

VUILLARD AND BONNARD, AND
THE FUNCTION OF PATTERN

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Spring 1992

Vuillard

No one of his day quite achieves the poetic vernacular of intimism as does Edouard Vuillard. His homely spaces are so personal that one perceives the shy, but intensely passionate, personality of the artist (1).

Vuillard's strongest works are about what and whom he knew best. Subject matter is common (2). The people are common, the rooms ordinary--working class people and their environs.

Using the decorative was no mere device in his paintings, for he lived among the world of women. His mother was a seamstress, and their apartment was filled with fabrics, dressmakers, and clients (3).

The use of the decorative is multipurposed. Obviously, fabric and wallpaper anchor the works to a specific time in history and standard of living. In this sense, it functions as a report on contemporary life.

Another facet of the decorative is its compositional usage. Different patterns from floor to ceiling cause a pace change. Pattern sizes, designs, and directions vary. Often colors are monochromatic as in "Woman Sweeping in a Room" (Fig. 1). Here the overall color is orange with black accents. Without pattern change, one object would be indistinguishable from the next.

Psychologically, the decorative aspects play to a definite mood. "Mother and Sister of the Artist" (Fig. 2) is an example. Perspective is askew. The viewer is at eye level with the seated woman dressed all in black. A taller bureau reveals an impossible view of its top face, while a standing woman on the left bends as though the ceiling were pressing her down. The painting has the odd effect of a fun-house optical illusion. The cloistered feeling is definitely enhanced by the wallpaper pattern overtaking the standing figure. I find this painting to be the most overt psychological statement among Vuillard's works. (Most are generally understated and are quite powerful because of their restraint.) (4). I do not know if the French have a comparable idiomatic expression for "blending into the wallpaper," but certainly the visceral understanding of this phrase is universal. Here we find its most literal visual illustration.

It is an interesting proposition to consider pattern as defining objects, as opposed to edge, line, color, or value. And this is what Vuillard does so well.



Fig. 1. "Woman Sweeping in a Room," 1892-93, oil on cardboard, 18 x 19". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

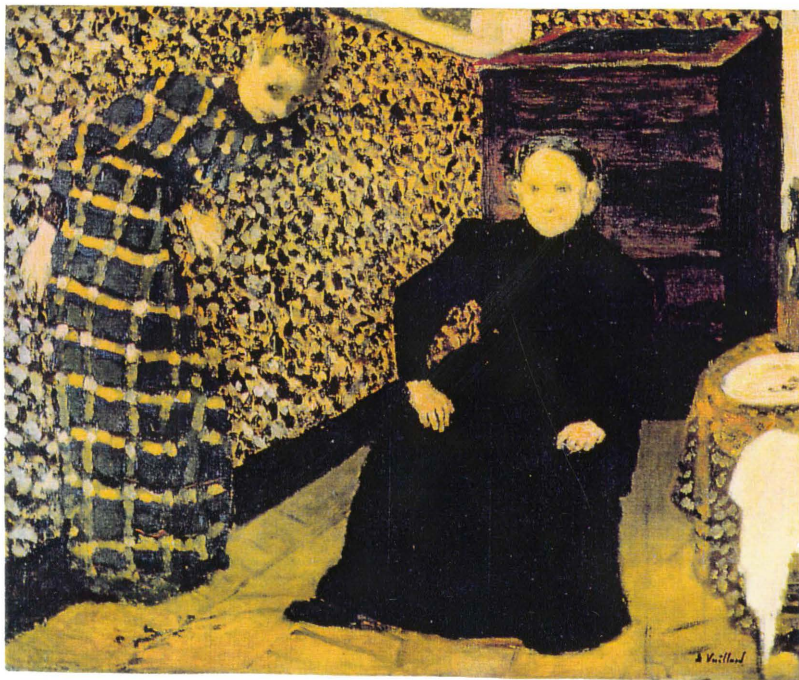


Fig. 2. "Mother and Sister of the Artist," 1893, oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 22 1/4". The Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

"Music" and "The Work Table" (Figs. 3 and 4), two of the four panels for "Figures and Interiors," share common colors: muted sea green, tan, and mauve. These colors run throughout the panels. Women are gathered in family spaces, at task. Nothing could be cozier and more unpretentious. There is no drama here, no soap opera, nor portrait-personalities. It is depicting of everyday life with its soft hum. The poetry given to such scenes is found in its tender treatment of detail. What we cannot see clearly in faces, we see in each wallpaper flower or dress striping.

