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exhibition review of

Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930, exhibition and catalogue

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Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930

The Art Institute of Chicago, 25 February-16 May 2001; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 26 June-9 September 2001

Gloria Groom, with an essay by Nicholas Watkins and contributions by Jennifer Paoletti and Thérèse Barruel

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In the days when aesthetics were shot through with post-WWII moralism, the word *decorative* connoted "liteness" and corruption by marketplace economics. Boldness and edginess were in, nostalgia and intimacy were out. Traditional ornament was taboo-way too soft, *mon vieux*-and there was nothing like a hard edge to the eye to send the viewer reeling into abject spatiality. Religion was anathema; as it was expunged from serious *Sputnik*-era science it was excommunicated from the laboratory of art as well, or at least relegated to one of its poorly heated back rooms. As for commercial engagement, well, this was the stuff of daubers, as if the proper goal of art was to starve in some boho basement, surrounded by pure and unsaleable canvases. (Perhaps in the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, that art was most commercially viable which best disguised its commercial intent.) The culture of the present influenced the construction of the past, and European Modernism was streamlined into a kind of Robert Moses, unidirectional superhighway, marked (in retrospect) "New York Ab Ex: 100 years ahead."

I exaggerate, of course, and besides, the passing of hardline Modernist theory is hardly today's news. However, it seems worth emphasizing that the history of decorative painting has had its dark ages. In part the problem is semantic: as a descriptive term *decorative* is the adjectival form of the word *décor* and denotes painting that is part of an integrated ensemble; in this sense it encompasses everything from whimsical garlands and borders to large-scale landscapes and figural paintings. At the same time the word can be made to assume the burden of qualitative judgments, indicating painting or sculpture that is "merely" ornamental and that lacks the weight, the rigor, of serious work.

Making matters worse, I expect, is the hegemony of easel painting and its easy portability. The fact that easel paintings can be crated, insured, and shipped around the world has led to the perception that they represent the entire range of French nineteenth-century painting. By the same token, because so many of the century's decorative projects cannot be moved, it is easy for those of us living outside France to forget the enormous significance decorative painting held. Throughout the century federal and civic groups spent lavishly, ornamenting the walls of churches, town halls, libraries, and theaters with frescoes and *marouflé* canvases.

This muralmania reached its apogee in the second half of the century with the extensive decorative programs for such buildings as Charles Garnier's Opera House and, especially, that schizophrenic structure known variously as the Pantheon and the Church of Sainte-Geneviève. Even reproduction is of little help here, since the large size of these works makes them resistant to adequate photographic transmission, to André Malraux's "museum without walls." On this side of the Atlantic, nineteenth-century French decorative painting remains an unfamiliar form of art.

Also important during the nineteenth century, and increasingly so as the century progressed, were decorative works for a domestic setting. In the atmosphere of nervousness and alienation that came to characterize modern life, the home assumed new significance as a manifestation of bourgeois social status as well as a fortress of safety, privacy, and nourishment. Intensifying the primacy of the domestic sphere were nationalist campaigns to honor the family and increase the country's birth rate—and to keep women out of the workplace and away from the university. Technology made daily life more graceful (with the introduction of such amenities as flush toilets and electricity), and the commercial sector found a ready market for all sorts of products that would enhance the attractiveness of the middle-class home. Artists, too, turned their attention to designing objects for domestic use, as well as producing wall panels intended to become part of the interior decoration of the home. That these paintings tend to be smaller in scale than public murals, and that they are more vulnerable to changes in aesthetic fashion, means that of all the decorative panels produced it is the ones for the domestic sphere that are most likely to be separated from their original environments and to turn up in museum exhibitions.

Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930 comprised eighty-five paintings and screens. All of the artists were part of the Nabis, the history of which is ably told in essays by Nicholas Watkins ("The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic") and Gloria Groom ("Coming of Age: Patrons and Projects, 1890-99"). Formed in 1888, the group evolved to include not only Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis, and Ker Xavier Roussel, but also figures such as Jan Verkade, Félix Vallotton, Paul Ranson, and Aristide Maillol. Like many artists at the end of the century, the Nabis sought to extend painting's range through the eradication of the boundaries between what was considered "fine art" and what was considered commercial, or applied, art. Thus they designed posters and book illustrations as well as ceramics, stained glass, screens, and textiles. And, seeking to remove painting from its frame, they created large- and small-scale panels intended for the domestic interior.

