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book review of

The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle by Katherine M. Kuenzli

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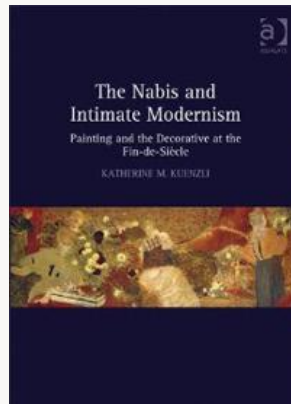
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Katherine M. Kuenzli,
The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle.
Surrey, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010.
302 pp., 119 b/w illustrations, 12 color illustrations; bibliography; index.
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In the late 1880s it was with great prescience that Paul Sérusier, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis and their colleagues chose for their artistic brotherhood a name laden with portent: Nabis, from the Hebrew word for prophet. In *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Katherine M. Kuenzli fittingly pays special attention to the group's self-designated role as prophets of modern art, (re)positioning their decorative work of the 1890s as a crucial prelude to post-1900 modernism.[\[1\]](#)

Challenging twentieth-century dismissals of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—unfairly tainted, the author suggests, by its associations with fascist spectacle, and discounted as crass commercialism by such writers as Theodor Adorno—Kuenzli treats examples of Nabi decoration as serious and ambitious works of art. (The groundbreaking work of Gloria Groom, of course, receives well-deserved credit for reintroducing Nabi decoration into the critical discourse through painstaking documentation and illuminating analysis.[\[2\]](#)) Indeed, all five of Kuenzli's main chapters focus to varying degrees on decorative cycles painted by Bonnard, Vuillard, and Denis between 1891 and 1896. In extended passages of meticulous formal analysis, the author revels in the visual complexity of each series; this close looking not only highlights the Nabis' formal acumen and innovation, but also lays a firm foundation onto which the author builds detailed discussions of a wide range of concurrent artistic and social trends, including the influence of music, theater, religion, and the mass media.

By predicating contextual considerations on formal analysis, Kuenzli aims to restore aesthetic and intellectual weight to the often dismissed notion of “the decorative,” reinstating it as a key arena for the development of a modernist vocabulary, forged by the Nabis—paradoxically but crucially—in the private interior. To this end, Kuenzli deftly proposes a reconciliation of what

she identifies as a rift in existing Nabi scholarship. Interpreting Nabi decorative cycles neither as purely escapist fantasies from the pressures of modern life, nor as exclusively visually-confounding indictments of the myth of bourgeois intimacy, she instead reads them as fruitful syntheses between these two poles: as soothing yet simultaneously provocative engagements with the surrounding world. The third decade of the Third Republic was indeed a tumultuous time, including General Boulanger's suicide after his precipitous fall from political grace in the late 1880s, the Panama Canal scandal, anarchist bombings, and the Dreyfus Affair. The Nabis, Kuenzli boldly asserts, did not want to make art that completely shut out this broader world; rather, she posits that through their decorative painting, the artists actively sought to link the individual to the broader collective.

In order to reconcile this seeming paradox between public and private, Kuenzli carefully analyzes the intricately-patterned surfaces of Nabi decorative panels, contending that the artists translated real sensations and direct observations of the surrounding world into stylized, "musical" rhythms of color and line that often presented confounding visual complexities, yet ultimately resulted in a lulling invitation to reverie. In an intrepid move, Kuenzli paradoxically interprets this invitation to solitary dreaming and personal reflection—to interiority—not as a rejection of the outside world, but as a new means of understanding oneself and one's engagement with society. Relying heavily on French Symbolist writers' reception of the music and writings of Richard Wagner, Kuenzli repeatedly proposes that the work of the German composer offered an influential model for ways in which a musical approach to art making could create an environment so all-encompassing as to invite viewers to lose themselves first in that artistic world and then within themselves. The result of this dream state inspired by subtle art in the private home, Kuenzli contends, was a kind of inter-subjectivity, a blurring of the lines between self and others, with potentially radical implications for erasing divides between male and female, individual and collective.

