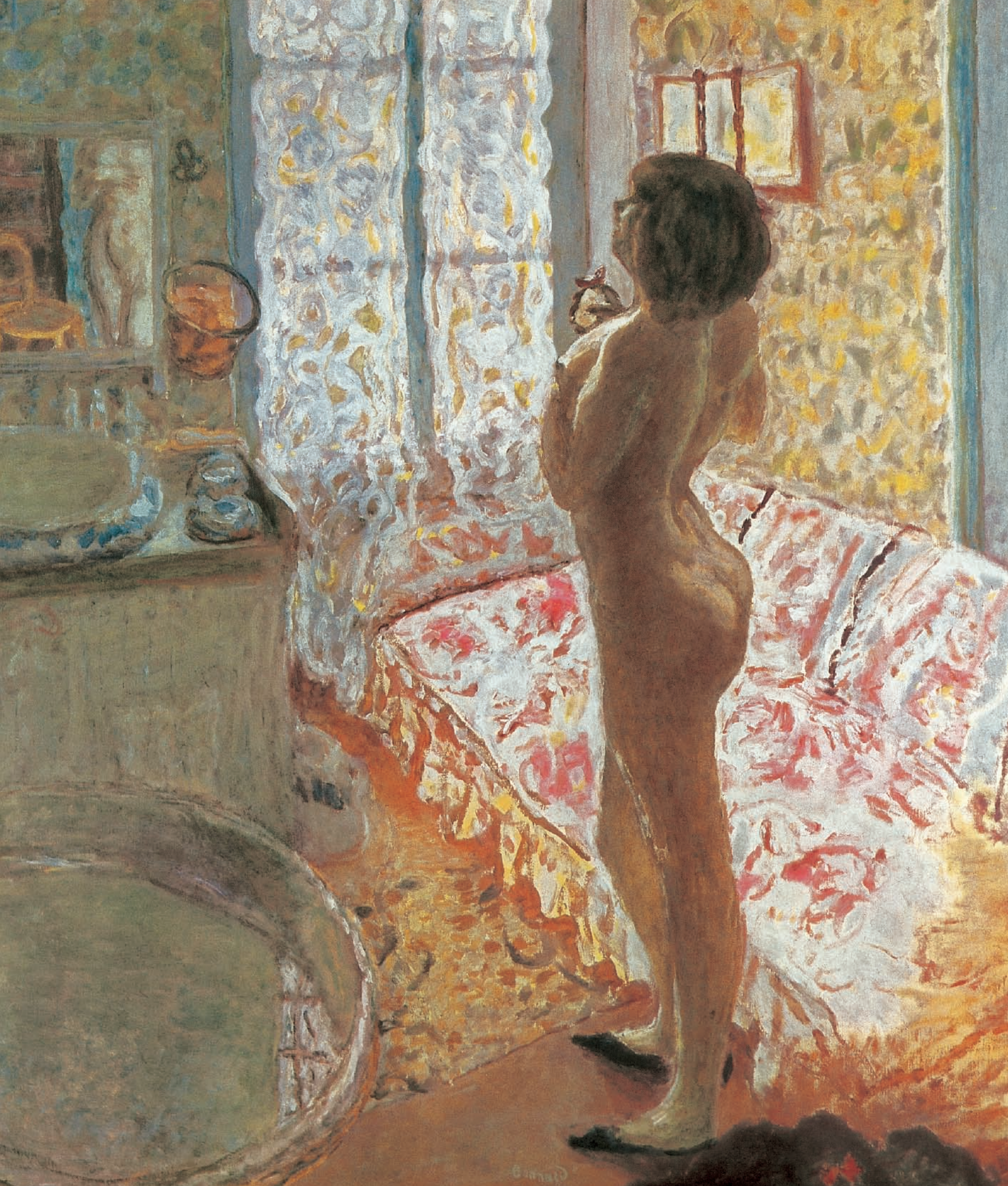
Impressionists. The puffed out cheeks of the faun playing the pipe is a delight. One does not immediately notice these little goat-legged creatures at the edge of the painting, but once one does, one cannot banish them from this convincingly real corner of the Ile-de-France. And this unpretentious yet endearing landscape seems alive with the gentle silvery sounds of the pipe. By introducing fauns into

106. **Pierre Bonnard**, *In the Bathroom*, 1907. Oil on board, 107 x 72 cm. Private collection, Lausanne.

his landscape, Bonnard endowed it with metaphorical overtones. A friend of the Symbolists, he used their poetical methods while at the same time gently mocking them. It is hard to decide what is more important in this picture, the humour or the joy at nature reawakening. It is this unity of poetic joy and gentle irony that makes the landscape of the countryside around Paris at the same time an embodiment of the mythical Golden Age.

The nature of Bonnard's relationship with Impressionism, a key factor in his art, reveals itself most vividly in the subjects he chose and in his compositions. The Parisian townscapes may serve as an illustration. In comparison with his early pictures of Paris, the urban scenes executed in 1911-12, representing one of the peaks in Bonnard's art, are remarkable for their more complex composition. They contain more human figures, more space and more light, and they are richer in colouring. These features place them close to the works of Monet, Pissarro and Renoir. An Impressionistic flavour is strongly felt in his city scenes *Morning in Paris* and *Evening in Paris*, a pair of works painted for Ivan Morozov and seemingly bearing all the marks of a casually observed scene. In fact, of course, this was not the case. Both pictures were painted from memory, as was Bonnard's usual practice. In these two townscapes Bonnard was particularly attentive to composition and in this respect, as before, he demonstrated a closer affinity to Degas than to Monet and Pissarro. Indeed, in his very conception of street scenes, Bonnard also followed Degas, or perhaps even Caillebotte, while Monet and Pissarro, the founding fathers of the Impressionistic townscape, were absorbed with a desire to show street life with its unceasing movement from a distance, and avoided close-up or even middle-ground views of pedestrians. Yet unlike Degas (*Place de la Concorde*, 1873, Hermitage) and still less like Caillebotte (*A Paris Street in the Rain*, 1877, Art Institute of Chicago), Bonnard does not focus on the human figures and avoids

107. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Nude Against the Light*, c. 1908. Oil on canvas, 124.5 x 109 cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.





depicting them in detail. The soft, subdued patches of colour affect the viewer before he has become aware of what this or that patch actually represents. Bonnard's wonderfully orchestrated colour arrangements are not arbitrary. In *Morning in Paris*, the blue and pink tones of the sky and the cool hues of the foreground are so true to life that they alone, even without the scurrying pedestrians and the coal-merchant's cart with its early-morning load, clearly indicate the time of day. But even after we realize the significance of the colour, that does not reduce its charm; quite the contrary, it is increased. The patches of colour do no more than "name" the objects depicted. They are sufficiently autonomous, and the beauty of their combinations could serve as a powerful justification for their independent existence.

At the same time, each masterly brushstroke and each patch of colour possesses a wonderfully keen and expressive force. The vagueness of Bonnard's painting does not reduce but intensifies that expressiveness. For example, the patch of colour representing a dog in *Morning in Paris* shows only its body and tail, but these details are enough to reveal the animal's behaviour with a striking liveliness and precision. In the same picture, the silhouette of the coal-merchant's donkey heavily and hurriedly moving its slipping legs may serve as another example. There is no animal painter of modern times who understood the character of animals better than Bonnard. With the alert eye of a master, Bonnard also catches a person's way of walking or behaving. The old flower-seller in *Evening in Paris* moves in a manner typical of her alone, unhurriedly measuring each step. The children fooling about in the street move as only children can.

The details of the picture are so arranged as to give an impression of the Parisian way of life. In *Morning in Paris* the artist depicts in the foreground people who have to rise early — the old coal merchant, a group of young girls

hurrying to work, a little boy loitering on his way to school. In *Evening in Paris* the movement of the figures is quite different. Here people are out for a leisurely stroll. In the first picture, Bonnard depicts a square, a junction of different streams of movement; in the second, a boulevard. In the first case, the artist needs an open space; in the second, a closed space. In the morning scene it is important to show the sunrise colours of the sky and the walls of houses catching the first rays of the sun; for the scene at dusk other details are necessary. "What is beautiful in nature," said Bonnard, "is not always beautiful in painting, especially in reduction. For example, the effects of evening and night."⁴³ They say that Félix Fénéon, the manager of the Bernheim Gallery, once casually remarked to Bonnard that his Parisian street scenes were a success, after which the artist stopped painting them.⁴⁴ This may have taken place in 1912, when the series of works commissioned by Morozov was on display for the first time at the gallery. Bonnard was always mistrustful of success; to his mind, it made an artist repeat himself. Whatever the truth of the matter, Bonnard's last picture of this kind, *Place Clichy*, (Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon) is dated 1912. It is a large painting which appears to be a sort of synthesis of the motifs in the Moscow works. The liveliness, the unassuming simplicity of the subject, an apparently casual composition which, however, always has a "framework" (Bonnard's word) and is well balanced, and the mobility of texture with each brushstroke vibrating in every patch of colour — all these elements are characteristic of an easel painting. It would seem from this that Bonnard had no special talent for monumental art, yet his large decorative panels are excellent. All the Nabis produced works in this field, but the most notable were by Bonnard, for his art is devoid of the deliberate solemnity nearly always present in monumental painting. Bonnard's most outstanding large work is undoubtedly the triptych entitled *Mediterranean*.

108. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Nude with Black Stockings*, c. 1900.
Oil on panel, 59 x 43 cm. Private collection.



Working on large paintings, Bonnard did not invent a new style. On the whole, his manner remained the same as in his small canvases. True, in these he used simpler, clearer compositions and the overall tonality changed under the influence of the southern light. The artist's sincerity, his deeply personal and poetic vision of reality and his unerring

109. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Man and Woman*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 115 x 72.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

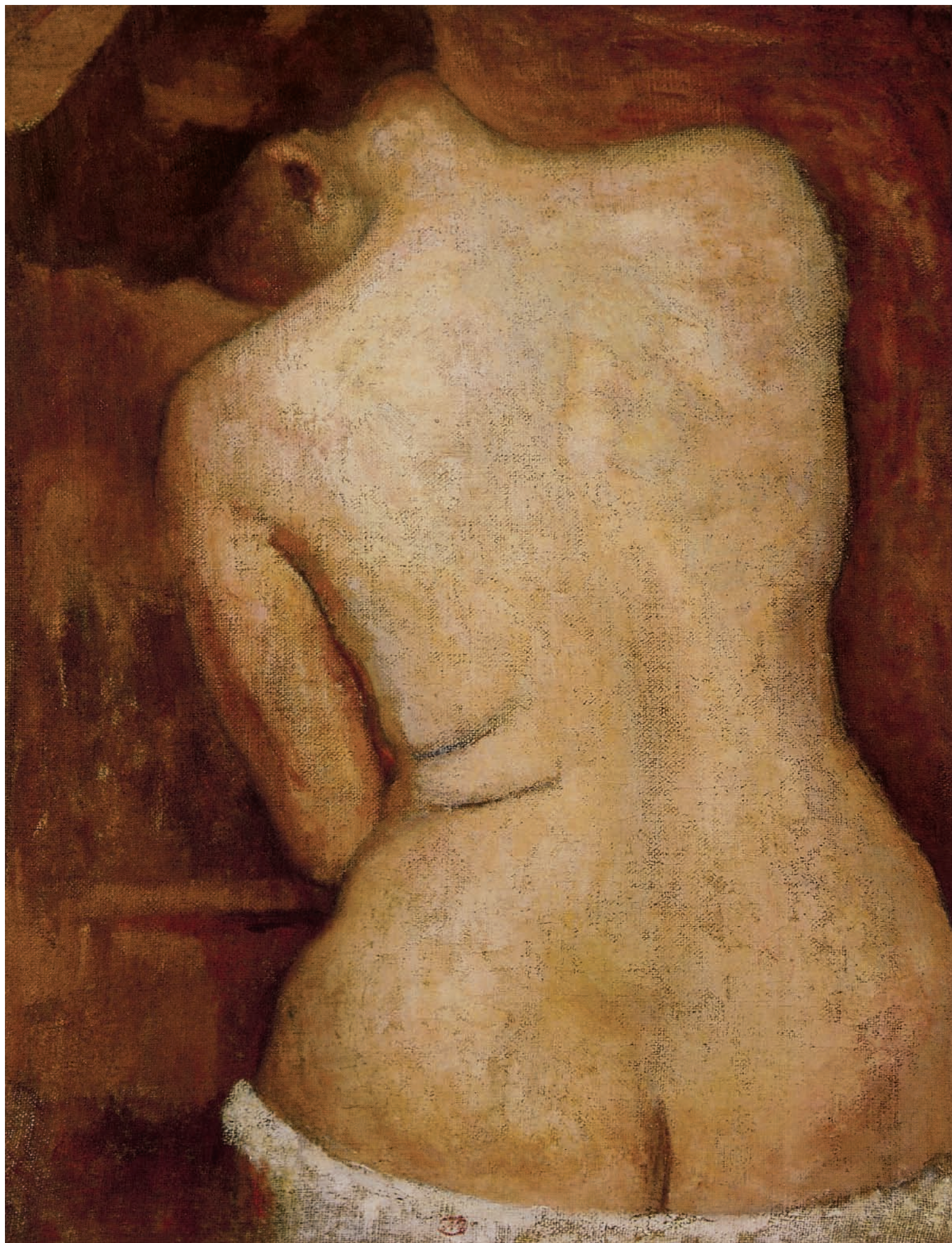
feeling for colour helped him to work on large surfaces with undiminished confidence. Displaying a close affinity to the elderly Monet with his water-lilies series and his great panels for the Orangerie, Bonnard left a noticeable mark in decorative painting, although the path thus mapped out was not followed by succeeding generations of monumental artists.

The *Mediterranean* triptych forms, in fact, one picture — a landscape on three sub-frames. At the same time, each canvas is compositionally complete. For this reason each panel requires space around it, “room to breathe”. Bonnard knew that the staircase in Morozov's mansion for which the triptych was intended had semi-columns, and he planned that they would act as spacers within the composition. The semi-columns served both as frames and as functional elements of the scene. The subject of the triptych is a garden with a view of the Mediterranean. The garden is not empty: the central panel features an amusing group of children playing and each of the side panels includes a young woman. Although all the human figures are placed in shadow, the triptych would lose a great deal without these gently graceful, typically Bonnardesque women and the funny, restless children. Yet, the landscape is more important here than the human figures, a landscape which is not wild and primordial but cultivated, a landscape produced by hundreds of years of European civilization nurtured by the Mediterranean.