One of the finest aspects of the exhibition was the intelligence seen in the installation. Perhaps the greatest problem with exhibiting decorative works like these arises from the fact that they were designed for private, intimate spaces and meant to be part of a domestic ensemble. This is a context so essentially different from the high-ceilinged galleries of a large, public museum that the character of the works can be altered or damaged when they are transported to such an alien setting. Or, to phrase it another way, lacking the highly personalized character of a domestic environment, lacking the atmosphere and the "walls" for which the works were designed, how can a museum help but exhibit the works as, well, easel paintings?

In Chicago, the installation of *Beyond the Easel* boldly asserted the significance of the walls so that they never vanished from the viewer's consciousness (figs. 1, 2). Avoiding the pitfalls of trying to re-create what the original environments might have looked like, the installations used color and pattern to give the walls a bold and continuous presence. The exhibition space was divided into a long series of fairly small rooms, each of which was given a pronounced character. Wall colors ranged from deep resonant yellow to dark brown to intense blue, with one room covered in leaf-patterned wallpaper based on a fin-de-siècle prototype. Some of the first rooms had eccentric polygonal shapes-five-sided, seven-sided, with the walls of unequal length and meeting at odd angles-a touch that disoriented me slightly but ultimately seemed highly effective. After I recovered from the impulse to count the number of walls and eyeball-measure the eccentric angles at which they met, the effect of these rooms, their purposeful deviation from normative four-sided galleries, was to evoke the concept of "environment" so that the works could not be read as the easel paintings they were never intended to be.



Fig. 1, Installation views of *Beyond the Easel*, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Installation views of *Beyond the Easel*, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago [\[larger image\]](#)

In New York the installation was significantly different. The number of galleries was limited to ten, five holding the works from the end of the nineteenth century (more or less) and five devoted to the works after 1900. The walls were crisply and more minimally treated, and the result was a neater and trimmer installation. The first five galleries were painted in colors like chocolate brown and teal blue, and the rooms had deep baseboard moldings and waist-high paneling, which signaled the idea of the private interior. The second five rooms

invoked the steely newness of the early twentieth century: all were painted in shades of grey, and the paneling and moldings were omitted. That the rooms were fewer and that the installation was sparser meant that, to my mind at least, the exhibition in New York seemed clearer and more coherent, though it was easier to forget that the works were designed to relate to a larger environment.

The period before 1900, from which roughly half the paintings date, coincides with the time of the Nabis' greatest coherence and inventiveness. Bonnard's *Twilight*, or *Croquet Game* (1892; one of the few works in the exhibition that began as a Salon painting rather than a decorative work) marks the real beginning of his professional career. Taut in color, the painting is held together by the subtle integration of repeating patterns—the simplified, curvilinear natural forms playing against the doubly abstracted plaids and prints of the croquet-players' clothing. Stylistically the painting shows the influence of Paul Gauguin, via Sérusier, in the exploration of flatness and formal simplification, in place of spatial recession and traditional chiaroscuro. However, unlike the works associated with the school of Pont-Aven, *Twilight* finds its subject in the garden pastimes of a less provincial milieu.

In these same years Bonnard turned his hand to producing designs for standing screens in the Japanese manner: the brilliantly red, three-paneled *Ducks, Heron, and Pheasants* (1889); the designs for *Women in a Garden* (1890–91); and his *Nannies' Promenade: Frieze of Carriages* (1895–96). This last was issued in lithographic form (in an edition of 110) and made available either mounted on a screen or loose. "It's the Place de la Concorde," Bonnard wrote in 1894, "where a young mother passes with her children; [there are] some nannies, some dogs, and at the top, making a border, a waiting station of carriages, all of which is placed on an off-white ground that looks indeed like the Place de la Concorde when there is dust and it resembles a mini-Sahara" (p. 71). One of the most fully realized of Bonnard's designs, *Nannies' Promenade* balances the schematically rendered figures—women, children, and dogs—against broad areas of open space. Across the top of the screen, a line-up of carriages creates a flat, frieze-like strip, which both anchors the image and plays vertical flatness against three-dimensional spatial recession.