Coming in the wake of Impressionism and fast on the heels of Neo-Impressionism, both with their emphasis on recording visual phenomena, the Nabis were, Kuenzli astutely reasons, anxious to reconcile subjective observation and objective artistic principles in their painting. Although she acknowledges the heterogeneity of the Nabis' decorative practice, Kuenzli identifies four theoretical threads woven throughout their work: "...first, a renegotiation of the relationship between sensation and imagination in an attempt to make modern art more enduring; second, an attempt to move beyond easel painting and to conceive of art as an environment; third, a dream of connecting the individual to some form of collective ideal or experience; and fourth, an attempt to synthesize modernity with tradition" (25).^[3] The author contends that all four of these principles were indicative of burgeoning modernism at the dawn of the twentieth century, and overall she succeeds admirably in making this case. Like so many Wagnerian leitmotifs, these themes resurface throughout Kuenzli's book; the structure of her writing thus cleverly mirrors the visual imagery she analyzes, with key concepts weaving in and out of her text as subtly as the musical rhythms she finds painted on the surface of Nabi canvases.

Kuenzli's first chapter, "Decorating the Street, Decorating the Home: Bonnard's Women in the Garden and the Poster," centers on two works that Bonnard produced in 1891: his four-paneled cycle *Women in the Garden* (originally conceived of as a freestanding screen, but first exhibited as four panels) and his *France-Champagne* poster. In discussing the *Women in the Garden* panels,

she chronicles the visual dance between depth and flatness, patterning of both the descriptive and the decorative variety, sophisticated Symbolist “rhythmic repetitions” and caricature-like simplification and exaggeration, and the women’s alternating suggestions of fleeting narrative and utter vacancy (41). Kuenzli compares these tensions to the aesthetics of Bonnard’s *France-Champagne* poster, with its cartoonish heroine and exuberantly exaggerated cascade of bubbles. She finds formal influences from Bonnard’s simplified advertising idiom on *Women in the Garden*, but suggests that the decoration goes even further than the poster in its stylization of form and obfuscation of narrative, citing “its peculiar combination of dream-like ambiguity and commercial vulgarity” (38). In juxtaposing these two seemingly disparate works, Kuenzli’s goal is not only to find stylistic influences from the realm of mass media on Bonnard’s painting, but also to challenge notions of “Nabi painting as ‘merely’ private or escapist,” arguing instead that “the Nabis premised their practice of the decorative on a dream of public art,” noting that Bonnard even went so far as to display *Women in the Garden* at the 1891 Salon des Indépendants (35). Setting the stage nicely for later arguments in her study, Kuenzli posits that this navigation between public and private and high and low art situates the Nabis firmly in the modernist idiom.

One of the chapter’s greatest strengths is its focus on divisions between media: in making distinctions between poster art and painting, treating each medium as subject to different cultural and technical concerns, the paradoxical final result is to show just how interconnected art making practices were at the close of the nineteenth century. By pointing out specific differences, the author ultimately highlights overall unity, a rather neat rhetorical trick that in turn parallels her larger statements about art being able to connect the individual to broader society.

In her second chapter, “Wagner as Intimist: Vuillard’s Desmarais Decoration and the Symbolist Theater,” Kuenzli asserts that the Nabis’ involvement in the Symbolist theater—where their designs accompanied plays by Henrik Ibsen, Auguste Strindberg, and Maurice Maeterlinck, among many others—influenced their private decorative commissions. In particular, she draws parallels between the evocative sets and programs they created for Paul Fort’s Théâtre d’Art (1890–92) and Aurélien Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Œuvre (1893–1900) and the six decorative panels Vuillard painted for the home of Paul and Léonie Desmarais in 1892.^[4] Kuenzli suggests that in the Desmarais panels, influenced heavily by his theatrical work, Vuillard diminishes the narrative quality of everyday scenes by abstracting recognizable forms. The result is a rhythmic interplay of line and color, like stage sets in which the drama of the commissioners’ daily lives could unfold, emblematic of “the Nabis’ attempt to forge a symbiotic relationship between viewer, painting, and environment...” (95).

Kuenzli campaigns passionately for Richard Wagner’s position as a crucial force in shaping Symbolist efforts to create these “musical” and evocative works of art. Rather than focusing on Wagner’s grandiose spectacles, Kuenzli explains how French Symbolist writers and artists attempted to transform the *Gesamtkunstwerk* into something decidedly more intimate. By shifting the focus of art from narrative clarity to formal invention, they believed, art could reach its greatest potential “...to suggest a universal realm of emotions through expressive arrangements of line and color” (89).