A basket-weave border crosses the top of the paintings in a strong horizontal band. This is mirrored in the bottom third with its striped rug. A large vase of mums explodes into the small pinks of a flowered wall. People are here, but at times the viewer must search for them, for they are often overwhelmed by their dress patterns. However, even without any figures, due to the nature of the interiors and their very human qualities, we would still read them as people places.

Structurally, the patterning in "Woman in Blue with Child" (Fig. 5) breaks up into clearly delineated units via the clay-red molding. This framing element pulls the eye from left to right. Its hue appears again as a unifying force in the large pattern of the chaise and of the cloth on the mid-right. The beautiful blue of the woman's chemise is a delightful surprise for the eye. Again, the actual people, a woman and baby, are a challenge to discover as they appear merely as shapes among shapes.



Fig. 3, 4. "Music" and "The Work Table," 1896, distemper on canvas, 83 1/2 x 60 5/8" and 83 1/2 x 29". Ville de Paris, Musee du Petit Palais, Paris.

People also function as shapes in "The Dress with a Floral Pattern" (Fig. 6). There is a broader value range than in the previous paintings, and this serves to bring greater clarity in visualizing the people. The values create undulating patterns of their own, which are echoes of the decorative elements. Masses of darks flow from the left through hair, shoulders, and looping arms. The exaggerated gesture is reflected in the floral 'arms' of the turquoise and black dress. Color is dichromatic, green and peach, a more vibrant combination than usual.

When Vuillard wishes to highlight certain persons, he does so. "Valloton and Misia in the Dining Room" (Fig. 7) provides specific portrait information. Coloration is typically Vuillard, with its overabundance of earth hues. Tans of every sort abound. Checks, tiny dots, large dots, a china pattern, tweed textures, gawdy florals, and plaid all compete, providing visual noise. The flat areas of faces, arms, hands, and jacket are a relief in contrast. The blue coat and yellow scarf are necessary color accents, pulling the painting out of a deadly drabness.

The strength of Vuillard's best works (those up to 1900), come from the evocative mood he so artfully arranges. The feelings produced are of the ordinary, the familiar. The enclosed spaces are



Fig. 5. "Woman With Child," 1899, oil on cardboard, 19 1/8 x 22 1/4", Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum

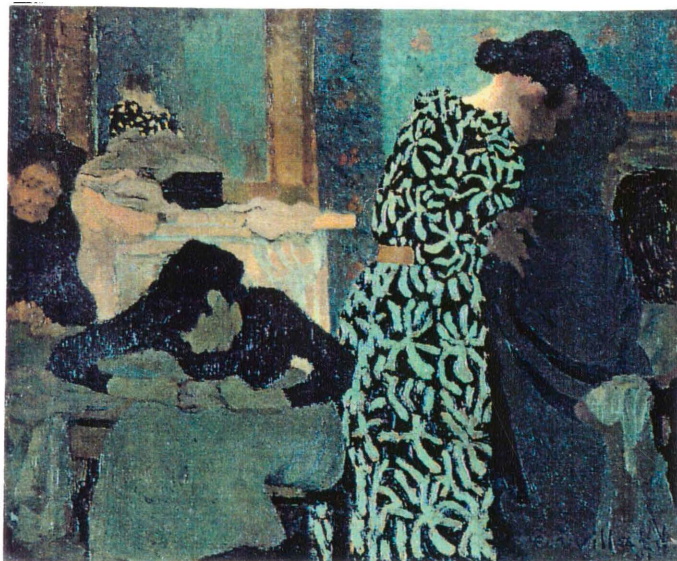


Fig. 6. "The Dress With a Floral Pattern," 1891, oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 30 3/4". Museum de Arte, Sao Paulo.

not unpleasant, yet there is a strangled tension underlying all.

Sometimes there are beautiful things done with lighting, as in "The Widow's Visit" (Fig. 8). But it is artificial lighting, lamplight, or firelight. There is no penetration of the interior by the out-of-doors.

The communication of Vuillard's paintings are effected through several avenues. Color favors earthy tones. Potential vibrancy is short-circuited by accompanying muting colors. A deliberate dulling results, which carries the mood.

Value is predominantly mid-range. I experience the impact of this as an emotional reign, a stricture against extreme highs and lows.

As common colors unify the whole and like-values cross pattern boundaries, a lostness or fusion of objects occurs, most particularly with people. This seems to function in the same manner as does nature's protective camouflage. (See Fig. 9, "Mame Vuillard in Front of the Mirror.")