One of the difficulties of the Symbolist aesthetic surfaces in some of Maurice Denis's designs. In his *Suite of Paintings on the Seasons* (1891–92) he depicted youthful female figures outlined against richly evocative natural settings. The suite consists of four panels (one each for September, October, April, and July) in which the forms are generally simplified into flat patterns and curvilinear arabesques. This approach works well for the landscape and the figures' clothing, but it tends to devolve into caricature when it comes to facial features. Caricatured physiognomy can be evocative in works whose tone is cynical (Henri Toulouse-Lautrec comes to mind) or parodic, but in Denis's gentle and even rhapsodic paintings the simplified distortions of the faces subvert the otherwise sophisticated patterning of the environments in which the figures are placed. The schism is less evident in the strikingly lush *Ladder in Foliage* (1892) and the more austere linear *April* (1894). Both works were designed as ceiling paintings, and in both cases Denis viewed the figures' faces from below, a vantage point that favors the features' simplification.

In both New York and Chicago, *Denis's Decorations for the Bedroom of a Young Girl* (1895–1900) was installed to great visual effect. In these blue-grounded panels, as in many of Denis's

works, there's a sense of youthful innocence that is about as far as one can get from the (also blue) depictions of the rawness of life on the edge that Pablo Picasso was about to produce. Writing about decorative painting in *La revue blanche* in 1892 Denis had described what he saw as its modern, poetic role:

I can picture quite clearly the role of painting in the decoration of the modern home . . . an interior that is light, simple, and pleasing, neither a museum nor a bazaar. In certain spots, but sparingly, paintings of convenient dimension and appropriate effect. I would want them to have a noble appearance, [to be] of rare and extraordinary beauty: they should contribute to the poetry of man's inner being, to the luxurious color scheme and arabesques without soul; and one should find in them a whole world of aesthetic emotion, free of literary allusions and all the more exalting for that. (p. 8)

Gentle and evocative, *Decorations for the Bedroom of a Young Girl* shares the Symbolist aesthetic as expressed by Stéphane Mallarmé in a survey undertaken by *L'écho de Paris* in 1891: "To *name* an object, that is to suppress the three-quarters of the pleasure of a poem that comes from divining little by little; to *suggest* it, there is the dream." Included in the catalogue is a lengthy discussion of the history of the panels, which were originally commissioned for Siegfried Bing's *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* (1895), but redone for Denis's home in St-Germain-en-Laye.

A crucial source of patronage for the Nabis was the art editor of *La revue blanche*, Thadée Natanson, along with his large extended family. Édouard Vuillard received commissions from various Natansons all through the 1890s, including his *Series of Five Decorative Panels Known as "Album"* (1895) and the pair of paintings *Window Overlooking the Woods and First Fruits* (the latter not included in the exhibition). Varying in format, the oil-on-canvas panels of *Album* depict women engaged in quiet, domestic pastimes—sewing, embroidering, reading, arranging flowers. Haunting in their liminal fragility, the panels intimate representation through the rich interweaving of the patterns and textures of wallpaper, fabrics, and flowers. Commissioned for Thadée and Misia Natanson's Paris apartment, the panels were also shown in Bing's gallery in 1895.

After the turn of the century, the Nabis struggled to adapt their painting to the altered aesthetics of the times, and in the second half of the exhibition the difficulties of that struggle are heavily apparent in quite a few of the works. Ker Xavier Roussel in particular, never the strongest member of the group, produced a number of strange, unresolved panels with classical themes; his *Afternoon of a Faun* (ca. 1930), for example, was inspired by Mallarmé's poem of the same name but resulted in an interpretation that Mallarmé could never have envisioned. Rescuing the second half of the exhibition was Bonnard's enormous triptych *Mediterranean* (1911) and virtually all of Vuillard's paintings—his studies for the five-panel screen, *Place Vintimille* (1909-10), the screen itself (1911), and several decorative panels depicting scenes of Paris and of the French countryside.