A great deal of space in the garden is taken up by trees. Their theatrical and festive arabesques set the general, decorative tone of the pictures and create a feeling of luxuriant nature. In the background, which nevertheless seems somehow close to the viewer, subordinate to the rules of flat landscape painting, is the alluring blue of the Mediterranean, the birthplace of European civilization. A comparison with *View of Saint-Tropez* (1909, Hahnloser collection, Bern), the forerunner of the central panel, shows

110. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Indolence*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 96 x 106 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





that in the triptych Bonnard omitted the opening to the sea. This made the composition more tranquil and even majestic. It is not just a view, but an image of the Mediterranean. In this respect the triptych painted for Morozov represents a new stage in Bonnard's evolution, although the stylized treatment of the trees goes back to the artist's experiments in the 1890s.

When Morozov commissioned two more panels to complete the triptych, Bonnard returned to already familiar subjects: early spring and the middle of autumn. These two panels flanked the triptych that represented summer time, and thus formed a seasons-of-the-year ensemble. *Early Spring in the Countryside* and *Autumn, Fruit-Picking* are technically inferior to the triptych, but they complement it admirably. Though Bonnard had not visited Moscow, he knew the setting in Morozov's mansion where the works were to be hung. The triptych was to decorate the main staircase, extending its vista, and for that reason had to have additional depth. The two panels ordered later were to hang on the side walls. They are flatter and more restrained in colour, while the decorative treatment of the trees is reminiscent of ancient tapestries. The panels also display features linking them with oriental art. Clive Bell, an English art critic, once perspicaciously remarked that "Bonnard's pictures as a rule grow not as trees; they float as water-lilies. European pictures, as a rule, spring upwards, masonry-wise, from their foundation; the design of a picture by Bonnard, like that of many Chinese pictures and Persian textiles, seems to have been laid on the canvas as one might lay cautiously on dry grass some infinitely precious figured gauze."⁴⁵

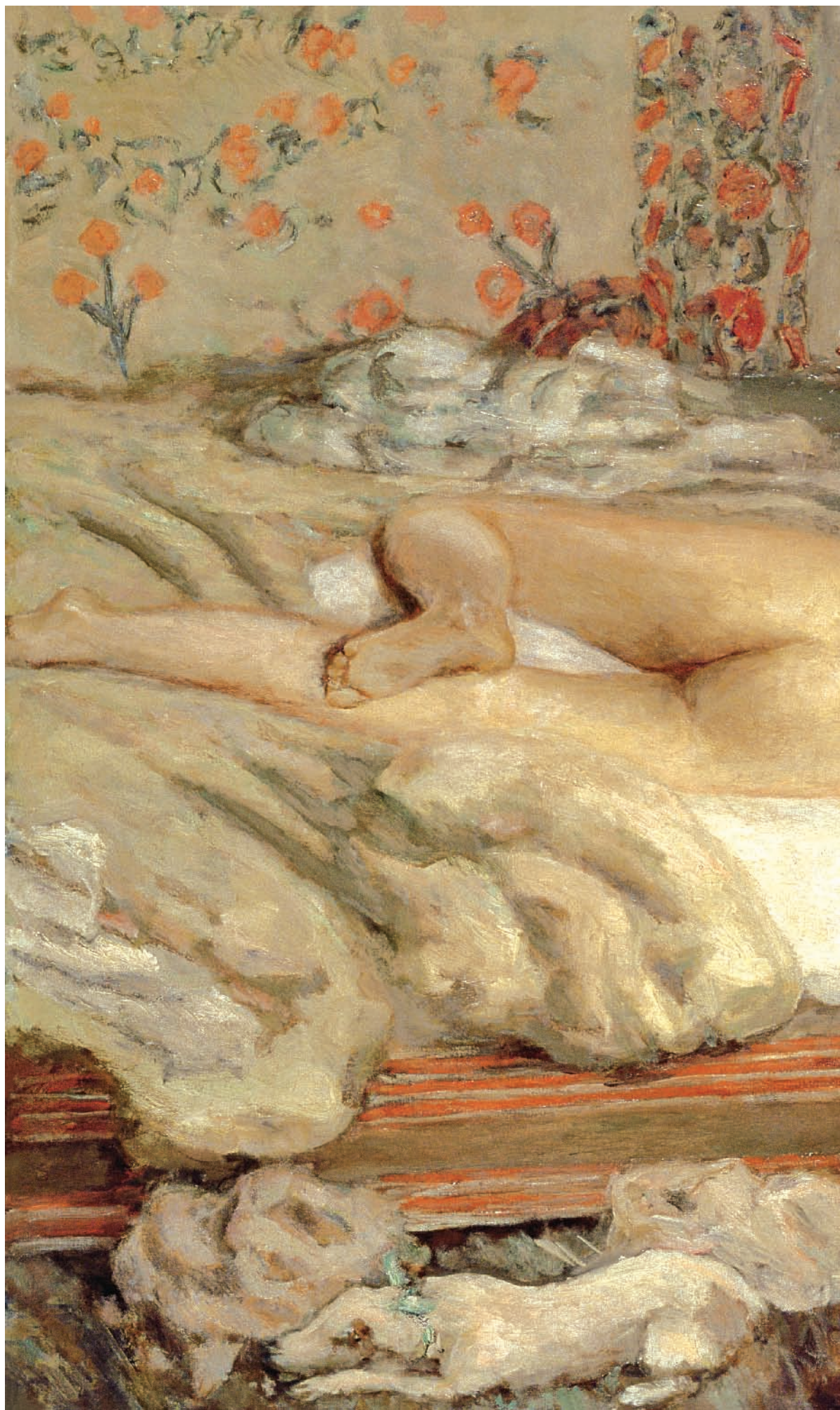
In the panels representing spring and autumn, Bonnard obviously depicted gardens in the north, a fact to which the preliminary sketches also testify. In another panel, *Summer*,

The Dance, painted in the same year and to a considerable extent related to Morozov's ensemble, Bonnard depicted a southern landscape. The artist admitted that he preferred the northern light, but to the viewer the difference between the north and the south is of secondary importance. Whatever the case, he sees first and foremost Bonnard's vision of nature and only after that a definite landscape in Saint-Tropez or Vernonnet. However decorative Bonnard's representation of nature may be, it never becomes a mere background subordinated to the human figures. The regally transformed world of vegetation is the embodiment of Bonnard's dream, his ideal, his joy, at times masked by a humorous and, at first glance flippant, irony. However, the beauty of nature in his paintings rejects dramatic or prosaic events, didactic subjects or subjects with a pathetic tinge. But it readily admits a group of children playing or women enjoying a chance to relax. Even the fruit-picking in the panel *Autumn* reminds one of a game rather than work.

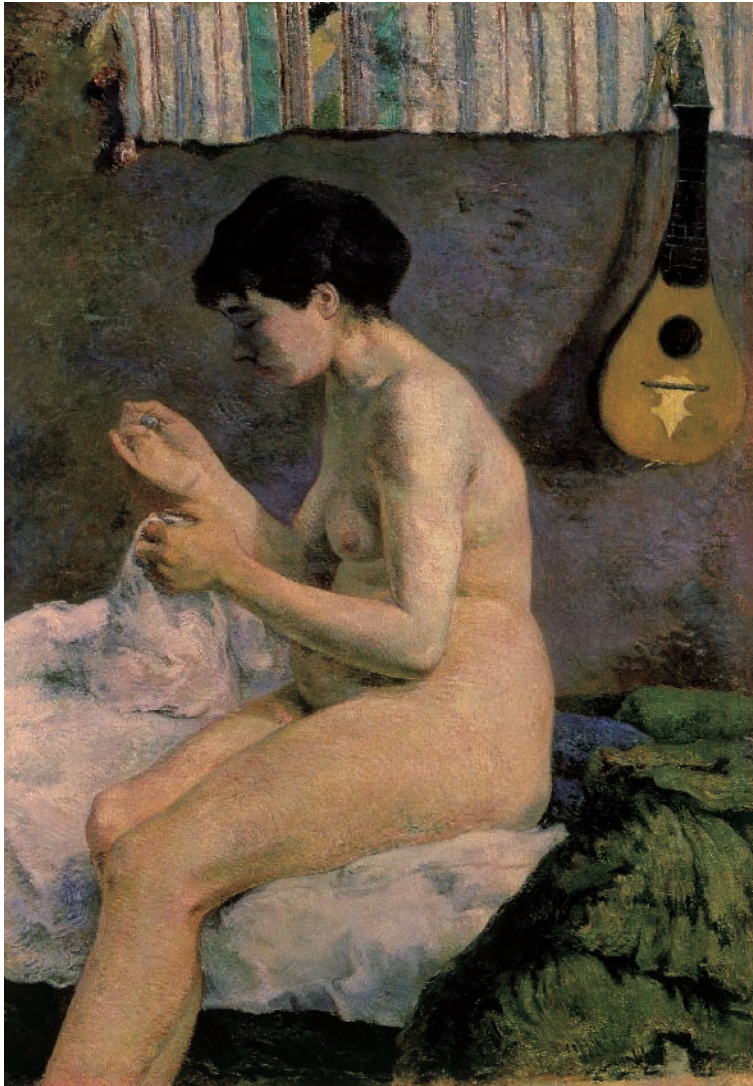
In Bonnard's pictures of nature in festive mood, only isolated features remind one of the real-world prototypes. That is not to say that the artist felt no need of any original for his decorative paintings. These wonderful states of nature were not invented, but observed. While painting his earthly paradise Bonnard, however, did not feel obliged to reproduce all the details of a real scene. Depicting the landscape of Provence in *Summer*, *The Dance*, he introduced into it without hesitation a usual motif of his — the games and pranks of his sister's children, which he loved watching and even joining in with. Of course, that did not take place in the south. The characters in the panel *Summer*, *The Dance* are not those depicted in the group portrait of the Terrasse family. They are imaginary, but they do make one think of their prototypes. Bonnard's fantasy, like that of any great artist, was founded on impressions from real life, and it is important to stress that on the whole these were happy,

111. **Aristide Maillol**, *Blonde Back*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 71 x 55.5 cm.

112. **Pierre Bonnard**, *The Siesta*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 109 x 132 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.







joyful impressions. In this respect Bonnard was a follower of Watteau, Fragonard and Renoir, and a fellow of his contemporaries Matisse and Dufy. Not only in his decorative panels, but also in his easel compositions depicting open-air scenes, Bonnard sacrificed the anthropocentrism deeply rooted in European art to the joyous, happy world he created. An excellent example of this is provided by the Moscow picture *Summer in Normandy*. Here, nothing has been invented. The work shows two women having a chat on

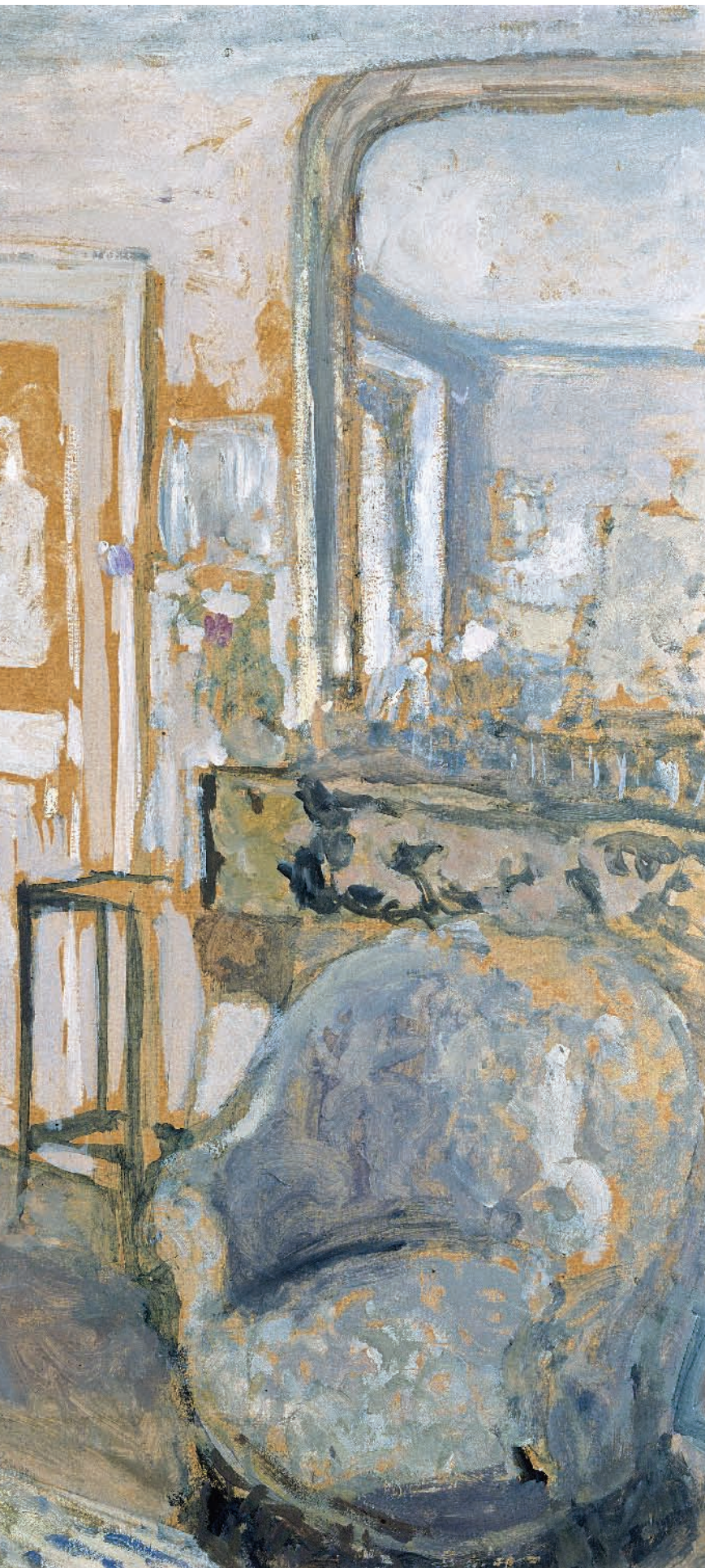
113. **Paul Gauguin**, *Woman Sewing*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 114.5 x 79.5 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

the terrace of the villa “Ma Roulotte” in Vernonnet. The one on the left is the artist’s wife. The dog, Ubu, always nearby, is looking up at them from below with an expectation typical of dogs. In the background, the Seine glistens behind the trees. Although the two women are in the foreground, one does not notice them at once. The viewer’s attention is attracted primarily to the garden and the fields in the background, since Marthe’s figure is placed in the shadow, while that of her friend, who is sitting in the sun, is masked by a green dress. But even when one notices the women, one perceives them as an integral part of this wonderful corner of nature. There is nothing in this picture of the role formerly played by landscape as a mere background for a human figure depicted in the foreground and thus inevitably dominant. The basis of the harmony at which Bonnard aimed was a happy coexistence of man and nature. “One morning, on his way from ‘Ma Roulotte’, Bonnard instinctively walked towards two men discussing something near an ancient poplar tree, a tree which played an important role in the surrounding landscape and which he always greeted with a friendly smile whenever he happened to pass by. It turned out that the two men, the owner of the land and a timber-merchant, were discussing felling the tree. They seemed to have come to an agreement. Digging into his pocket, Bonnard produced more notes than the buyer could ever have offered, and the tree was saved. With his dachshund at his heel, Bonnard walked happily away, feeling the astonishment of the two men behind his back. He walked away with a tight heart because the old poplar would continue to hold up that vital landscape.”⁴⁶ Today Bonnard’s popularity is on the rise. The public is becoming aware of the unique beauty of his paintings and of the wise warmth of the artist’s spirit. The delight Bonnard took in nature is perhaps appreciated all the more today, when we find ourselves confronted with ecological problems at every turn.