All of these employed elements produce the most personally experienced intimate paintings.

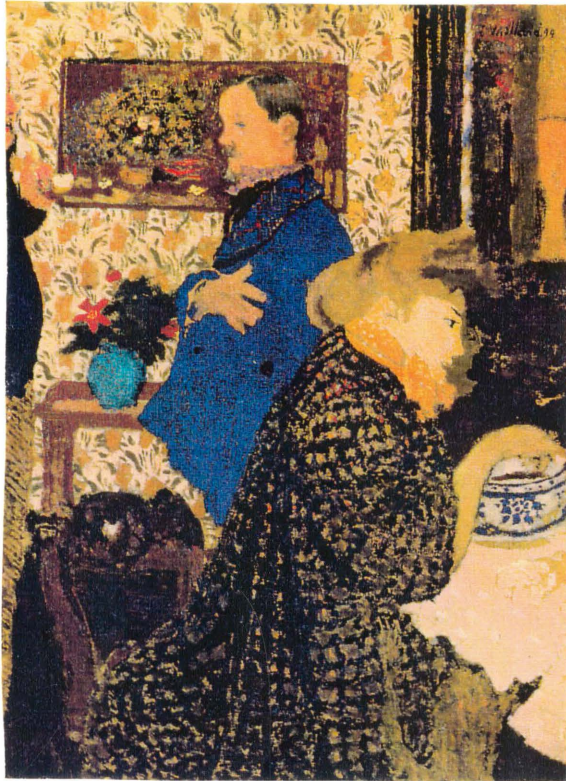


Fig. 7. "Valloton and Misia in the Dining room," 1899. Oil on cardboard, 28 3/8 x 20 7/8". Private collection, United States.



Fig. 8. "The Widow's Visit," 1893. Oil on paper on panel 19 3/4 x 24 3/4". The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

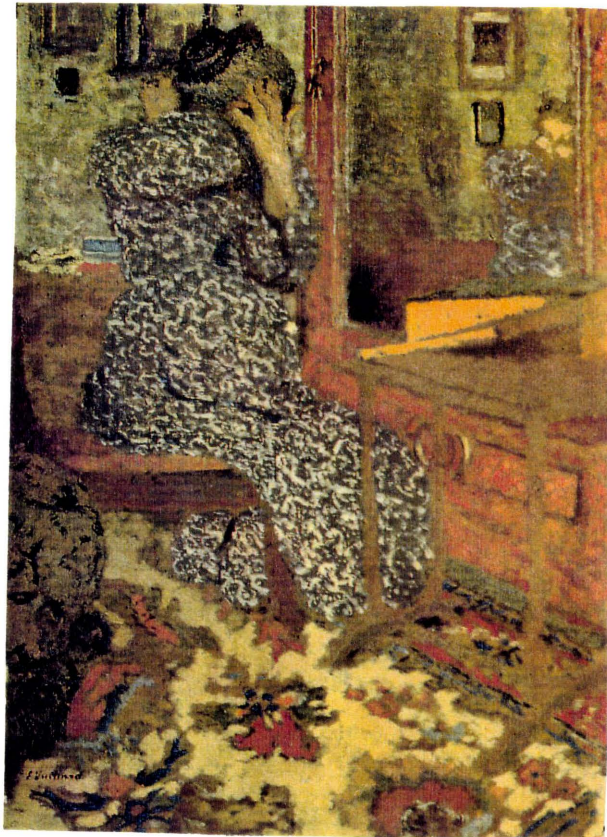


Fig. 9. "Mme. Vuillard in Front of the Mirror," 1900, oil on cardboard, 19 1/2 x 14". The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham.

Bonnard

Bonnard lived and worked alongside his compatriot Vuillard (5). He also dealt with similar concerns in interiors and pattern usage. But as intensely personal as are Vuillard's paintings, so also we find Bonnard's to be stamped with the uniqueness of this creator's personality.

At first glance "White Interior (Le Cannel)" (Fig. 10) appears as a scene from which people have just left. The outside door is propped, another door swings open, the table is full of dishes. Then, as the eye moves from object to object, we are surprised to discover a woman curved around the table top!

As with Vuillard, the human is often obscured by its surrounding patterns. Here, perhaps even more so (see Figs. 11, 12). The point seems not to be a psychological need to meld with the background, but to use the figure in a subordinate role, as simply part of the whole. There is nothing stifled or secretive in Bonnard's loss of figure as ⁱⁿ Vuillard's work. Rather, we are delighted when the figure is found. But it is an after-effect experienced after the painting's primary impact.