It has become a platitude that Wagner left an indelible mark on the arts in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Kuenzli therefore deserves utmost praise for digging deeper, attempting to enumerate in detail the composer's influence. Yet Kuenzli's discussion includes so many intellectual facets that it is sometimes unclear how a reified Wagnerian aesthetic connects, for instance, the ghostlike figures in Vuillard's 1894 theater program for Ibsen's *Master Builder* and the bourgeois figures in the artist's Desmarais panels of 1892. Kuenzli's treatment of the reception and interpretation of Wagner's writings and music by French Symbolists in the 1880s and 1890s, on the one hand, is highly effective. It demonstrates how these writers deftly translated the all encompassing grandeur of Wagner's project into a focus on interiority, with the implication that this kind of thinking provided a model for Nabi paintings that encourage states of reverie. Less successfully delineated, however, is how this reverie actually manifested itself in the Nabis' compositions. The author refers repeatedly to "Wagnerian painterly aesthetics" and a "musical approach" to color, line, and composition, yet never offers truly satisfactory explanations for these fascinating but devilishly abstract concepts (15, 88). The chapter might have benefited from explicit definitions of these terms. A consideration of the mechanics and impact of several of Wagner's key compositions—the particular way in which the composer's music actually functions, for instance his use of the leitmotif to link key dramatic and psychological moments in an opera through musical means—could have prepared the reader to understand the sense of Wagnerian musicality that the author ascribes to Nabi decoration.^[5] These criticisms aside, the author proffers rich material and thought-provoking conclusions, and should be credited for daring to bridge the gap between art forms. The field of art history would be greatly enriched if more scholars had the courage to follow Kuenzli into this challenging lacuna.

In chapter three, "Modernism and Catholicism in Maurice Denis's *Frauenliebe und Leben*," Kuenzli boldly tackles a topic that, aside from Debora Silverman's impressive 2000 study, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, has largely been understudied: the influence of religion on the development of avant-garde painting.^[6] Using Denis's *Frauenliebe und Leben* as a case study, Kuenzli elegantly reasons that Denis's relatively progressive and highly personal brand of Catholicism acted as a kind of mediator between several potentially opposing factors: positivism and idealism, Symbolism and modernism, and individuality and collectivity.

According to Kuenzli, the music of Robert Schumann (much like the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé) was appreciated in fin-de-siècle France for its introspective quality, inviting listeners to lose themselves in personal mental exploration. Denis took inspiration for the six-paneled *Frauenliebe und Leben* from a Schumann song cycle of the same name, in turn based on an 1830 poem by French-born German poet and botanist Adelbert von Chamisso, but freely adapted these sources. Kuenzli argues that Denis's paintings translate the alternating rhythms of Schumann's songs, which evoke the story of a young woman experiencing the ebb and flow of falling in love, into a series of arabesques, "rhythms of line and color whose varying cadence conveys a tender lyricism" (112). Yet although the panels have an abstracted, timeless quality about them, in many ways they were grounded in Denis's personal experience; in the three years preceding the creation of the decoration, Denis and Marthe Meurier had met, courted, and married, and shortly afterward, grieved the loss of their firstborn son. Indeed, the landscapes in Denis's panels even seem to evoke the countryside around his home in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where many of these deeply personal moments would have unfolded.

Drawing heavily on Denis's journals, letters, published writings on art and religion, and even his eventual membership in a Dominican lay order, Kuenzli positions the artist's Catholicism as formative in reconciling these potential conflicts of stylization and specificity in his art. According to the author, Denis's art bears not only the formal influence of Fra Angelico's frescoes for the monastery of San Marco in Florence (which, Kuenzli asserts, navigate the waters between naturalism and idealism, as well as art meant for both public and private consumption), but also the spiritual imprint of contemporary progressive Catholicism. Based on his written reference to, and attendance at, lectures given by Father Janvier, a Thomist priest, Kuenzli concludes that Denis could have arrived at a complex understanding of human knowledge as deriving from worldly sensation (inspired by Thomas Aquinas's adaptation of Aristotelian physics to prove the existence of God). And from the late-medieval *Devotio moderna* movement (whose key text, the anonymous fifteenth-century *L'Imitation du Jésus-Christ*, Denis illustrated in 1894–95), the artist could have gleaned the impulse to balance intense personal meditation on the example of Christ's life with engagement in the broader spiritual community.