114. **Pierre Bonnard**, *Mirror in the Dressing Room*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 120 x 97 cm. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.







Édouard VUILLARD

(1868-1940)

By the beginning of the twentieth century the names of Bonnard and Vuillard were already firmly linked in the minds of those who appreciated new art. Even before that, there had been a considerable creative affinity between them, reinforced by a strong friendship. This bond was only broken by Vuillard's death, but their artistic paths, which at first ran side by side, diverged noticeably in the 1920s and 1930s. Vuillard's painting became somehow drier, more "natural", and quite often fell into repetition, especially in his society portraits. Perhaps sensing that something very important was slipping away from him, he began to tackle a broader range of themes. He might paint not only a game of cards but also, say, a medical scene, something inconceivable for Bonnard. Compared to Bonnard he was always slightly lacking in emotional warmth, even in the early days when in terms of artistry he was the equal of his friend.

As a ten-year-old at the Lycée Condorcet, Vuillard made friends with Roussel, Denis and Lugné-Poë. Supposedly it was Roussel who persuaded the young Édouard to enter the École des Beaux-Arts. His first works are signed *Vuillard*,

115. Édouard Vuillard, *Model in a Blue Dress*.
Oil and tempera, 58.4 x 78.7 cm.
Private collection.

116. Édouard Vuillard, *In the Room*, 1903. Oil on cardboard, 50 x 77 cm.
The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.







élève de M. Gérôme, but they already display distinct maturity and steer clear of the temptations of academic painting and the portrayal of pleasant, engaging scenes which the celebrated *maître* himself practised. Like all the Nabis, Vuillard was very well-read. He was fond of Baudelaire, Giraudoux and Valéry, and adored Mallarmé, who gave the artist a first edition of his *Divagations* and wanted him, rather than anyone else, to illustrate his *Hérodiade*. Vuillard took an interest in many things, but his own way of life was steady and uneventful. After losing his father fairly early, he continued to live with his mother and never married. Vuillard's art tends towards calm, but after first meeting him, the perspicacious Signac saw him as "a clever, intelligent boy, a highly-strung searching artist".

"He showed me all his works from different periods, the searches he had gone through. His little sketches of interiors have a good deal of charm. He has a splendid understanding of the voices of things. His pictures reveal a fine painter. In their dull colour scheme there is always a flash of some bright colour establishing harmony in the piece. The contrast of tones, the skilfully arranged *chiaroscuro* balance out the different colours which, for all their dullness, are always refined, almost morbidly so."⁴⁷ Signac made that entry in his diary on 16 February 1898.

Within days, on 19 February, Vuillard wrote in a letter to Maurice Denis something we might consider his credo: "I have a fear or more precisely an awful terror of those commonly-held ideas which I have not reached myself. It's not that I deny their value, just that I would prefer humiliation to aping understanding."⁴⁸ Having no trust in accepted truths and fashionable theories, Vuillard only acknowledged an idea when it had matured within himself.

117. **Édouard Vuillard**, *Embroidery*, 1895-1896. Oil on canvas, 177.7 x 65.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

118. **Édouard Vuillard**, *At the Window (Interior: Woman at the Window)*, 1907-1908. Oil on cardboard, 40.2 x 33 cm. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.







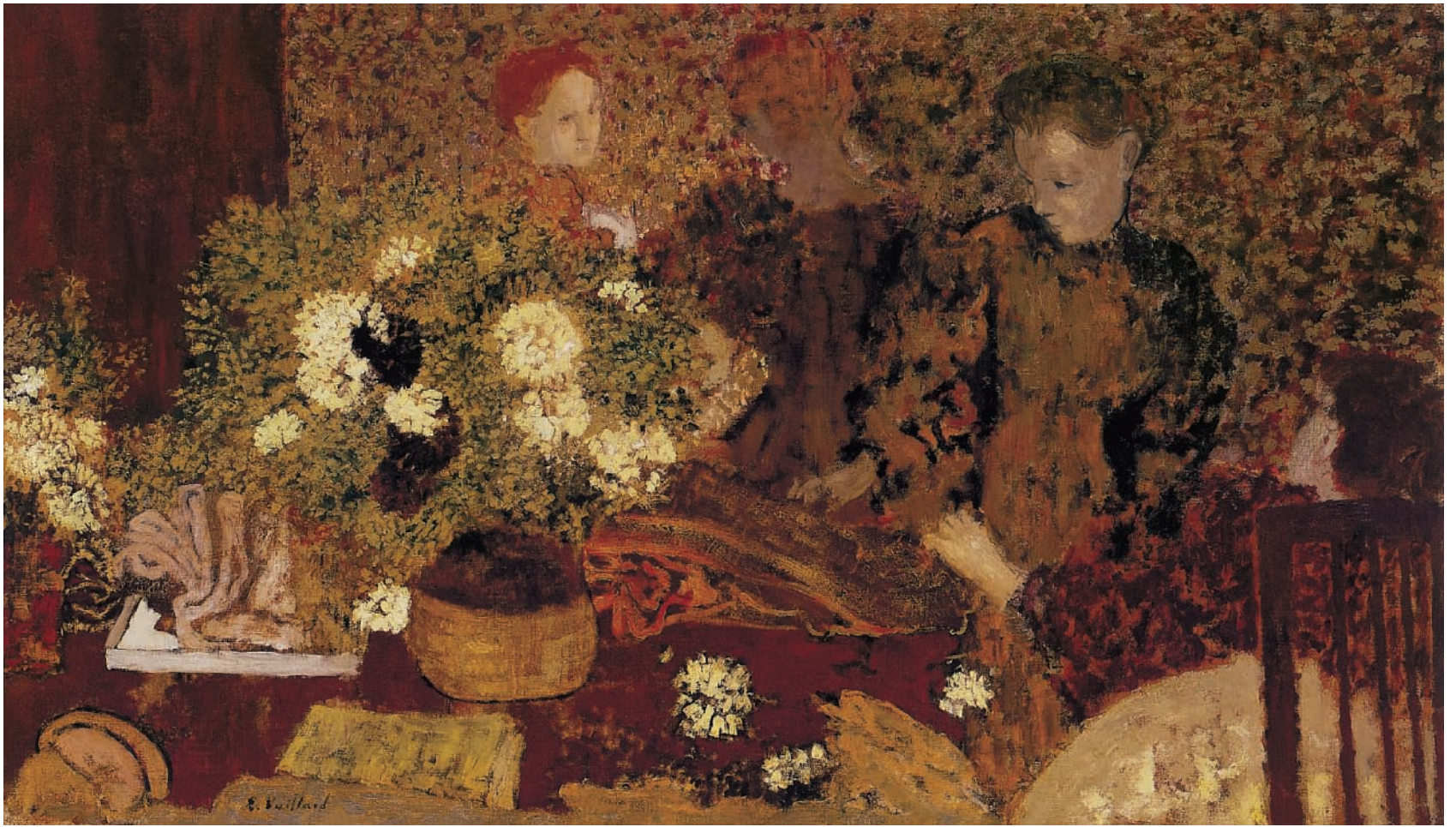
In the same letter he also wrote that if he derived joy from his work it was because he had within him an idea in which he believed. But he never proclaimed his ideas. Like Bonnard, he had a dislike of publicity and said on several occasions, “Silence protects me.”⁴⁹

Somewhat condescendingly calling Vuillard a “boy” (he was in fact already about thirty), Signac noted “searches” and “periods” and was undoubtedly surprised at the metamorphoses in the other’s work. By the end of the century Vuillard had indeed changed his artistic manner more than once – not, of course, simply following fashion, but following the dictates of his own inner development. His early still lifes exude admiration for Chardin. The Louvre, already familiar from frequent childhood visits, strengthened Vuillard in his love of Rembrandt, Lesueur and Prud’hon. Gauguin’s teaching, which came to him through *The Talisman*, found in Vuillard a more committed follower than Sérusier himself. The Nabis’ desire to paint “icons” took an unexpected turn in the small paintings of 1890-91, which were put together from a few small areas of

colour that were completely flat and very bright. Their boldness anticipates Fauvism. Immediately afterwards Vuillard returned to calmer colours and abandoned absolute flatness without, however, resorting to the modelling devices used by the Old Masters. His painting became an ornamental pattern with a very complex rhythm. Impressions of Japanese woodcuts or old French *mille-fleurs* suggest themselves as possible inspirations, but the most probable source of all was contemporary cheap fabrics. At home, and in the small dressmaker’s studio which Vuillard’s mother ran after her husband’s death in order to feed the family, the future artist was surrounded from an early age by the unusual patterns and combinations of colours presented by jumbled off-cuts of fabric. Moreover, Vuillard’s mother’s brother and father were both fabric designers. Vuillard did not, however, follow their example. He felt himself to be a painter, and fabrics for him were only supplementary material, sometimes suggesting a new arabesque, sometimes becoming an object for depiction in its own right. There are paintings in which fabrics emerge as characters on par with the human figures. Vuillard would paint his mother and

119. Édouard Vuillard, *Cipa Listening to Misia at the Piano*, 1897-1898. Oil on cardboard, 63.5 x 56 cm. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

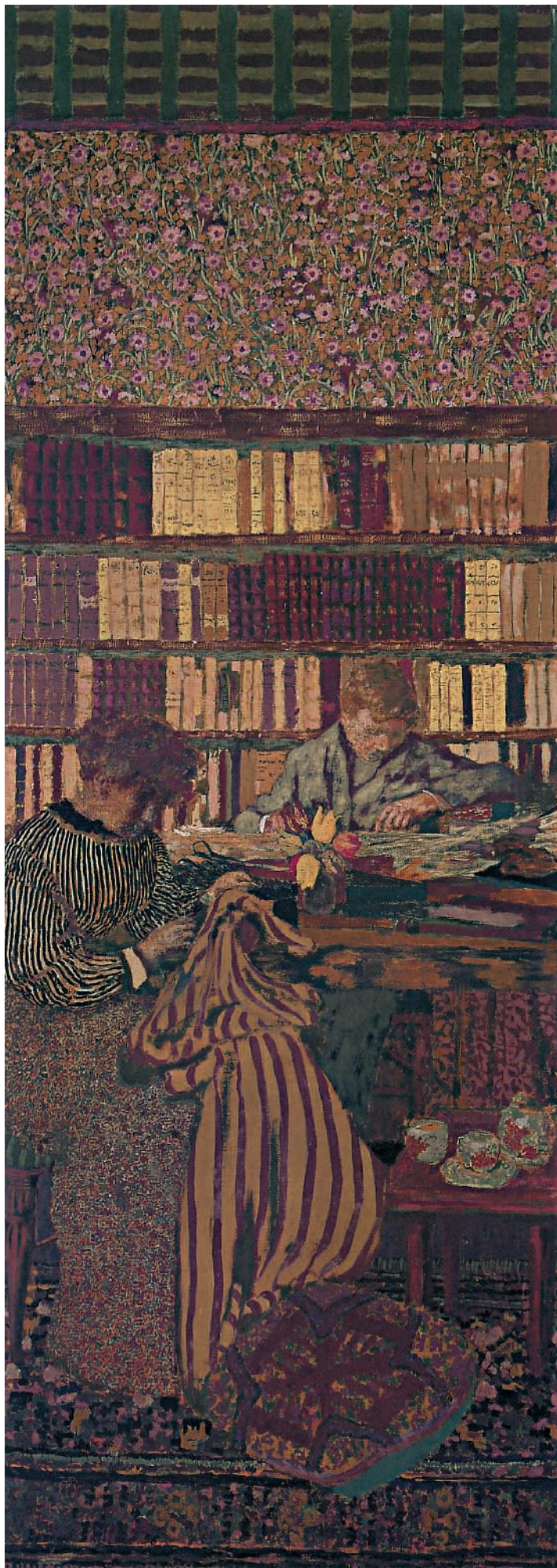
120. Édouard Vuillard, *Album*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 67.9 x 204.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



121. Édouard Vuillard, *Stoneware Vase or Conversation*.
65.5 x 114.5 cm. Private collection.



122. Édouard Vuillard, *Vanity Table*. Oil on canvas, 65 x 116 cm.
Private collection.



sister relaxing or performing their laborious work, and would present a homely breakfast or simply an interior. His painting is consciously intimate, something encouraged by the choice of themes. As far back as 1892 Albert Aurier, the ardent advocate of the work of Van Gogh and Gauguin and considered the leading theoretician of the new painting, called Vuillard an “*intimiste verlainien*”.⁵⁰ At the same time Gustave Geffroy, in a review of an exhibition at Le Barque de Bouteville’s, pointed out the creative affinity between Bonnard and Vuillard, stressing the way in which they masterfully handled the smallest gradations of colour capable of delighting the eye. “[They] possess a gift, of course, for nuances and the play of lines, symmetrical and disorderly, combining and diverging them with fascinating, exquisite taste for decorative painting.”⁵¹

The style which Geffroy described is one which Vuillard maintained for a long time. It did go through modifications, though, and the artist concurrently employed another style marked by fairly strict geometrics and simplifications. The former is to be seen in his picture *In the Garden* (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts) and paintings in both Moscow and St. Petersburg depicting domestic interiors, the latter represented by *Children* (Hermitage). An example of the combination of the two styles is found in the small work *On the Sofa*, now in Moscow.