Fig. 10. "White Interior (Le Cannet)," 1932, oil on canvas, 43 x 61 5/8". Musee de Peinture et de Sculpture de Grenoble.

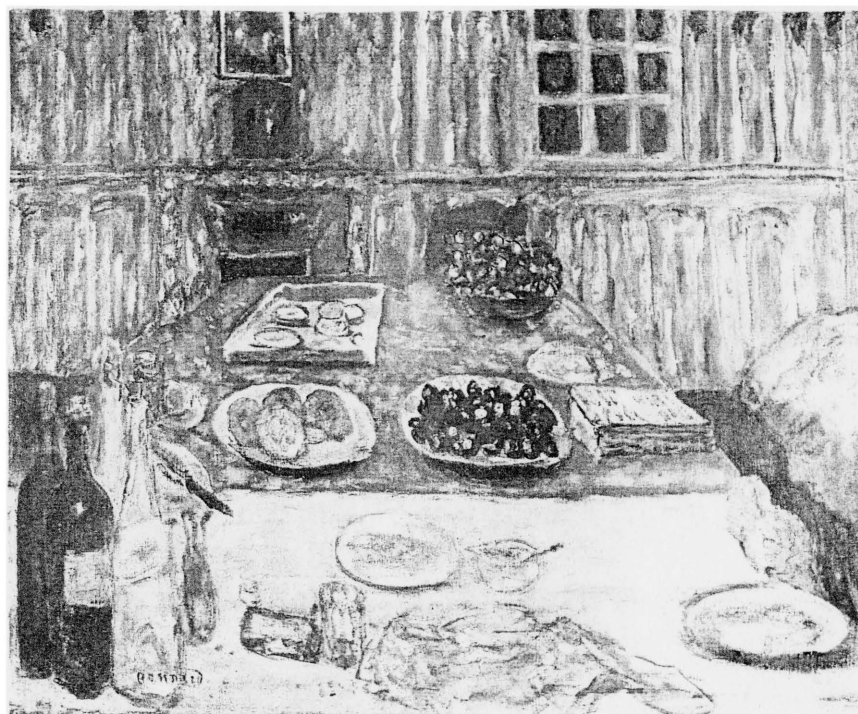


Fig. 11. "Interior Dining Room," 1942-46, oil on canvas, 32 3/4 x 39 3/8". Private collection, Paris.



Fig. 12. "Interior at Le Cannet with Woman at Her Toilette," 1938, oil on canvas, 49 3/4 x 49 1/4. Yale University Art Gallery, The Katharine Ordway Collection.

Bonnard's paintings are about abundance. Tables are spread with delicious and precious food and objects. They are precious, not because of innate quality, but because of the treatment given them. Plates and fruit, walls and windows, appear as pearls, amethysts, and garnets. Light and color transform the ordinary, and the viewer is invited to drink it in (Figs. 13, 14).

Open doors and large windows expand and break open the eggshell until interior and exterior fuse. Whereas Vuillard's airless spaces denote introversion, Bonnard's are totally unself-conscious (6).

His use of pattern and fabric is not historically specific. Color and light are more an issue than accurate reporting of styles of the day.

The competition of floor tile patterns is lessened in "Interior at le Cannet With Woman at Her Toilette" (Fig. 12) by their value divisions. Strong verticals also separate and contain differing pattern areas.

Tablecloths and wallpaper can be used as a vital compositional force. "Interior Dining Room" (Fig. 11) sets up a hammering rhythm of vertical orange stripes which play horizontally through the upper half of the painting. A tablecloth of the same hue is consumed in this horizontal march. Only the checkerboard of a small-paned window breaks the pattern. The bottom third opens up into a white patternless ground.