Thus, concludes Kuenzli, by displaying *Frauenliebe und Leben* at Siegfried Bing's Art Nouveau exhibition in 1895, Denis exemplified how his highly personal art—mediated through his equally singular faith—was both traditional and modern, simultaneously private and public, and encouraged introspection as a way of fostering a new kind of public consciousness and awareness of universal concerns. By overcoming Impressionism's visual subjectivism and tempering the unbridled individualism of Symbolism, Kuenzli contends that Denis strove to add a measure of objective permanence to art at the close of the nineteenth century. Even if the reader does not agree with all of Kuenzli's conclusions about Denis's actual painting and "its connection to a Wagnerian, musical aesthetic," this remains a particularly effective chapter, providing a cogent model for ways in which the subjects of religion and spirituality can be considered seriously in the unfolding story of modernism (112). It is all too easy to brush faith aside as impossibly subjective or even anti-academic; Kuenzli demonstrates with aplomb that not only can it be treated objectively, but also that great intellectual rewards can be reaped in the process.

Kuenzli's fourth chapter, "Two Versions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: The Nabis and the Art Nouveau Interior," builds on the excellent scholarship of Debora Silverman, Nancy Troy, and Gabriel Weisberg.^[7] Kuenzli sets the stage for her arguments regarding the Nabis by first analyzing the writings of Siegfried Bing and Julius Meier-Graefe on Art Nouveau, concluding that the two align in an "essentially Wagnerian conception of interior decoration as enabling an imaginary and pleasurable loss of self..." (158–59). These ideas were partially realized in Bing's 1895 Art Nouveau exhibition in Paris, which included architecture and furniture by the Belgian designer Henry van de Velde and many decorations by the Nabis, including stained glass windows and decorative painting cycles. (Denis, as previously mentioned, exhibited his *Frauenliebe und Leben* cycle.) Van de Velde collaborated with the Nabis on a dining room ensemble to which he contributed the architecture and furniture, while Vuillard designed a set of decorated china, and Paul Ranson painted wall murals. Van de Velde was reportedly unhappy with the final results, which Kuenzli attributes to the fact that, like Bing and Meier-Graefe, his conception of a successful interior was one in which every design element was weighted equally, creating a holistic environment. Van de Velde may have been inspired by the Nabis' experimentation with color, line, "rhythmic repetition," and arabesques, but he

perceived these elements only as building blocks for creating a harmonious dwelling. By contrast, the author argues that although the Nabis greatly valued the unifying effect of a well-designed interior, they never challenged the primacy of painting. Rather, Kuenzli suggests that they embraced the constraints imposed by functioning within a decorative idiom—the material realities of working in stained glass or painted china, for instance, or the dimensional requirements of creating site-specific painted ensembles for an existing room—as fruitful incentives to paint in an increasingly abstracted manner, a paradoxical way to amplify their visual creativity by responding to physical strictures. The resulting paintings, although never fully relinquishing representation, place increased emphasis on musical and rhythmic arrangements of color and line, thereby inviting viewers to open their imaginations to reverie and thus activating a kind of modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Kuenzli cites Vuillard's five-panel *Album*, also exhibited in Bing's 1895 Art Nouveau exhibition, as a prime manifestation of this impulse. Suggesting that the artist may have drawn inspiration (in both mundane subject matter and all-over patterning) from the sixteenth-century *Seignorial Life* tapestries at the Musée de Cluny, Kuenzli notes the complex play of Vuillard's heroines, who seem to have ambiguous relationships between each other as well as with the space surrounding them, appearing to merge with floral arrangements and wallpaper on numerous occasions.^[8] In this way, Vuillard seems to have progressed toward achieving the goal, expressed in his journal, of translating complex emotions and abstract ideas into representational art. Kuenzli reasons that by publicly displaying a work with such intimate subject matter and complex facture, Vuillard suggests his interest in the ability of avant-garde art to speak to a larger audience through formal invention. As the author writes in her conclusion to the chapter:

The vision of the decorative foregrounded at Bing's exhibition turned on a series of oppositions between the individual and the collective, sensation and ornament, private and public spheres. Although unresolved, these very oppositions matter, for they point to larger dynamics that define 1890s modernism. Advanced artists in the 1890s valued individualistic artistic creation at the same time that they realized that art, if it were to be sustainable, needed to be grounded in collective practices and ideals (177).