This ratio of works, with only one landscape to a number of interiors, reflects an important peculiarity of Vuillard’s art: indoor scenes were more attractive to him than the open spaces of landscape. This preference for interiors made Vuillard a greater intimist than Bonnard. His landscapes, too, were usually to a greater or lesser degree intimate pieces.

123. Édouard Vuillard, *The Worktable or Dressmaking*, 1896. Distemper on canvas, 210 x 75 cm. Petit Palais – Musée des beaux-arts de la ville de Paris, Paris.

124. Édouard Vuillard, *The Piano*, 1896. Distemper on canvas, 210 x 75 cm. Petit Palais – Musée des beaux-arts de la ville de Paris, Paris.





125. **Édouard Vuillard**, *In a Room*, 1899. Oil on cardboard pasted on panel, 52 x 79 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

126. **Édouard Vuillard**, *Children*, 1908-1909. Tempera on paper glued on canvas, 84.5 x 77.7 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



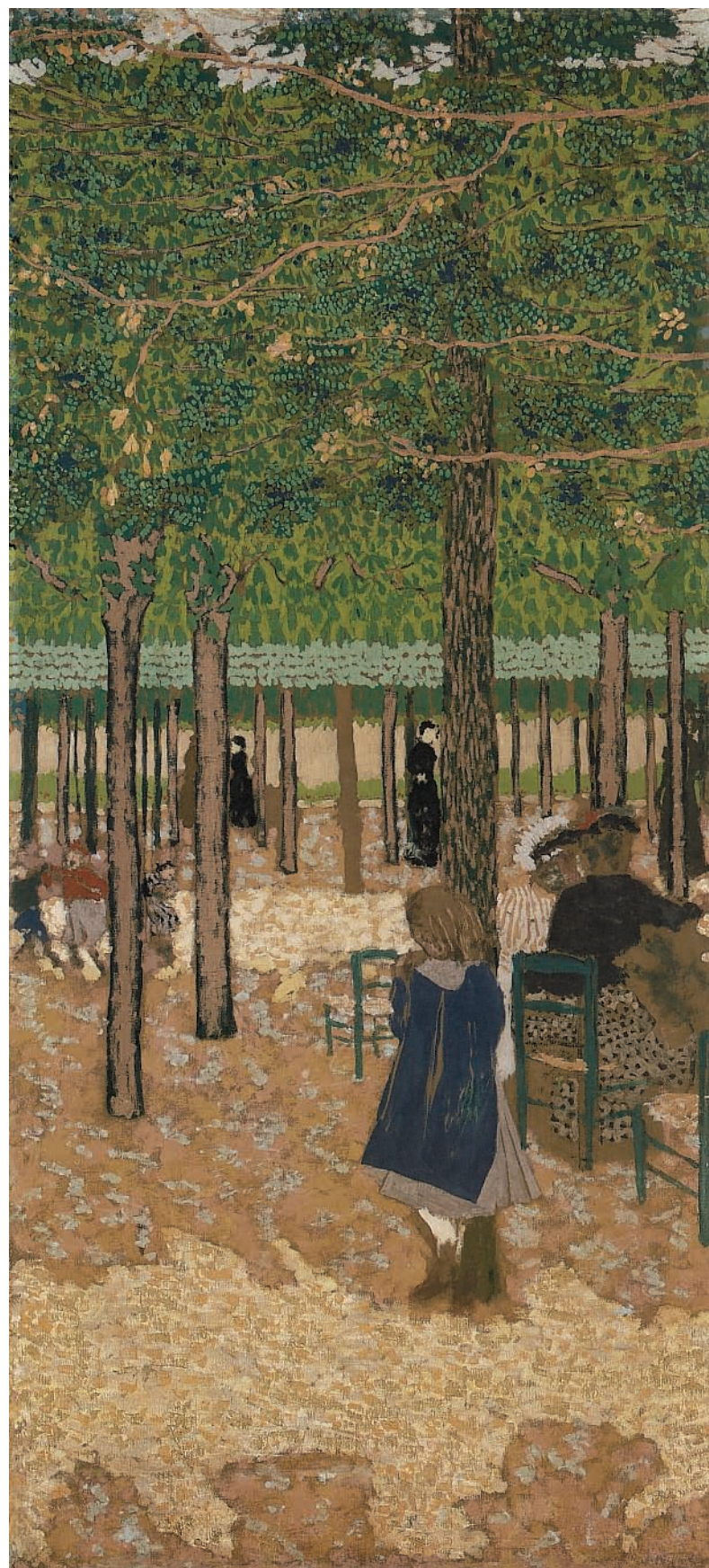


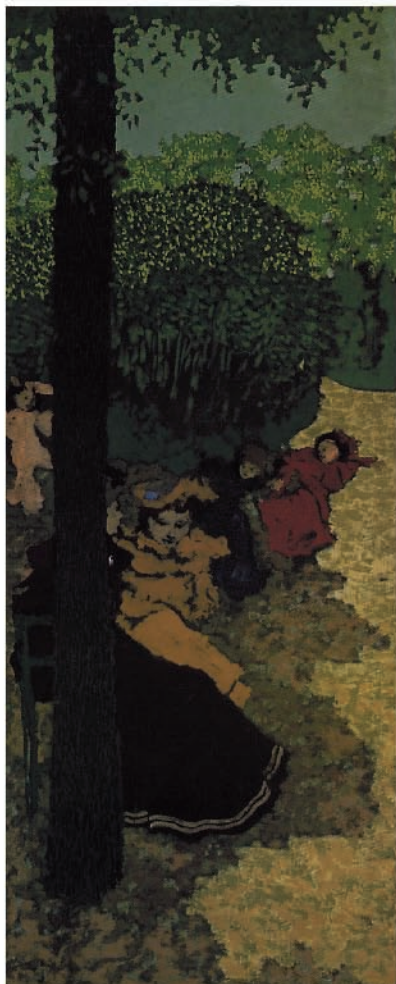
“His subjects,” the artist’s biographer Jacques Salomon wrote, “were for a long period his room, his window and the view from his window: the yard or garden. [...] He would not have put on his boots to go and paint snow, he would have gazed at it from his room, looking out. As for his portraits, he catches his models in their own homes in accustomed surroundings.”⁵² What makes the intimism of a Vuillard landscape? Partly the role played by his characters. Placed in the centre of *In the Garden* are two ladies seated comfortably round a garden table. Their conversation seems unhurried and routine, perhaps about knitting or domestic chores. Yet these female figures do not dominate the composition. The intimate effect of the picture is due to the general vagueness of details, the softness of colouring, the subdued opaque texture and the limited space, with the landscape reduced to the lawn instead of stretching to infinity and no room whatever left for the sky. This type of composition can be traced back to early Impressionism, or rather to Claude Monet (*Women in the Garden*, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, and *Lady in the Garden*, Hermitage, St. Petersburg; both 1867). In those pictures, with an emphasis on pictorial effect, the subject matter is already losing its significance. Three decades later Van Gogh and Gauguin, developing Monet’s motifs while working side by side in Arles, painted, respectively, *Reminiscence of the Garden at Etten* (Hermitage, St. Petersburg) and *In the Garden of the Aries Hospital* (Art Institute of Chicago). Vuillard might have seen one of these pictures, perhaps both. Each employs the Japanese type of design, avoiding depth, with the artist viewing the scene from above and placing the line of the horizon beyond the top of the composition. The difference, however, is more noticeable than the similarity. To Van Gogh and Gauguin, human presence is of paramount importance, so the female figures are clear-cut and large-scale. The powerful emotional message is paralleled by the effective picturesque qualities. Proceeding from Seurat’s and

127. Édouard Vuillard, *Public Gardens – First Steps*, 1894. Distemper on canvas, 213.4 x 68.5 cm. Private collection, United States.

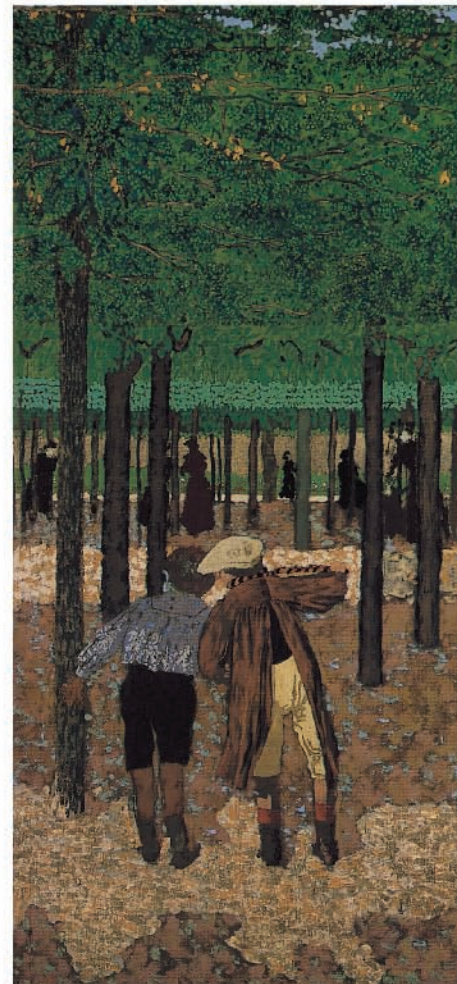
Signac's methods, Van Gogh made his paintings extremely "tense" by applying large divided strokes of contrasting colours. Vuillard and his fellow artists did not like smooth surfaces either; nevertheless, Vuillard's divided strokes create an altogether different impression. His use of the cardboard's brownish colour, with the ground not completely covered by paint (a technique favoured by the Nabis as well as Toulouse-Lautrec), contributes not only to the effective economy of means, but also to a more subdued and softened pictorial quality. The painting is notable for its decorativeness. It is evident that Vuillard did not aim to create an illusion of reality. The decorative quality of the picture is of a specific type reminding us that the artist worked as a stage designer. Vuillard shared, at least in the 1890s, the idea of the Nabis (and those artists who grouped round the *Revue Blanche*) that the main purpose of painting was to produce monumental works. Some time later, Octave Mirbeau remarked in his preface to the sale catalogue of Thadée Natanson's collection, which included twenty-six paintings by Vuillard, "His magic needs walls."⁵³ Vuillard agreed with Lesueur, his favourite fellow artist, that monumental painting was the supreme art form, yet the best of his own work was easel painting, suggestive though it is of his decorative panels and stage designs. The very early painting by Vuillard called *On the Sofa* (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow) is marked with a rare artistic daring. It consists of two seemingly very different parts, the one on the right dominated by white and devoid of pictorial details, for it merely features a door and a wall, and the one on the left a juxtaposition of various pure colours and ornaments. It is remarkable that the two parts, however different, seem to belong together. All the details are well balanced, a quality which is especially important in paintings of interiors. The title *On the Sofa* is quite appropriate, as that piece of furniture is more significant than the woman reclining on it, who seems no more than a feature of the interior.

128. Édouard Vuillard, *Public Gardens – Under the Trees*, 1894. Distemper on fabric, 214.2 x 96.3 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.





129. Édouard Vuillard, *Public Gardens*, 1894. Glue tempera on canvas, 214.5 x 88 cm; 214.5 x 92 cm; 213.5 x 73 cm; 213.5 x 154 cm; 214 x 81 cm; 214.3 x 97.9 cm; 214 x 98 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





The human figures in Vuillard's painting behave with an extreme calmness. The woman in *On the Sofa* is asleep, the family in *In the Room* engrossed in reading. The pleasures of the home, the unhurried domestic round — that is what Vuillard's art dealt with. The painter would not highlight the occupations pursued by his characters. The design requires the models to strike a note of vitality, and they are always well-matched to the interior decoration. Only occasionally are they treated as individuals. They are, as it were, resultant forces in the system of colour patches and consequently they ultimately serve as colour patches, too. The human figures are inseparable from their surroundings, sometimes to the point of merging with the background. Vuillard had the subtle intuition of a colourist, which led him to discover an abundance of artistic resources where they had formerly remained neglected: in the regular and simple routine, in the details of everyday life.

At times Vuillard might seem to be unthinkingly registering whatever caught his eye, unruffled by the ungainly or the unsightly, such as the black cast-iron stove and flue of *In the Room*.

No detail is omitted here, and a closer look at the painting reveals not only the stove, tables and chairs, but also a number of minor objects, like the vases and the waste-paper basket. The viewer is unaware that the basket is "inelegant", because the material quality of things is erased and completely dominated by the pictorial pattern. The objects seem to dissolve, turning into patches of subdued colour, yet still they are there. Vuillard was second to none at grasping the beauty of soft tints, always immaculately suited to his peaceful interiors.

Like all the Nabis, Vuillard attached immense importance to colour effects. Both Vuillard and Bonnard managed to use

them to enhance the intimate mood of a picture. Their contemporaries already detected the similarity between their gentle colour palettes and the music of Debussy. Their awareness of fleeting nuances and waning undertints combined the Impressionist commitment to real subject-matter and the craving for the mysterious and the indefinite, which amounted to the most outstanding feature of art at the turn of the century. The latter tendency found its ultimate expression in Symbolism, but it influenced even those artists who were not involved in this trend. For all the softness and delicacy of his art, Vuillard never disregarded the structure of his compositions, and this is something which distinguished him from the rest of the Nabis. Both *In the Room* and *Children* display a framework formed by bringing together the straight lines of the buildings and pieces of furniture.

The viewpoint selected in *Children* is such that a geometric pattern is formed by the screen, balcony, door and carpet, which links the patches of colour together. This is done so unobtrusively that the artist's concern for the structure of his composition remains unnoticeable. Compared with *In the Room*, encumbered with objects to an almost psychopathic degree, *Children* reveals another aspect of Vuillard the painter: "a gourmet turned ascetic," as Jacques Emile Blanche very aptly remarked.⁵⁴ Here Vuillard makes bold use of empty spaces, relying on them to strengthen the whole composition. The pale patch of the floor takes up about a third of the canvas and nearly all of the foreground. The contrast between the empty light surfaces and the richly-tinted and colourful details endows the painting with an inner significance. The artist did not have to resort to an unusual or exotic theme to achieve a rich decorative effect. His subject-matter was always at hand: mainly the lives of his nearest and dearest.

