

Bonnard : [brochure] June 21-October 13, 1998

[Maria del Carmen González]

Author

Bonnard, Pierre, 1867-1947

Date

1998

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/212

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.



Bonnard

June 21–October 13, 1998

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Archive
MoMA
18086

Welcome to Bonnard

The Museum of Modern Art Library


Looking does not necessarily mean seeing. To see something is to explore it visually. With Bonnard's paintings, prolonged looking leads to seeing more—and enjoying and understanding more. Bonnard spoke of “the pleasure of seeing, and its rewards.”

Bonnard has been thought a late Impressionist—even a bourgeois nineteenth-century painter interested only in pleasure. The catalogue introduction of Bonnard's first exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1948 went as far as to describe him as an artist who “wished to paint only happy paintings.” Closer knowledge of his life and painting practice, however, shows that he was not a hedonist but rather an obsessive and complex artist. Bonnard strongly believed that “one can take all possible liberties of line, form, proportions, colors to make feeling intelligible and clearly visible.” Bonnard was keenly aware of the subtleties of visual perception and his paintings ask us to move from what he called “crude” to “intelligent” seeing.

PERCEPTION

Bonnard's interest in delaying the process of perception led him to experiment with the qualities of paint, with ways of applying paint, and with ways of leading a viewer to slowly discover the unsuspected in his works. He chose to disregard centuries of representational art where the important figures or objects would be found in the center, appearing unambiguously clear to the viewer's gaze. Bonnard was aware of the difference between seeing something directly—in central, or foveal, vision—and therefore with great clarity, and catching a glimpse of something from

the corner of the eye, in peripheral vision. By composing his paintings with objects or images at the edges of his canvases, he postpones the viewer's awareness of these objects. He also increased his ability to delay recognition of objects by camouflaging them against the ground on which they are placed, or he would distract the viewer with other optical stimuli strategically placed nearby. Additionally, areas of color that look like flat, almost abstract patches when seen in foveal vision, combine and blend when seen in peripheral vision to create volume and the illusion of space.

This brochure is an invitation to see selected paintings in the exhibition indicated by the  icon on the wall labels. The paintings are numbered according to the exhibition catalogue.

More information on Bonnard and visual perception can be found in John Elderfield's exhibition catalogue essay and on the Bonnard subsite on MoMA's Web site.



16

What strikes us first about *Man and Woman* (no. 16) is its odd composition. Dead center, where we expect the principal subject to be, is a tall, narrow object that we only later realize is a hinged dressing screen, seen obliquely. The figures are relegated to the sides. This disruption of the traditional way of organizing a painting forces us to investigate the two divided sides.

Seeing the two isolated nude figures, we immediately become voyeurs of this post-coital couple in their bedroom. The woman, now preoccupied with the kittens in front of her, lies on the bed seemingly unaware of our presence. A narrow band along the picture edge—perhaps a molding or part of a doorway—flanks the woman on the left.

At the bottom, in the lower left-hand corner, a dark curved shape encircles some crosshatched brushwork suggesting either a basket or part of a coverlet. On the right, the man is holding a length of whitish material—a towel or perhaps a sheet—that mirrors the dark border at the left-hand side of the composition.

After prolonged viewing the visual ambivalence in the work begins to reveal itself. What can the jumble of white brushstrokes behind the man mean? Part of a second bed, or is it a pile of sheets? The shadow on his face, the streak of paint across his left knee, and the odd light patches to the left of his shoulder all make us wonder whether we're witnessing the scene itself or looking at its reflection in a mirror or a window. Bonnard's willful ambiguity frustrates conclusive conjecture. He forces us to switch from one reading to the next and back again, freeing us from feeling compelled to be more specific than the painting itself.

The man is Bonnard himself, at the age of 33. The woman is his lifelong companion, Maria Boursin, or as she referred to herself, Marthe de Méligny, at 31. They had been together for seven years, but would not marry until twenty-five years later. It has been surmised that Bonnard was thinking of Adam and Eve on each side of the Tree of Knowledge when he was composing this work.

The primary focus of *After the Meal* (no. 51) is a laden, blue table at the center of the image, its tilted perspective reminiscent of a Cézanne still life. The two bottles of wine initially catch our attention because their comparatively stark color contrasts with the rest of the table top—a brightly colored arrangement of fruit, decanter, baskets, and plates. Given the title of the work, the woman to the right seems occupied with clearing the table. Her lack of awareness of our presence allows us the ease to pace ourselves as to where our eyes might fall next, while her being so engrossed in her task perhaps justifies Bonnard's decision to paint her as literally part of the objects she attends to. The tablecloth fabric, her skirt, and even her legs dissolve into one. Her tiny feet hanging down from the tipped-up table add to the ethereal nature of her floating form. Perhaps her image depicts less her physical reality than her state of mind, her absorption.