In her fifth and final full chapter, "The Art of Reverie: Vuillard's Vaquez Decoration and the Nabis' Critical Legacy," Kuenzli crosses the threshold into the twentieth century. Here, she instructively considers the critical reaction to the display at the 1905 Salon d'Automne of the four panels comprising the decoration that Dr. Henri Vaquez had commissioned in 1896. By considering critics' responses to these panels nearly a decade after their production, the author is able to cement more firmly Vuillard's position within the canon of early modernism, showing that the Nabis' work of the 1890s was indeed in step with avant-garde artistic concerns at the dawn of the new century. Most critics reviewed the panels in 1905 as either pleasant accompaniments to bourgeois life or visually confrontational assaults on that world—a dichotomy perpetuated about Vuillard's work, the author says, by modern scholars.^[9] Kuenzli instead aligns herself with André Gide and the lesser-known Gustave Babin, both of whom found a way to reconcile these two poles in their criticism of the Vaquez panels as displayed at the Salon d'Automne. Babin in particular contends that although the panels' heavily patterned surfaces initially seem unsettling, sustained appreciation by a sensitive viewer will unlock their soothing rhythms of color and line. Just as the depicted figures seem ensconced in their individual reverie, receptive observers are invited to lose themselves in the same way.

Through carefully crafted formal and narrative ambiguity, Vuillard makes the familiar strange. In doing so, posits the author, he blurs deeply entrenched boundaries between masculine and feminine as well as between working class and middle class (the panels depict a man working at a desk, surrounded by a number of women, two of whom appear to be sewing, a task that can be read as either a bourgeois pastime or paid labor). Although not all readers will agree with Kuenzli's bold conclusions about the work's ability to blur deeply entrenched class and gender divisions, her larger point is both interesting and important. Kuenzli argues that Vuillard's visual destabilizing of social norms brought the artist, artwork, and viewer into close and equal proximity; through prolonged, daily exposure to their visually lulling but mentally provocative qualities, decorative ensembles can be a catalyst for the viewer's contemplation of a more unified society. With their emphasis on formal play capable of seducing viewers into deep psychological associations, Kuenzli concludes that Vuillard's decorative panels demand to be understood alongside the most advanced painting of Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse as "challenging and innovative works that define fin-de-siècle modernism" (208).

The author might have done well to end her impressive investigation on this note, having convincingly demonstrated through sensitive visual analysis and rich cultural contextualization that the Nabis produced decorative painting for the private interior that was very much aligned with the modern tenor of the 1890s—and continued to be relevant after the turn of the new century. Instead, Kuenzli states early on in her conclusion that "...what remains to be demonstrated is how the Nabis' practice of the decorative leads us to uncover new or forgotten dimensions of modernist painting after 1900" (218). She uses Henry van de Velde's Hohenhof House, built in 1906–08 for German art collector Karl Ernst Osterhaus (and which van de Velde decorated with a 1900 Vuillard painting as well as a 1907 triptych of painted tiles by Matisse) as a springboard to discuss the role of the decorative in the early twentieth century, in particular *Dance* and *Music*, which Matisse completed for Sergei Shchukin's Moscow residence in 1910. The author likewise fleetingly mentions interest in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* held by Kandinsky, the Futurists, and Malevich, before fascist regimes irrevocably corrupted modern perceptions of art aiming for totality into totalitarian art. Kuenzli does ultimately return to the Nabis, concluding that their "...simultaneous dream of universal art and critique of the public sphere as it then stood constitutes one of the hallmarks of modernism in France in the 1890s..." and resulted in "difficult and compelling paintings that changed the face of modernist aesthetics" (227 and 228).