130. Édouard Vuillard, *Place St.-Augustin*, 1912-1913. Distemper on paper, mounted on canvas, 156 x 193 cm. Private collection, London.



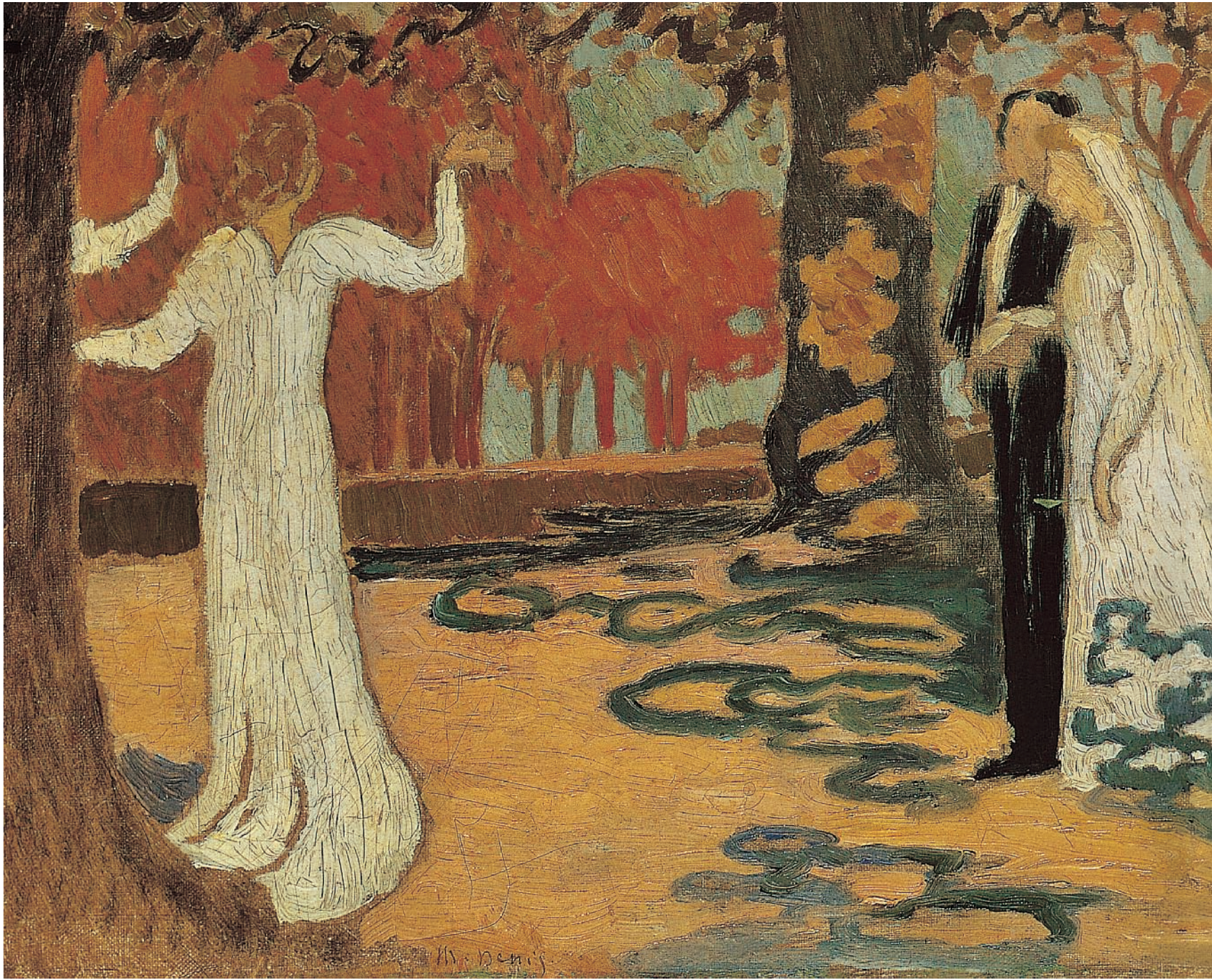
Maurice DENIS (1870-1943)



Denis was born in Granville, where his parents had fled from the Franco-Prussian War. His boyhood and adolescence were spent at his parents' home at Saint-Germain-en-Laye and also in Paris. In the course of his numerous travels Denis frequently visited Italy, for he held the art of that country in great esteem. He attended the Lycée Condorcet, which laid the foundations for his extraordinary breadth of knowledge and his future artistic associations.

As a boy Denis was ambitious. One of the first entries in his diary, which he kept till the end of his life, was a proud mention of the fact that he had won second prize for French, first prize for history and second for drawing. He was not yet 14 years old. Subsequently he was to win many more honours, including membership in the Académie. His personality not being very strong, he was incapable of becoming a leader. Verkade remarked after the Nabis had formed a group, "He was like a girl tied to her mother's apron-strings."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he was full of vitality. It was he who helped Sérusier, at the Académie Julian, to bring

131. Maurice Denis, *April*. Oil on canvas. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



132. Maurice Denis, *Wedding Procession*, c. 1892.
Oil on canvas, 26 x 63 cm. The State Hermitage Museum,
St. Petersburg.



together a group of students sharing the same ideas. Eventually he became one of the organizers of the Salon d'Automne. He always wished to play a prominent part in the artistic life of Paris, not only as a painter, but also as art critic, theorist, instructor and even preacher.

Denis was profoundly pious from childhood. He wrote in his diary in May 1885, "Yes, I must become a Christian painter and eulogize all the wonders of Christianity; I feel that this is necessary."⁵⁶

His quest to combine art and religion, which became apparent during his Nabis period, eventually and logically resulted in his setting up the Ateliers d'Art Sacré in 1919 and joining the Franciscan order.

However, Denis was too much of an artist to remain merely a minister of religion at such a time as the late nineteenth century. For it was he who, at the age of twenty, coined the statement that first appeared in the journal *Art et Critique* under the pen-name of Pierre Louis which was to be echoed by avant-garde artists in the decades that followed: "A picture — before being a war horse, a female nude, or some anecdote — is essentially a flat surface covered with paints in a particular order."⁵⁷ This statement, slightly altered, came to express the aesthetic programme of Symbolism: "... the sounds, colours and words are wonderfully expressive regardless of any representation; indeed, regardless of the actual meaning of the words."⁵⁸

In 1901 Denis exhibited a large canvas called *Homage to Cézanne* at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts (1900, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which could be regarded as a manifesto of the new art. It was a full-length group portrait of himself, Redon, Sérusier, Bonnard, Roussel, Vuillard and Vollard standing round a still life by the then little-known

artist. The Nabis were enthusiastic admirers of Cézanne, and Denis was among his first advocates and expounders, although his own art owes little to Cézanne. He was much closer to Gauguin, not only when he was first impressed by his *Talisman*, but also years later. Incidentally, the Cézanne still life on the easel in the *Homage* belonged to Gauguin, a fact that only those "in the know" were aware of.

It is only natural that by smoothing away the harshness present in the art of Cézanne and Gauguin, Denis should have gained fame quickly, while the other two did not achieve real recognition during their lifetimes. Yet this is not to say that Denis practised such artistic methods with the sole purpose of becoming successful. In the first place, there were shorter and safer ways to early fame by becoming an academic painter; secondly, such qualities as softness, refinement and prettiness were innate in Denis's character and passed on to his art. It seems probable that Denis would have arrived at a style of his own even without Gauguin's influence, although it might have come somewhat later and with some slight differences. Even before he became acquainted with Gauguin's art, Denis was strongly attracted by simplified forms, soft decorative effects and lofty themes. When visiting the Puvis de Chavannes exhibition, the 17-year-old Denis was enchanted by the "wonderful, quiet and simple decorative quality of his pictures and by their compositions producing a delightful and mysterious effect on the soul."⁵⁹ Puvis de Chavannes, Gauguin and Early Renaissance Italian masters led Denis to think that "synthesizing is not just simplifying or eliminating some details of the object; but simplifying means making things clearer, briefer, more orderly, subordinating the details to a single dominant rhythmical pattern, making sacrifices, revealing dependence, coming to generalisations."⁶⁰ From a fascination with Puvis de Chavannes and Gauguin, Denis went on to study the art of Poussin, Raphael and Fra

133. **Maurice Denis**, *Homage to Cézanne*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 180 x 240 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





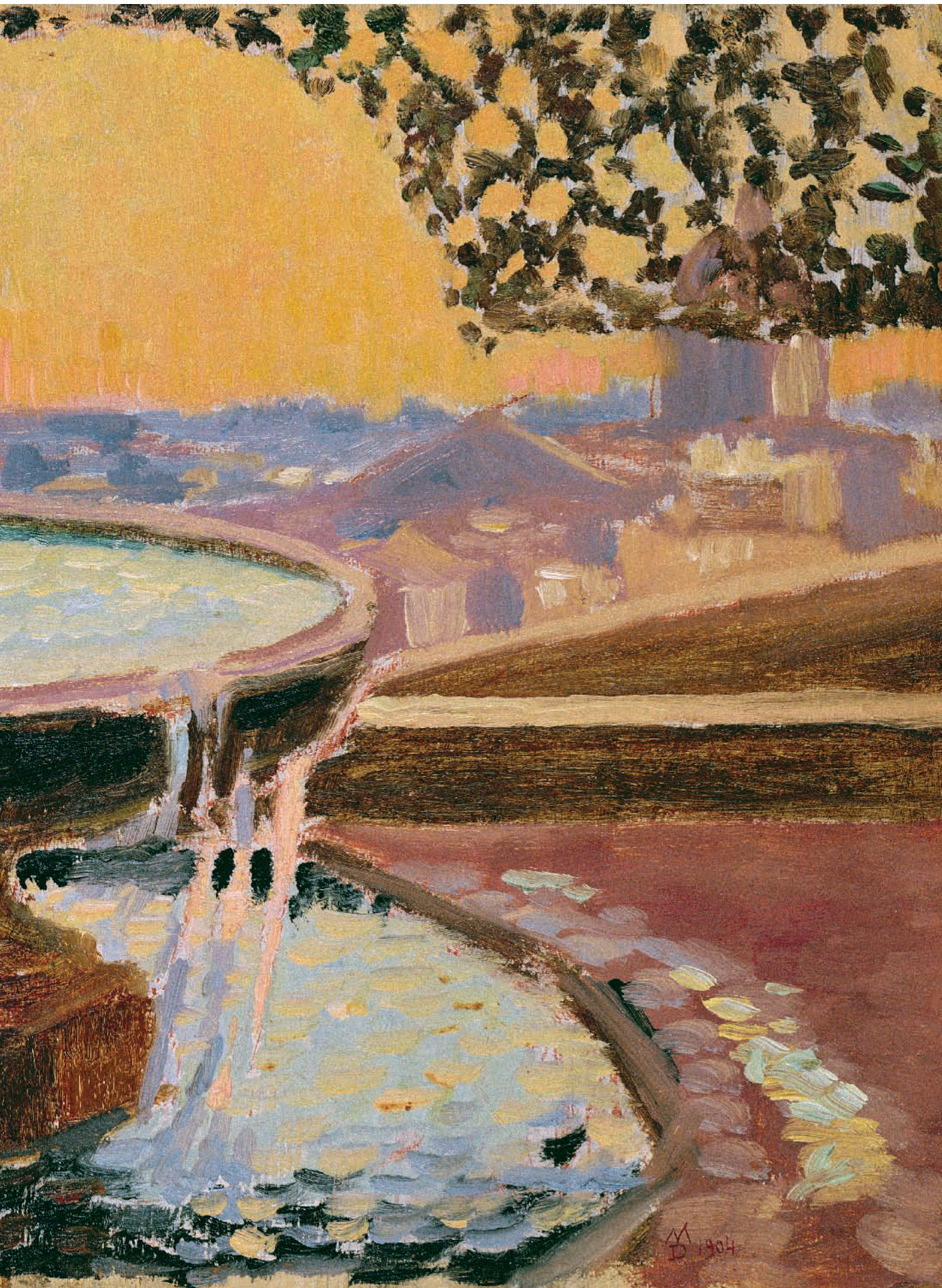
134. Pierre Bonnard, *Behind the Fence*, 1895. Oil on cardboard, 31 x 35 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

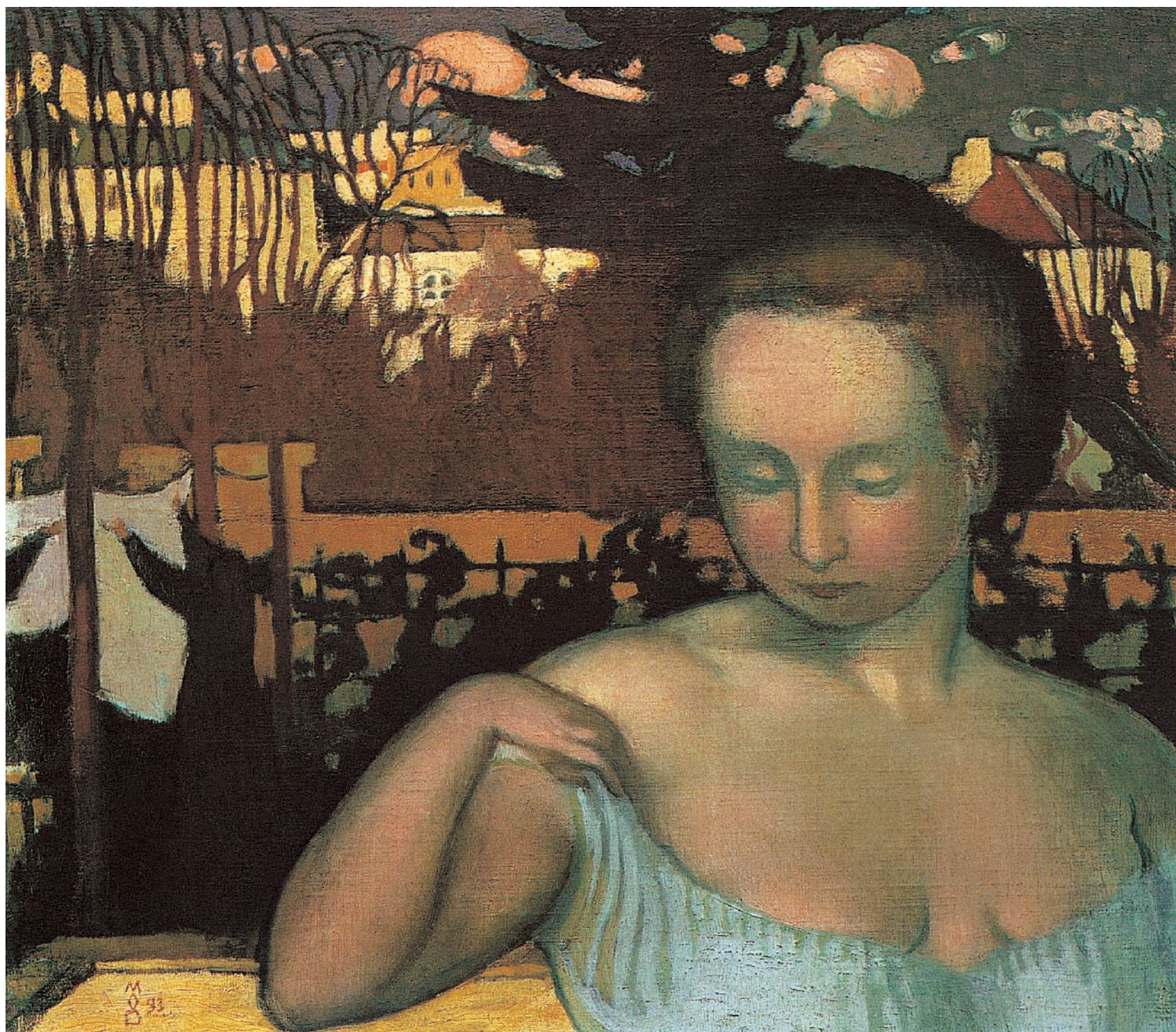


135. **Maurice Denis**, *The Encounter*, c. 1892. Oil on cardboard, 37.5 x 33 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

136. **Maurice Denis**, *Fountain at the Villa Medici*.
Oil on cardboard, 27.7 cm x 37 cm.
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis.