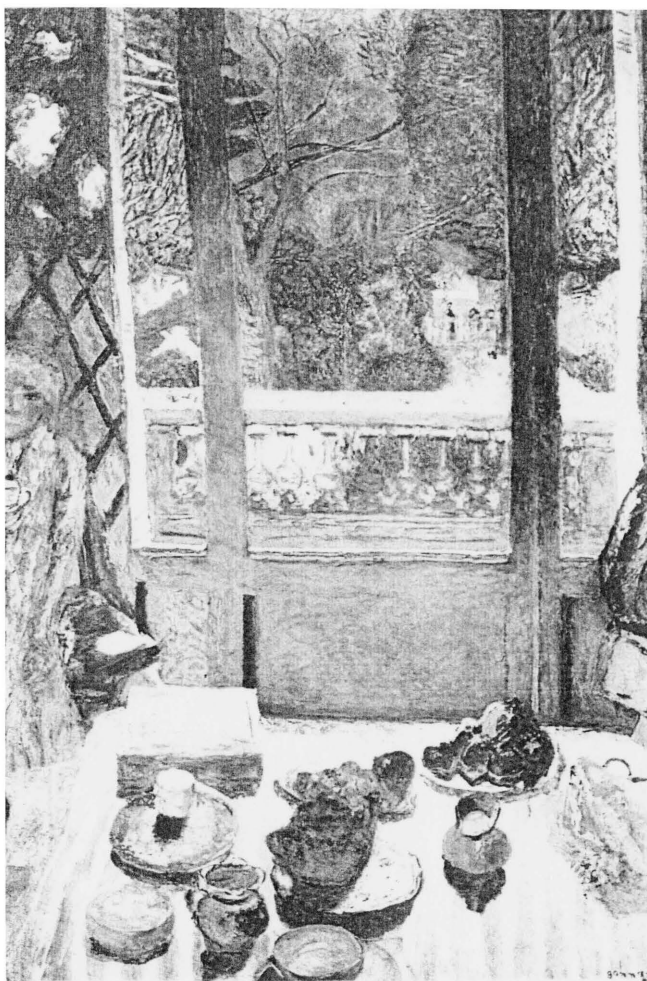


Fig. 13. "The Breakfast Room," 1931-32, oil on canvas, 62 7/8 x 44 7/8". Moma, New York.

"The Breakfast Room" (Fig. 13) uses a blue and white striped tablecloth to unify very specific and separate objects onto one plane. The light blue is in striking contrast to the intense yellow-orange of the window wall. The window frames lush vegetation and a rhythmical ornate balustrade. A glimpse of wallpaper on the left presents strong repeated purple diamonds with an interesting flower print above. Intriguing is this treatment of pattern, for the floral shapes are not repetitious and float as individual objects. In this way, they relate to the individuation of table paraphernalia in the foreground.

"The Red-Checkered Tablecloth" (Fig. 15) makes an issue of pattern. The cloth takes up fully half of the painting. A dog with a wonderful expression grabs our eye. His head is the singular dark blot against this red and cream. His gaze finally directs us to the object of his begging, a young girl in the upper right. The ambience created by one piece of fabric is right on the mark. It says kitchen; it says home; it says comfort and family.

As Bonnard uptilts tabletops to display separate items, window and door frames are utilized to exhibit patterns of nature interacting with architecture. "The French Window with Dog" (Fig. 16) loads the view with a keyboard of porch planking and railing, diagonal spears of palm, and puzzle pieces of carmen-tiled villa roofs. But the vista outside really informs us about the interior life. Here again, it is space expanding to embrace the outdoors. We feel the breeze and the room smells of sun and plants.



Fig. 14. "Dining Room in the Country," 1913, oil on canvas, 63 x 80". Minneapolis Institute of Arts.



Fig. 15. "The Red-Checkered Tablecloth," 1910, oil on canvas, 32 5/8 x 33 1/2". Collection Professor Hans R. Hahnloser, Berne.

Both Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard painted French turn-of-the century interiors. Both employed techniques of camouflaging the human figure. They both spoke of family life and ordinary activities. They drew on decorative, ornamental elements and patterns to create a whole. The results, however, remain dramatically different. Vuillard's people seem motivated to hide themselves. Bonnard's remain happily integrated into a whole. As Vuillard's rooms are rarely penetrated by natural light, Bonnard's sunlight drenches the ordinary and transforms it into gemstones. The mood, the personal vision are in contrast. Vuillard gives a poetically expressive and yet self-conscious view. Bonnard shares an expansive, joyous, and table-laden feast.



Fig. 16. "The French Window With Dog," 1927, 105 x 63 cm. Private Collection, United States.

End Notes

1. Jeanine Warnod, Vuillard, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1989, p. 6.
2. Stuart Preston, Vuillard, New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985, p. 8.
3. Warnod, p. 7.
4. Preston, p. 37.
5. Bonnard, The Last Paintings, Washington, DC: The Phillips Collection and Dallas Museum of Art, 1984, p. 8.

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