Kuenzli's goal was presumably to let this conclusion serve as a coda, a kind of affirmation of the modernity of the Nabis and the continuation of the social and artistic concerns that piqued their interest into the new century. Yet it is too long to be a postscript, and too brief to tackle the tantalizing issues raised in any depth; by the time the author returns to the Nabis, the conclusion has risked creating the impression that the preceding chapters were somehow a prologue to a more important story of twentieth-century modernism to be told elsewhere. Although it would be unfair to expect Kuenzli to redirect single-handedly the teleological course of most art historical inquiry, one wishes that the book's central arguments had been allowed to stand on their own, with the author's sensitive readings of Nabi decorations making the case for their relevance both then and now.

This, however, seems petty criticism in the face of Kuenzli's impressive contributions, both to Nabi scholarship and to the larger field of art history. Kuenzli has not only made an essential

contribution to the literature on the Nabis (not to mention modernism), but also at the same time provided a daring model for the intellectual benefits of erasing divisions between academic disciplines and art forms. *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism* is consequently filled with intellectual risks, and as befits a study of such ambitious scope, some of these risks reap greater rewards than others. Kuenzli has set herself a monumental task, promising to “adopt an interdisciplinary methodology by drawing on primary and secondary sources in the fields of musicology, history, religion, literature, theater history, architecture, interior decoration, design history, popular culture, and painting” (23). The reader can sometimes sense an imbalance in the author’s expert treatment of passages dealing with visual art and her able but more tentative handling of themes relating to music, theater, and poetry. At times Kuenzli seems to be scratching the surface of certain topics when delving deeper might have produced greater results. Some additional time spent analyzing formal play in music, poetry, and drama, to the same extent she so aptly did with painting, could have illuminated the mechanics of each art form in ways rich with potential for a deeper understanding of how artists approach their task, as well as how the final product is received by its audience.^[10]

None of these criticisms is meant to detract from Kuenzli’s impressive work, or to suggest that she should have narrowed her scope. Rather, they should suggest the enormity of her task, and urge future historians to follow her bold lead. Art history, by its very hybrid nature, is poised to create an interdisciplinary example for other fields. All too often, however, scholars seem hesitant to leave—at least in any substantial way—the tested waters of traditional art historical analysis. Kuenzli deserves commendation for charting a bold course beyond this safe harbor in *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism*.^[11] The book skillfully demonstrates that examining painting’s connections to other arenas of creative production, rather than diffusing the power of the discipline, can instead enhance our understanding of the objects at hand and their relationship to the broader world. Kuenzli has thus not only demonstrated the relevance of the Nabis beyond the boundaries of the world of fine art, but also suggested how the larger field of art history might use their scholarly discipline-defying work as a model to invigorate the study of other periods. What could be more fitting when discussing a group of artists whose stated goal to was to break down boundaries between art and everyday life? I can only imagine that the “prophets” of modern art would be pleased.

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Notes

[1] For a useful précis of the evolution of Nabi scholarship since the 1980s, please see Laura Morowitz’s insightful review of Kuenzli’s book: *H-France Review*, Vol. 11, no. 182 (August 2011): 1–4 <<http://www.h-france.net/vol11reviews/vol11no182Morowitz.pdf>> (accessed 30 August 2011).

[2] Gloria Groom, *Edouard Vuillard: Painter-Decorator; Patrons and Projects, 1892–1912* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993). Gloria Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930*, exh. cat. (Chicago and New Haven: The Art Institute of Chicago in collaboration with Yale University Press, 2001).

[3] Despite Kuenzli’s clear acknowledgment that hers is a very specific topic that does not claim to encompass the entire Nabi movement, she nonetheless argues perhaps too vehemently for the centrality of painting to the Nabi project, seemingly at the expense of other ways of working

and artists other than Denis, Vuillard, and Bonnard. The Nabis very pointedly carried out their project of blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life in a range of media, and actively marginalizing their non-painted output need not be necessary in order to valorize their decorative painting. Likewise surprising was Kuenzli's readiness to minimize the contributions of such artists as Félix Vallotton and Henri-Gabriel Ibels, who, writes the author, "distinguished themselves more as graphic artists than as painters," and "whose political activism placed them on the fringes of the Nabi movement" (27, note 13; and 60). Although Vallotton's woodcuts and Ibels's color lithographs helped reinvigorate fin-de-siècle printmaking, they are here presented primarily as workaday counterpoints to Denis's, Vuillard's, and Bonnard's apparently more innovative paintings and prints.