Angelico. He departed from the original simplicity of form, without noticing himself that it amounted to sharing the views of academicism. These changes, however, did not become apparent until the early years of the twentieth century. The 1890s were a distinct stage in Denis's career, when his painting was sincere and gently poetic, marked by a quiet elegance of style entirely his own. Only occasionally did his taste fail him at that time, something that cannot be said of the 1900s nor especially of the 1910s to 1930s. At the turn of the century, Denis's religious experience made him look back on the past as a time of still unshaken faith, an attitude shared by many artists and strengthened by the revival of religion in Europe, brought about by the crisis of Positivism.

In turning to biblical subjects such as *The Visitation* and *Martha and Mary*, Denis was dealing with exceptionally enduring iconographic traditions. But at a time when any kind of art was expected to be imaginative and to demonstrate new solutions, Denis could not confine himself to an accustomed compositional scheme. It was a great challenge to give biblical subjects a new treatment; it was a still greater challenge to make this treatment simple and natural. Denis achieved this by making use of gently outlined forms, subtle rhythmic patterns and a skilled choice of the details of the setting. It was in such biblical paintings as *Martha and Mary* that Denis's Neo-Traditionalism attained its finest expression.

A deep-rooted tradition of portrait painting is violated in *Martha and Mary* in that the figures in the foreground are more vague than the landscape in the background. Denis first used this device in his lithographs and, subsequently, it found its way into his paintings. The intention was to emphasize the religious context. The overall mood of the canvas, the obscuring of details, all the more noticeable and

deliberate because they pertain to the images of Christ and other biblical characters depicted as large-scale figures, distinguish Denis's work strongly from the religious paintings of Gauguin, an artist who had obviously "stepped away" from Symbolism. Denis rather affiliated himself with the artists who stuck by that movement and adhered to obscure, mystic images, "smoky" in the case of Carrière, glowing with Gustave Moreau, nocturnal with Lévy-Dhurmer or very light with Redon, whose blend of colour and light made the faces in his canvases look ephemeral. *Martha and Mary* is a most striking example of how Denis was trying to bridge the gap between Gauguin and Redon. Biblical subjects are often associated in Denis's early pictures with his personal experiences, an attitude similar to Gauguin's. The figure on the right in *The Visitation* is an idealized likeness of Marthe, the artist's wife. When the picture was being painted, she was pregnant. Denis treated the biblical scene as a sublime equivalent of reality, so that it acquired a special significance for him.

His marriage to Marthe Meurier in 1893 was a major event in his life. From that time onwards most of his female figures bore a resemblance to his wife. She was depicted by Denis in his religious works as an ethereal, or indeed incorporeal, creature, which she was most definitely not, as the portrait of her in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts clearly shows. Paintings like *Martha and Mary* can be perceived as having two facets: one traditional, that of a biblical story, the other intimate and more obscure. In both *The Visitation* and *Martha and Mary* the two female characters look uncannily alike. With regard to the former painting, this similarity may be accounted for by the fact that they are close relatives. But even if the characters are not related, Denis still deliberately adhered to his favourite types. This duplication smoothes away all idiosyncrasies and transfers the painting into the realm of allegory. Denis's

biblical paintings mostly depict female characters and this preference indeed determined his choice of subjects. Only infrequently did he turn to dramatic episodes, for they were alien to his rather feminine talent.

Denis's portrait and genre paintings created in this same period are also imbued with an air of controlled solemnity peculiar to religious art. *Portrait of Marthe Denis, the Artist's Wife* (1893, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow) captures purely casual details: Marthe is portrayed adjusting her shoulder strap, and a woman in the background is taking laundry off the line. But these details only slightly obscure the classical character of the picture. *The Encounter* is reminiscent of *The Visitation* and is seen as some formal act worthy of a painter's brush. Denis's scenes of motherhood are always suggestive of the Virgin and Child. The sincerity of his emotion helped him to keep up to the mark even in such idyllic pictures as *Mother and Child*. He was tempted by a kind of colour scheme that is almost sickly sweet, and at times he could not resist the temptation. This hazard was happily avoided in the portrait of his wife Marthe and daughter Noële now in the Hermitage. With great discretion Denis softened the striped pattern of the mother's dress, which is used to set off the baby's white robe. By this simple device he manages to avoid monotony, skilfully bringing into harmony the curved outlines of human figures and the rectangular shapes of the doors, windows and the frame on the wall. The Christian art tradition is also very noticeable in a few pictures based on real events, *Sacred Spring in Guidel* being one of them. This small-scale, intensely picturesque painting is superior to many large-sized genre compositions with some story to them. It provides an impressive example of what Denis's gift as a colourist could have developed into had he not

subordinated it to the theory of Neo-Traditionalism and rigid rules of composition. The appearance of *Figures in a Springtime Landscape* (*The Sacred Grove*) has become a landmark in the history of Symbolism. With its allegoric and evanescent quality and elaborately bizarre style, as well as the numerous allusions it evokes, this painting is akin to Symbolist poetry. Though profoundly personal, it gives objective expression to a whole programme of Symbolism, which requires a measure of erudition and contemplation on the part of the viewer.

Figures in a Springtime Landscape is a splendid demonstration of how Gauguin's manner was adapted by Denis. It is not only that Symbolism becomes more involved. After *Wedding Procession* or *The Visitation*, this canvas marks a divergence from Denis's earlier flatly treated paintings which had been stimulated by his visits to Italy, where he was influenced by the Renaissance painting. The scope of different allusions brought to mind by *Figures in a Springtime Landscape* is amazing: old tapestries, Neo-Impressionism, Raphael and Puvis de Chavannes. The painting is designed in such a way that all details are reduced to a single common denominator: the outlines of the female nudes and the drapery echo each other and also the contours of the trees. However, Gauguin's method of rhythmical similarities is only sparingly employed by Denis. By flattening the surface of the picture, Denis strives for a pattern of lines that would not only delineate the patches of colour, but also be one with them, striking the same chord. The delicate interlacing of streaming lines is in harmony with a subtle colour scheme dominated by pinkish hues. Unlike Gauguin, Denis had a desire to be liked, which is still further evidence of the feminine nature of his art. Denis saw the difference between the Symbolist wing of the Nabis, to which he belonged

138. **Maurice Denis**, *The Muses*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 137.5 x 171.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

139. **Maurice Denis**, *Forest in Autumn*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 230 x 100 cm. Private collection.

140. **Maurice Denis**, *Forest in Spring*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 230 x 100 cm. Private collection.

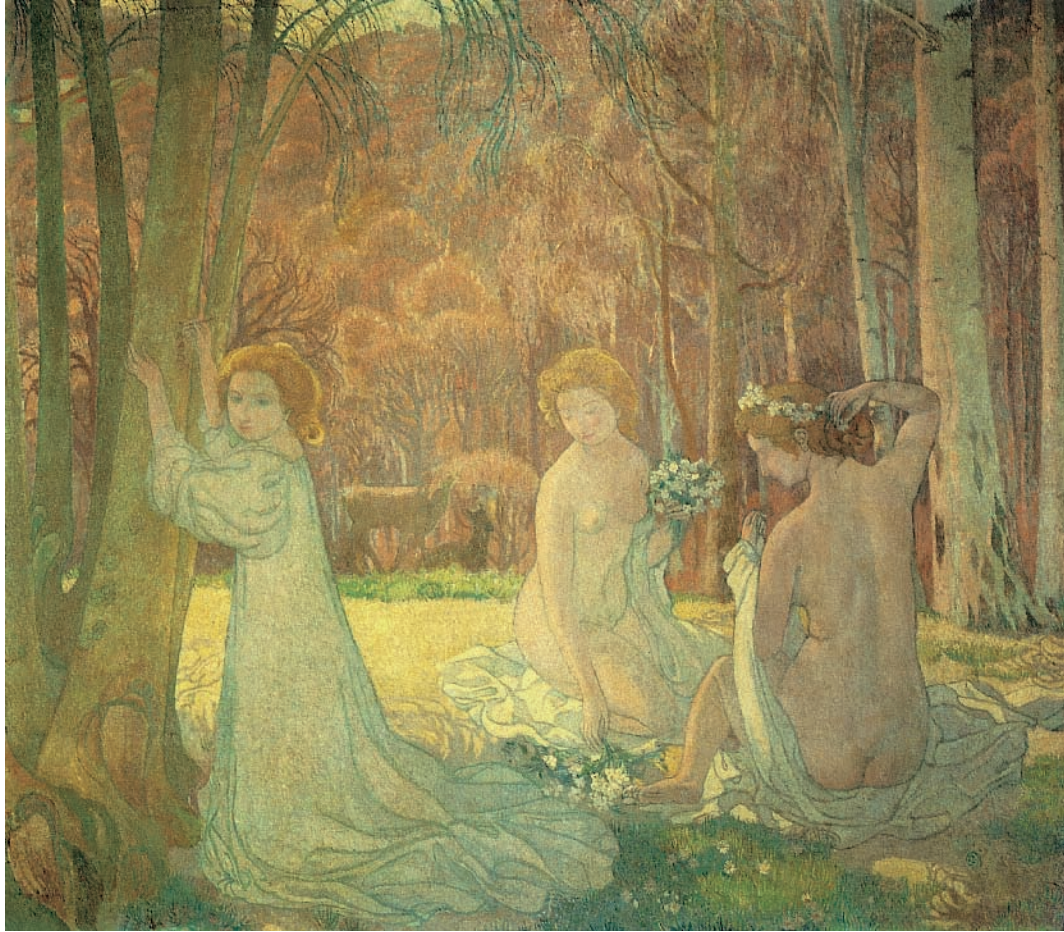
141. **Maurice Denis**, *Ladder in Foliage* or *Poetic Arabesques for the Decoration of the Ceiling*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 235 x 172 cm. Musée départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré", Saint-Germain-en-Laye.











together with Sérusier and Ranson, and the circle of Bonnard, Vuillard and Roussel as being that, while attaching great importance to the human figure, he was inclined to give supremacy to the drawing.

From the start of the twentieth century, Denis found it increasingly difficult to retain a balance between drawing and colour. His drawing would quite often become harsh, his colour scheme crude and garish. Compared to his best works produced in the 1890s, or even *Sacred Spring in Guidel*, the twin

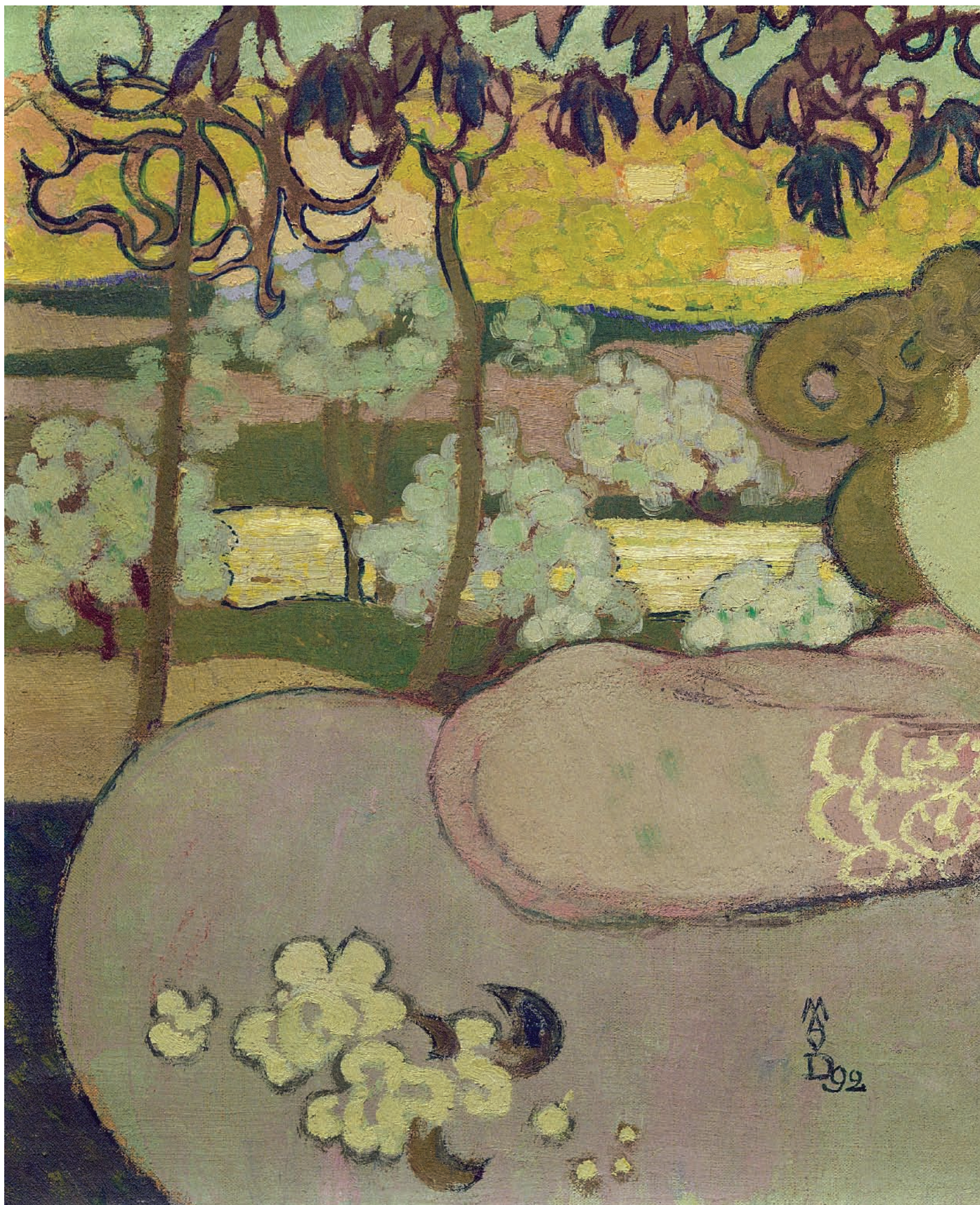
canvases *Bacchus and Ariadne* and *Polyphemus* seem lacking in clearness and perspicuity. The bathing woman in *Polyphemus* is directly borrowed from Gauguin's *Fatata te miti (On the Seashore)* painted in 1892.