Throughout, the artists focused on scenes of women and children, and with few exceptions the ambience was one of secure material ease. This had everything to do with the backgrounds of these artists and the way in which they met and became affiliated. Several of

the group's core—the "three Musketeers" Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel (as well as Thadée Natanson)—had been students together at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris. This was the boys' school where Mallarmé taught English in those years, and among the *lycées* in Paris it had a singular character. The only *lycée* that took day pupils exclusively, it prided itself on being able to mix "the life of the classics and family and worldly life," as one of its former students described it, and as Charles Chassé has documented and discussed. It considered itself "a *lycée* apart, a *lycée* like no other *lycée*." Or, as another former student versified in 1861, the typical student self-image was of someone who was steeped in the chic culture of the day:

*Il a vu le dernier ballet de l'Opéra,
Allez chez Offenbach, au Bois; il y sera.
Il connaît le pastel; il a vu la marine
Que Goupil mit hier en montre à sa vitrine.*

Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel went on to study painting at the Académie Julian, where they linked up with Bonnard; all four subsequently gained admission to the École des Beaux-Arts.

As Denis later wrote, it was Paul Sérusier who named the group "the Nabis," basing the name on the Hebrew word for prophets, *Nebiiim*: "He gave us a name which, with respect to the studios, made us initiates, a sort of secret society with mystical tendencies, habitually in a state of prophetic fervour." The four were then very young; when the group was formed in 1888 Bonnard was twenty-one, Vuillard twenty, and Denis eighteen; when Roussel joined the following year he was twenty-two. They met regularly in restaurants or at chez Paul Ranson (whose home they called "The Temple"), and in the course of time they acquired nicknames: Bonnard was "le Nabi très japonard"; Denis "le Nabi aux belles icônes"; Ranson "le Nabi plus japonard que le Nabi japonard"; and Vallotton "le Nabi étranger." The youth of these painters seems significant because there is a certain element of cuteness about a group of artists banding together, giving themselves nicknames, and setting themselves up as prophetic missionaries—an artistic role to which few but the very young would aspire. That the Nabis were so young probably also explains their adoption of a Hebrew sobriquet. France at this time was beginning to experience a virulent wave of xenophobia and antisemitism, which would erupt in the mid-nineties into the vicious confrontations of the Dreyfus Affair, and it is hard to know how to assess the Jewishness of their chosen artistic identity. (Of the group, Bonnard, Vuillard, and Roussel would support Dreyfus; Denis would stand with the anti-Dreyfusards; and there seems to have been little tension associated with their differences [pp. 33-34].) Lacking any solid explanation for the choice of the word *Nabis*, one is left with the thought that however worldly their *lycée* education might have been, it left the young men naive, if not woefully uninformed.

Beyond the Easel, like the stunningly revelatory "1900: Art at the Crossroads," demonstrated how profoundly diversified the making of paintings was two turns of a century ago and how essential that diversity was in the art of fin-de-siècle France. With both exhibitions, I was mindful of what a relief it is to get off that Modernist superhighway now and again, to wander along less well traveled roads and to lose one's bearings, even.

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Notes

- [1] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and Georges Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 869.
- [2] See Charles Chassé, *The Nabis and Their Period*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), p. 10.
- [3] Ibid. ("He has seen the latest ballet at the Opéra, / Go to Offenbach's, to the Bois [de Boulogne]; he will be there. / He knows about pastels; he has seen the seascape / That Goupil put on display in his window yesterday.") All of the information about the Lycée Condorcet has been based on Chassé's lively account.
- [4] Quoted in Claire Frèches-Thory and Antoine Terrasse, *The Nabis: Bonnard, Vuillard, and Their Circle*, trans. Mary Pardoe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), p. 17.
- [5] *1900: Art at the Crossroads*, by Robert Rosenblum, Mary Anne Stevens, and Ann Dumas (exh. cat., New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2000).

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Installation views of *Beyond the Easel*, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Installation views of *Beyond the Easel*, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago [\[return to text\]](#)