[4] Kuenzli dismisses André Antoine's Théâtre Libre (1887–94) in a mere sentence, presumably because it was too Realist in its outlook. In addition to paving the way for Symbolist theaters, the Théâtre Libre provided the venue where Vuillard, Bonnard, Sérusier, and Ibels all cut their teeth as theatrical designers. While it seems common practice for modern scholars to sever the Théâtre d'Art and the Théâtre de l'Œuvre from the Théâtre Libre, consideration of their connections may lead to a deeper understanding of the birth of modern, avant-garde theater. For evidence of this, please see Patricia Eckert Boyer, *Artists and the Avant-Garde Theater in Paris, 1887–1900: The Martin and Liane W. Atlas Collection*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1998).

[5] For readers interested in learning more about how Wagner pushed the boundaries of musical composition to create a sense of both constancy and progression in the Ring Cycle, the recording *An Introduction to Der Ring des Nibelungen* presents an excellent overview. Originally released in 1968, this recording was reissued in 1995 and is currently available on iTunes and www.amazon.com, among other locations. Deryck Cooke narrates a series of excerpts from the Ring Cycle, dissecting how the composer used repeated but evolving musical themes to add psychological depth and development to the cycle's myriad characters, not to mention create narrative coherence for the listener through aural terms. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the author's project, readers may also benefit greatly from supplementing Kuenzli's written analysis with recordings of the music she treats, readily available in multiple versions through such sites as www.youtube.com. Kuenzli's discussion of Maurice Denis's reevaluation (in his famous "Définition du neo-traditionnisme") of the Mona Lisa in relation to Wagner's Tannhäuser overture, for example, becomes much richer when the listener experiences simultaneously the power of the painting and the music.

[6] Debora L. Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

[7] Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1989). Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991). Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing. Paris Style 1900*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service, in association with Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1986).

[8] Previous scholars have posited Cluny's more famous *Woman with a Unicorn* tapestries as influencing Vuillard, but Kuenzli astutely notes that Vuillard's admiration in his journal of the pedestrian nature of the scenes depicted in Cluny's tapestries does not sit well with the exotic subject matter of the Unicorn tapestries. Kuenzli further notes that the *Seignorial Life* tapestries entered the museum's collection in the mid-nineteenth century under the name *Scenes of Private Life*.

[9] In the "pleasing" camp Kuenzli places: Roseline Bacou, "Décors d'appartements au temps des Nabis," *Art de France* 4 (1964); James Dugdale, "Vuillard the Decorator. First Phase: The 1890s," *Apollo* 81, no. 36 (February 1965); and Nicholas Watkins, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic," in Gloria Groom, ed., *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930*. In the more contentious realm, Kuenzli situates: Guy Cogeval, "Backward Glances," in *Edouard Vuillard*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, and Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in association with Yale University Press, 2003); Susan Sidlauskas, "Contesting Femininity: Vuillard's Family Pictures," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997); and Susan Sidlauskas, "The 'Surface of Existence': Edouard Vuillard's Mother and Sister of the Artist," in *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[10] Readers may wish to supplement their reading of Kuenzli's significant book further by listening to recordings (readily available online) of the music it discusses. Hearing the changing cadences of Schumann's glorious *Frauenliebe und Leben* song cycle, for instance, while looking at Denis's paintings of the same name can unlock new intricacies over time, much as the original patrons' relationships to Nabi decorative cycles must have evolved during long periods of daily

interaction. The same can be said for reading Mallarmé's poetry or Ibsen's and Maeterlinck's plays.

[11] The degree of specialization demanded by modern academia is, of course, a great asset as regards depth and specificity, but can be a methodological hindrance to the scholar trying to move beyond the rigid classifications of the ivory tower in order to recreate a more holistic image of life as it was actually experienced, as Kuenzli has so admirably attempted. In the absence of an educational system that encourages greater breadth of knowledge, one can hope that in the future scholars from different fields will be more willing to share their expertise by collaborating on interdisciplinary projects like the one Kuenzli has laid out, thus enriching intellectual discourse.