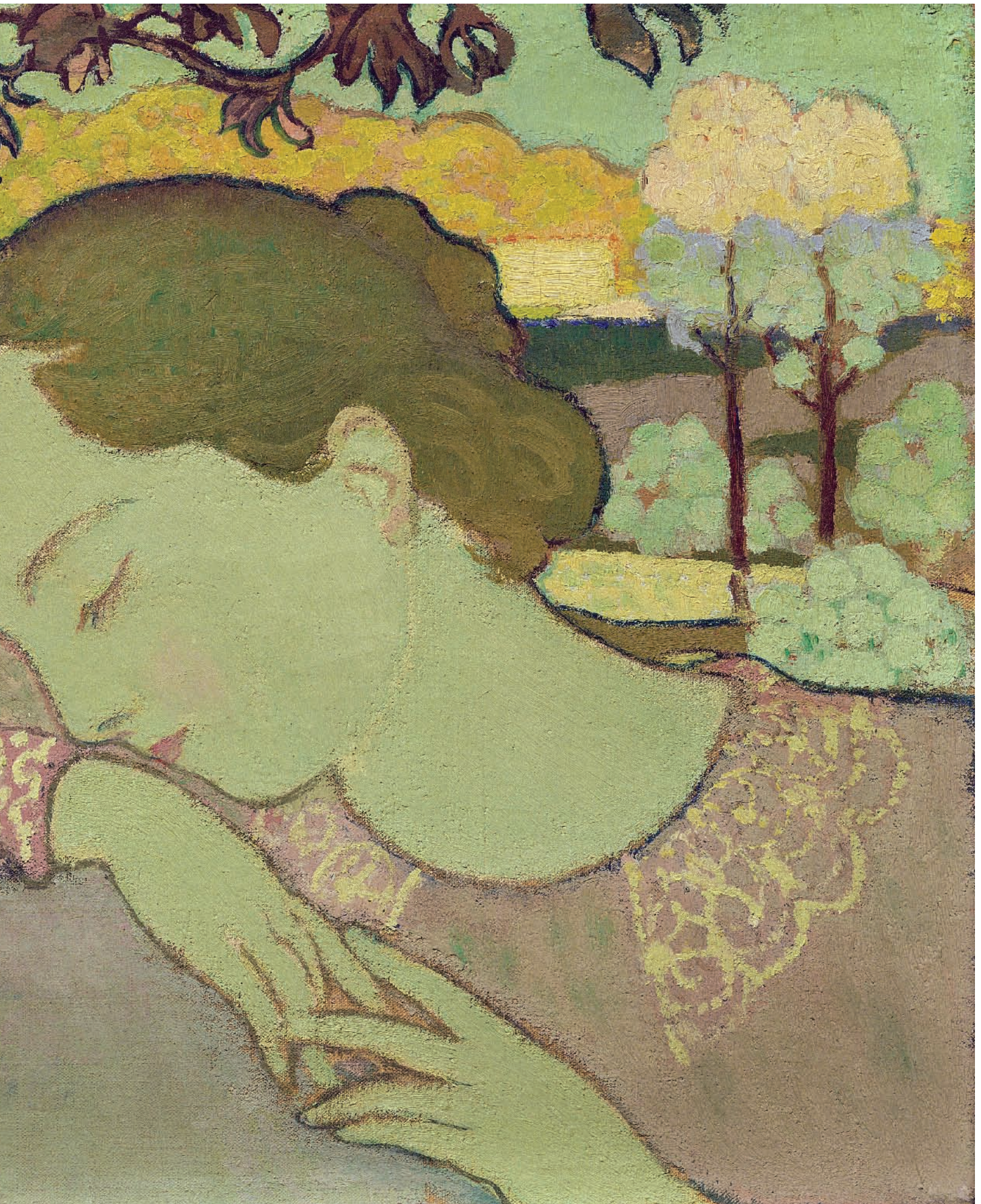
This painting was in Vollard's possession and Denis was undoubtedly familiar with it. Gauguin's influence can also be traced in the decorative and ornamental treatment of the breaking waves. However, the handling of the figures in the foreground goes against Gauguin's method. They do not

142. **Maurice Denis**, *April*, 1894. Oil on canvas, diam.: 200 cm. Private collection.

143. **Maurice Denis**, *Figures in a Spring Landscape (The Sacred Grove)*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 156.5 x 178.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

144. **Maurice Denis**, *Dusk*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 38 x 61 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.







seem to belong in this stylized landscape. Gauguin's precept of avoiding poses in motion is disregarded here. Degas, who was primarily preoccupied with the human body in motion, developed special qualities of drawing, ingeniously evading the rigidity of line. Departing from Gauguin's soothing balanced design and, consequently, from the principles of his own early work, ignoring the dynamic quality of Degas' pictures, Denis doomed his art to the eclecticism of academic painting, which he had rejected in his younger days. He seemed to have forgotten his own daring statement: "A picture — before being a female nude — is a flat surface..." The nudes in Denis's *Bacchus and Ariadne* and *Polyphemus* are painted in a three-dimensional manner, with bulging muscles, contrasting shadows and reflexes. This approach resulted from the artist's desire to breathe new life into the ancient legend, to bring the myth up to date. The modernisation, however, appears to be rather forced. Ariadne reclining on the rock calls to mind classical sculpture, whereas the bathing men and women are part of another world, the world of bourgeois fashion which rejects all legend. Polyphemus looks very much like an obese habitué of seaside resorts. The picture almost strikes a note of caricature. Vallotton used this approach to achieve a calculated effect; with Denis, the same method seems to be evidence of a lack of taste, all the more unexpected since he

had shown himself an artist of subtle, indeed refined, judgement. After the break-up of the Nabis, the art of Denis and his fellow painters was put to the test. It is notable that while Bonnard managed to avoid a crisis, the whole Symbolist wing was affected. These artists, obsessed with cramming symbols and metaphors into their pictures in order to expound elements of Christian doctrine, a theosophical theory or literary narration, were vulnerable to inadequacies in the painterly sphere. Not that they were less gifted than the rest. That was true only of Sérusier, while Denis himself was exceptionally talented. However, his stylistic vacillations in the 1890s betray his uncertainty with regard to his choice of artistic direction. Denis was a man of both knowledge and ability, yet his pictures and panels increasingly came to resemble mere tinted drawings. Later on, realistic paintings, not quite what one would expect from him, such as New York skyscrapers, alternated with returns to the style of his youth, showing a preference for flat surfaces, but he never recaptured the excellence of his early canvases. At the end of his career Denis was preoccupied with the ideas of monumental art, which often seemed far-fetched. The panel he painted for the Bureau International du Travail in Geneva (1931) shows an Old Master type of Christ wearing a classical tunic preaching to labourers who might have stepped into the picture from a photograph,

145. **Maurice Denis**, *Sleeping Woman or Crown of the Betrothal*, 1897-1899. Oil on canvas, 53 x 219 cm.
Musée départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré", Saint-Germain-en-Laye.



dressed as they are in the fashions of the early 1930s. Over a period of fifty years Denis created a large number of monumental decorative works for private houses, theatres, churches and public buildings. Only a few of them — including *The Legend of Psyche* commissioned by Ivan Morozov — attain the level of his best easel paintings. In his old age, turning over his most important works in his mind, Maurice Denis described the Moscow series as dating from his easy and formulaic period.⁶¹ Indeed, the *Legend of Psyche* series is not without a certain ease, though it is the cultivated ease of the skilfully applied and readily appreciated formula, in this case that of Art Nouveau.

Art Nouveau, which flourished at the turn of the century, aimed especially at the creation of a decorative and monumental ensemble. It seemed that everything — from architecture to jewellery — could be reduced to the curvilinear forms of Art Nouveau. This movement lived and breathed with the idea of synthesis, while clinging tenaciously to the notion of elegance. The ceramics and pieces of furniture which Denis designed for Morozov's house, as well as the series of thirteen panels, all belonged together and were derived from the same principles. The total effect of the interior was intensified by Maillol's statues.

In this ensemble, with its beautiful architecture sheltering applied arts, sculpture and painting, it was the last which reigned supreme, for painting always set the tone at Morozov's house. The interior decoration was centred around the five largest panels. They were similar in size and were effectively united by a shared degree of flatness, the same scale of figures and interplay of colours. Nevertheless, Denis's decorative painting is not flawless. The facial expressions of the figures are banal, the garlands, bouquets and clouds are commonplace. The combination of blue and pink surfaces is determined by the subject, but equally by the traditional principles of Art Nouveau. Denis worked within the bounds of generally accepted standards. Similar decorative approaches are easily found in the design of posters and labels, as the individual personality of the artist becomes increasingly lost. The abundance of flesh is rather obtrusive. Only the third panel, *Psyche discovers that her mysterious Lover is Cupid*, is better in this respect. Here the bright pink of a naked body is transformed into a pinkish-ochre by the light of the oil-lamp and the composition is well set off by the dark background. The emphasis on the centre of the canvas makes the subject-matter more intelligible. The panel is designed like an easel-painting, and that is yet another demonstration of the fact that Denis's greatest merit lay in this field.

146. Maurice Denis, *Birth*, 1897-1899. Oil on canvas, 53 x 196 cm.
Musée départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré", Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

Notes

¹ M. Denis, *Théories. 1890-1911*, Paris, 1913, p. 162

² *Ibid.*

³ *Le Symbolisme en Europe*. Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-von Beuningen. Bruxelles, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique. Baden-Baden, Staatliche Kunsthalle. Paris, Grand Palais, Paris, 1976

⁴ *Nabis und Fauves. Zeichnungen, Aquarelle, Pastelle aus Schweizer Privatbesitz. Kunsthhaus Zürich. Kunsthhaus Bremen. Kunsthalle Bielefeld*, Zürich, 1982

⁵ B. Dorival, *Les Peintres du XX^e siècle*, Paris, 1957, p. 16

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17

⁷ A. Terrasse, *Bonnard*, Geneva, 1964, p. 54

⁸ *Bonnard*, Exhibition Catalogue, Musée de Lyon, Lyon, 1954

⁹ M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 1, Paris, 1957, p. 67

¹⁰ A. S. Golubkina, *Letters. A Few Words on the Sculptor's Profession. Reminiscences of Contemporaries*, Moscow, 1983, p. 79 (In Russian)

¹¹ M. Denis, *Préface du catalogue. L'école de Pont-Avon et les Nabis. 1888-1908*. Galerie Parvillé, Paris, 1943, p. 3

¹² V. F. Khodasevich, *Necropolis, Reminiscences*, Paris, 1976, pp. 10, 11 (in Russian)

¹³ Ch. Chassé, *Les Nabis et leur temps*, Lausanne-Paris, 1960

¹⁴ "Extraits du journal inédit de Paul Signac. 1897-1898", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1952, April. p. 280

¹⁵ *Gazette de Lausanne*, 4 May 1893

¹⁶ J. Cassou, *Panorama des arts plastiques contemporains*, Paris, 1960, p. 65

¹⁷ A. Vaillant, *Bonnard*, London, 1966, p. 109

¹⁸ M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 1 (1884-1904), Paris, p. 143

¹⁹ Ch. Zervos, "Pierre Bonnard, est-il un grand peintre?", *Cahiers d'Art*, 1947, p. 1

²⁰ A. Terrasse, "Matisse et Bonnard : quarante ans d'amitié", *Revue de l'Art*, 1984, p. 64

²¹ Perucchi-Petri, "Das Figurenbild in Bonnard's Nabis-Zeit", *Pierre Bonnard*, Zürich, 1984, p. 42

²² Th. Natanson, *Le Bonnard que je propose*, Geneva, 1951, pp. 16, 17

²³ A. Terrasse, *Bonnard*, Geneva, 1964, p. 24

²⁴ Dom W. Verkade, *Le Tourment de Dieu*, Paris, 1926, p. 80

²⁵ A. Benois, *My Reminiscences*, vol. 1, Moscow, 1980, p. 154 (in Russian)

²⁶ Th. Natanson, *op. cit.*, p. 100

²⁷ A. Benois, *op. cit.*, p. 154

²⁸ Th. Natanson, *op. cit.*, p. 24

²⁹ H. Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, Paris, 1972, p. 304

³⁰ Letter to Pierre Courthion (P. Courthion, "Impromptus – Pierre Bonnard", *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 24 June 1933)

³¹ J. and H. Dauberville, *Bonnard. Catalogue raisonné de l'Œuvre peint*, Paris, 1965-1974, vols. 1-4; F. Bouvet, *Bonnard. L'Œuvre gravé*, Paris, 1981; C. Roger-Marx, *Bonnard lithographe*, Monte Carlo, 1952

³² H. Matisse, *op. cit.*, p. 83

³³ A. Terrasse, *Pierre Bonnard*, Paris, 1967, p. 10

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.23

³⁵ A. Terrasse, *Pierre Bonnard*, p. 44

³⁶ Th. Natanson, *op. cit.*, p. 170

³⁷ Quoted from A. Terrasse, *Bonnard*, Geneva, 1964, p. 40

³⁸ Quoted from J. Bouret, *Bonnard. Seductions*, Lausanne, 1967. p. 26

³⁹ A. Terrasse, *Pierre Bonnard*, Paris, 1967, p. 94

⁴⁰ R. Cogniat, "Pierre Bonnard ou le Miroir magique", *Pierre Bonnard*, Geneva, 1981

⁴¹ Th. Natanson, *op. cit.*, p. 104

⁴² A. Terrasse, *op. cit.*, p. 11

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ A. Vaillant, *Bonnard*, London, 1966, p. 113

⁴⁵ *Bonnard and his Environment*, New York, 1966, p. 11

⁴⁶ Th. Natanson, *op. cit.*, p. 87

⁴⁷ "Extraits du journal inédit de Paul Signac. 1897-1898", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1952, April, pp. 276, 277

⁴⁸ M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. I (1884-1904), Paris, p. 137

⁴⁹ Édouard Vuillard, *K. X. Roussel*, Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, 1968, p. 23

⁵⁰ A. Aurier, "Les Symbolistes", *Revue Encyclopédique*, Paris, 1892, no. 1, April

⁵¹ G. Geffroy, *La Vie artistique, 2^e série*, Paris, 1893, p. 382

⁵² J. Salomon, *Vuillard*, Paris, 1968, p. 29

⁵³ *Vente Thadée Natanson à l'Hôtel Drouot* (preface by Octave Mirbeau), Paris, 1908

⁵⁴ *Les Mardis, Stéphane Mallarmé and the Artists of his Circle*, The University of Kansas Museum of Art, 1966, p. 44

⁵⁵ Dom W. Verkade, *Le Tourment de Dieu*, Paris, 1926, p. 78

⁵⁶ M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 1 (1884-1904), Paris, 1957, p. 59

⁵⁷ M. Denis, *Théories, 1890-1910*, Paris, 1913, p.1

⁵⁸ M. Denis, *Sérusier, sa vie, son Œuvre*, Paris, 1943, p. 64

⁵⁹ M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 1, p. 67

⁶⁰ M. Denis, *Théories*, p. 251

⁶¹ M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 3, Paris, 1959, p. 214

Bibliography

- S. Barazzetti-Demoulin, *Maurice Denis*, Paris, 1945
- A. Barskaya, M. Bessonova, *Impressionists and Post-Impressionists in Soviet Museums*, Leningrad, 1985 (in Russian)
- M. Bessonova and W. J. Williams *Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. The Hermitage, Leningrad. The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Introductions by Marina Bessonova and William James Williams. Selection by Marina Bessonova, William James Williams and Albert Kostenevich, Leningrad-New York, 1986
- N. Brodskaya, *Félix Vallotton et la Russie*, Lausanne, Galerie Paul, 1986
- Catalogue of S. I. Shchukin's Collection*, Moscow, 1913 (in Russian)
- Catalogue of the Municipal Gallery of the Brothers Pavel and Sergei Tretyakov*, Moscow, Catalogue, 1917 (in Russian)
- G. Coquiott, *Bonnard*, Paris, 1922
- J. and H. Dauberville, *Bonnard. L'Œuvre peint*, Paris, 1965-74, 4 vols
- M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 1 (1884-1904), vol. 2 (1905-1920), Paris, 1957, vol. 3 (1921-1943), Paris, 1959
- P. Descargues, *Le Musée de l'Ermitage*, Paris, 1961
- H. Hahnloser-Bühler, *Félix Vallotton et ses amis*, Paris, 1936
- The Hermitage. Department of Western European Art: Catalogue of Painting*, Leningrad-Moscow, Catalogue, 1958, vol. 1 (in Russian)
- A. N. Izerghina (Introduction) and A. G. Barskaya, B. A. Zernov (Notes), *The Hermitage, Leningrad. French 20th century Masters*, Prague, 1970
- The Hermitage. Western European Painting. Catalogue. I: Italy, Spain, France, Switzerland*, Leningrad, Catalogue, 1976 (in Russian)
- Izerghina, Barskaya, *French Painting from the Hermitage, Leningrad. Mid 19th to Early 20th Century*, (introduction by A. Izerghina, selection and notes on the plates by A. Barskaya), Leningrad, 1975
- N. Kalitina, *French Landscape Painting, 1870-1970*, Leningrad, 1972 (in Russian)
- A. Kostenevich, *French Art of the 19th to Early 20th Century in the Hermitage* (guidebook), Leningrad, 1984 (in Russian)
- A. Kostenevich, *Western European Painting in the Hermitage: 19th-20th Centuries*, Leningrad, 1987
- A. Kostenevich, *From Monet to Picasso. French Painting from the Late 19th to Early 20th Centuries in the Hermitage*, Leningrad, 1989 (in Russian)
- G. Kuznetsova, *French Painting from the Pushkin Museum*, Leningrad, 1979
- S. Makovsky, *French Painters from I. A. Morozov's Collection, Apollon*, St. Petersburg, 1912, nos. 3, 4 (in Russian)
- A. Mithouard, *Maurice Denis, Art et Decoration*, 1907, July-December
- P. Muratov, *The Shchukin Gallery: An Essay on the History of New Painting, Russkaya mysl'*, Moscow, 1908, no. 8 (in Russian)
- Museum of New Western Art. Illustrated Catalogue*, Moscow, Catalogue, 1928 (in Russian)
- The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts: Catalogue of the Picture Gallery. Painting, Sculpture*, Moscow, Catalogue, 1961 (in Russian)
- The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts: Catalogue of the Picture Gallery. Painting, Sculpture, Miniature Painting*, Moscow, Catalogue, 1986 (in Russian)
- L. Réau, *Catalogue de l'art français dans les musées russes*, Paris, 1929
- A. Segard, *Peintres d'aujourd'hui. Les Décorateurs*, Paris, 1914
- C. Sterling, *Musée de l'Ermitage. La Peinture française de Poussin à nos jours*, Paris, 1957
- B. Ternovets, *Letters, Diaries, Essays*, Moscow, 1977 (in Russian)
- C. Terrasse, *Bonnard*, Paris, 1927
- A. Terrasse, *Pierre Bonnard*, Paris, 1967
- Y. Tugendhold, *The First Museum of New Western Painting*, Moscow, 1923 (in Russian)
- Y. Tugendhold, *The French Collection of S. I. Shchukin, Apollon*, St. Petersburg, 1914, nos. 1, 2 (in Russian)
- F. Vallotton, *Documents pour une biographie et pour l'histoire d'une œuvre*, Introduction, selection and notes by Gilbert Gaison and Doris Jacubec, Lausanne-Paris, 1974, vol 2 (1900-1914)
- N. Y. Yavorskaya, *Pierre Bonnard*, Moscow, 1972 (in Russian)

Index

B Ballin, Mogens

Breton Landscape 13

Bonnard, Pierre

Behind the Fence 180
Breakfast by the Radiator 93
The Cab Horse 123
The Cherry Tart 105
The Child with a Sandcastle 18
The Children's Lunch 132
Corner of Paris 88
The Dressing Gown 36
Family Scene 134
Flower-Seller 115
France-Champagne 125
The Gardener 107
The Grands Boulevards 130
In the Bathroom 142
Indolence 147
The Little Laundry Girl 131
Man and Woman 146
Mediterranean.Triptych 90-91
Mirror in the Dressing Room 153
Misia 138
Misia with Roses 136-137
Nude Against the Light 143
Nude with Black Stockings 144
Nursemaid's Promenade, Frieze of Carriages 128-129
Place Clichy 114
Place Clichy or Two Elegant Ladies 120
Pont du Carrousel in Paris 117
Poster for "La Revue Blanche" 124
The Red Garters 141
Sailing (The Hahnloser Family) 100
The Siesta 150-151
The Stroll 121
Tugboat at Vernon 89
Women in the Garden 84-85
The Yellow Boat 99

C Caillebotte, Gustave

Paris Street. Rainy Day 116

Cézanne, Paul

The Four Seasons – Autumn (detail) 19
The Four Seasons – Spring (detail) 23

Chavannes, Pierre Puvis de

The Poor Fisherman 102
Young Girls by the Seaside 64

D Denis, Maurice

April 174-175, 190
Bacchanalia 39
Bacchus and Ariadne 48
Birth 195
Dusk 192-193
The Encounter 181
Figures in a Spring Landscape
(The Sacred Grove) 191
The Flying Cupid is Struck by Psyche's Beauty 83
Forest in Autumn 188
Forest in Spring 188
Fountain at the Villa Medici 182-183
Homage to Cézanne 179
Ladder in Foliage or Poetic Arabesques for the
Decoration of the Ceiling 189
Madame Ranson with Cat 32
Martha and Mary 20-21
Mother and Child 135
The Muses 187
Portrait of Marthe Denis 184
Screen with Doves 87
Shepherds (The Green Seashore) 46-47
Sleeping Woman or Crown of the Betrothal 194
Sun Patches on the Terrace 9
Wedding Procession 176-177

G Gauguin, Paul

Vision of the Sermon
(Jacob Wrestling with the Angel) 10
Woman Sewing 152

I Ibels, Henri-Gabriel

At the Circus 40

L Lacombe, Georges

The Ages of Life – Spring 30-31
The Blue Sea 96-97
Breton and Breton Women 28
Death and Love 42-43
Harvestwomen 29

	<i>Isis</i>	22	T Tiffany, Louis Comfort	
	<i>Red Pines</i>	26	<i>Garden</i>	17
M Maillol, Aristide			V Vallotton, Félix	
	<i>Bather</i> or <i>The Wave</i>	54, 55	<i>The Dinner</i>	71
	<i>Blonde Back</i>	148	<i>Interior</i>	74
	<i>Lady Sitting with a Sunshade</i>	112–113	<i>A Port</i>	103
	<i>Lady with a Sunshade</i>	95	<i>Portrait of Georges Haasen</i>	69
	<i>Portrait of Miss Jeanne Faraill</i>	94	<i>Portrait of Madame Haasen</i>	68
	<i>Spring</i>	33	<i>The Saturday Evening Bath</i>	52–53
	<i>Standing Bather</i>	67	<i>Sleep</i>	62–63
	<i>The Two Bathers</i> or <i>Dina's Back and Profil</i>	58–59	<i>Street Scene in Paris.</i>	60
	<i>Two Nudes in a Landscape</i>	57	<i>The Taking of Europe</i>	65
	<i>The Wave</i>	51	<i>The Visit, Interior Blue Sofa</i>	72–73
Matisse, Henri			<i>Woman at a Piano</i>	92
	<i>The Dance</i>	44	<i>Woman Relaxing</i>	34–35
Monet, Claude			<i>Woman with Black Hat</i>	66
	<i>The Luncheon on the Grass</i>	106	Verkade, Jan	
Morisot, Berthe			<i>Decorative Landscape</i>	11
	<i>On the Lake in the Bois de Boulogne</i>	101	Vuillard, Édouard	
R Ranson, Paul			<i>Album</i>	161
	<i>Lustral</i> or <i>The Blue Bather</i>	45	<i>At the Window (Interior: Woman at the Window)</i>	159
	<i>The Tiger</i>	38	<i>Chestnut Trees</i>	14
	<i>Women in White</i>	37	<i>Children</i>	167
Roussel, Ker Xavier			<i>Cipa Listening to Misia at the Piano</i>	160
	<i>The Abduction of the Daughter of Leucippus</i>	80	<i>Embroidery</i>	158
	<i>Conversation on a Terrace</i>	109	<i>In a Room</i>	166
	<i>The Fisherman</i>	98	<i>In the Garden</i>	108
	<i>Garden</i>	16	<i>In the Garden, at the Vallottons</i>	127
	<i>In the Snow</i>	25	<i>In the Room</i>	156–157
	<i>Mythological Subject</i>	76–77	<i>Model in a Blue Dress</i>	154–155
	<i>The Sleep of Narcissus</i>	81	<i>Oval Negligee</i>	140
	<i>Spring</i>	82	<i>The Pastry Shop</i>	126
	<i>The Triumph of Bacchus (Rural Festival)</i>	79	<i>The Piano</i>	165
	<i>The Triumph of Ceres (Rural Festival)</i>	78	<i>Place St.-Augustin</i>	172
	<i>Women in the Countryside</i>	15	<i>Place Vintimille</i>	110, 118
S Sérusier, Paul			<i>Public Gardens</i>	170–171
	<i>Breton Women, the Meeting in the Sacred Grove</i>	27	<i>Public Gardens – First Steps</i>	168
	<i>Bretons Wrestlers</i>	41	<i>Public Gardens – Under the Trees</i>	169
	<i>Old Breton Woman under a Tree</i>	12	<i>Stoneware Vase or Conversation</i>	162
	<i>The Talisman</i>	6	<i>Vallotton and Misia in the Dining Room, rue Saint-Florentin</i>	75
			<i>Vanity Table</i>	163
			<i>The Worktable or Dressmaking</i>	164

Art of Century Collection		
 Abstract Expressionism	 Cubism	 Pop Art
 Abstraction	 Dadaism	 Post-Impressionism
 American Scene	 Expressionism	 The Pre-Raphaelites
 The Arts & Crafts Movement	 Fauvism	 Rayonnism
 Art Déco	 Free Figuration	 Realism
 Art Informel	 Futurism	 Regionalism
 Art Nouveau	 Gothic Art	 Renaissance Art
 Arte Povera	 Hudson River School	 Rococo
 Ashcan School	 Impressionism	 Romanesque Art
 Baroque Art	 Mannerism	 Romanticism
 Bauhaus	 The Nabis	 Russian Avant-Garde
 Byzantine Art	 Naïve Art	 School of Barbizon
 Camden Town Group	 Naturalism	 Social Realism
 COBRA	 Neoclassicism	 Surrealism
 Constructivism	 New Realism	 Symbolism

Pierre Bonnard was the leader of the group of post-impressionist painters who called themselves “the Nabis,” based on the Hebrew word for “prophet”. Influenced by Odilon Redon, Puvis de Chavannes, popular imagery and Japanese woodblock printing, Bonnard, Vuillard, Vallotton and Denis (to name the most prominent) revolutionised the spirit of decorative technique during one of the richest periods in French painting.

Although the increasing individualism of their works often threatened to weaken their unity, the Nabis were above all a group of close friends. The artwork presented in this book - varying between Bonnard’s guilelessness, Vuillard’s ornamental and mysterious works, Denis’s soft languor and Vallotton’s almost-bitter roughness - plunges us into the deep source of their creative gifts.