51

Understandably, then, we are startled to see another woman entering the room in the upper left-hand corner, for until now our gaze has not been met. Appearing “later” in the painting, she defiantly returns our stare. Simultaneously, though, her form flickers—floating in and out of the swatches of color which lend her substance. Whether we discovered this second figure by following the direction of the curved back of the other woman or by simply turning our attention to the

periphery of the painting is unclear. Either way, the painting's ambiguities now unfold and other oddities slowly begin to present themselves. For example, the two squares beneath the table should logically read as an area of patterned floor, darkened by shadows cast by the table. Yet the difference of their patterning from the rest of the floor and the mirroring of the squares in the cupboard above the table cause our eyes to oscillate around the surface, uncertain of what is being represented. As to the two blue squares at either side of the cupboard, are we to interpret them as windows looking onto open sky, or simply another play of patterning? Bonnard pulls our vision around the surface and, as he said he liked to do, constructs a painting around an empty space.

In *The Provençal Jug* (no. 59) Bonnard imposes his presence as not only observer of a scene but also as director of our own observation by delaying visual perception. Moving beyond the vase to explore the edges of the canvas, an arm appears to the right. Bonnard leads us to this discovery through the zigzag patterning on the cuff and shirtsleeve. And a further surprise is in store. When you focus on the arm and catch the main subject out of the corner of your eye, all of a sudden, the somewhat flat image of the jug and bouquet transforms into a tangible, three-dimensional group of objects in space. Knowing that reality shifts with our looking at it, Bonnard wrote, "A strict compartmentalizing of one's vision nearly always produces something false. The second stage of composition involves integrating certain elements which are outside that rectangle."



59

Landscapes | GALLERY 4



76

The dense growth of *The Garden* (no. 76) resembles an intricately woven tapestry more than a painting. Our eyes dart about the surface, momentarily confused by the flat patches of brilliant color. As in all of his landscapes, it takes time to catch up with Bonnard's sense of space. It is difficult enough to distinguish where one bramble ends and another part of the vegetation begins, and what looks at first like a bramble may well turn out to be something else.

For example, it takes time to see that the narrowing shape stemming from the lower left-hand corner is a road rather than a snakelike form. Subtleties such as the change of scale between the two pairs of birds—when at last we find them—are slow to unfold before our eyes. As we identify the elements of the scene, the two-dimensional patches of paint form a more legible third dimension, and yet Bonnard, as always, manages to insert something that throws off our understanding of what is going on, like the rectilinear shape along the right edge of the canvas. If this is a part of the wall of his home, we must question whether we are observing the scene dead on or from a second-story window. The answer will influence any spatial understanding of the image.



66

The subject of a woman at her toilette has been a preoccupation of artists from Titian to Degas. In *The Bathroom* (no. 66) we see Marthe stooped over in the act of powdering herself with what looks like a puff that peeks out from behind her right thigh. The bathtub on the left is slow to register because its exaggeratedly wide lip and the peculiar angle of its leg make it seem almost animate.

More difficult to understand, though, is what the colors of the painting signify. Are the markings of white underneath the stool meant to represent an accumulation of powder upon the floor tiles, or could this spillage of white paint, dripping from the stool to the floor, be reflected light, or a reflection of the white of the stool? Whether powder or reflection, Bonnard has given it solid form. The color of floor tiles mutates from green-and-blue diamond patterns underneath the tub into orange and blue tiles to the right of Marthe. Mirroring the change in floor tiles, the larger rectangular grayish-white wall tiles above the table at the left of the painting change to vibrant violet with pink edging. Despite the obvious deception of these shifts, our eyes willingly accept the changes as reflections and light.

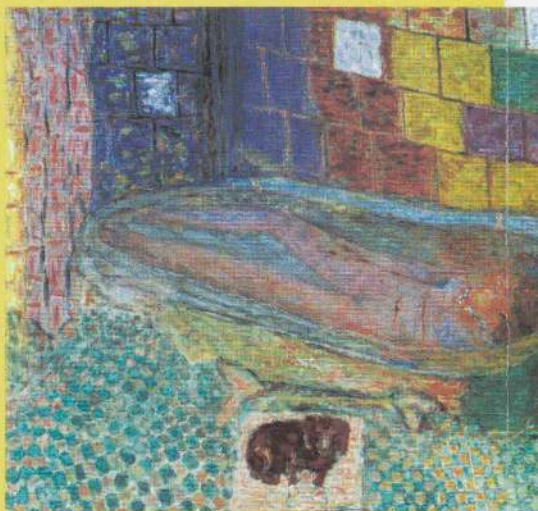
The image of Marthe herself perhaps is the most difficult to read. Her stiffly extended right leg and pointed toes seem more poised for a pirouette than stepping onto a mat or perhaps a stool. Bonnard throws off our understanding of the spatial relationships in the work by placing the large rectangle of patches of pink paint in the lower right. Once again, he skillfully dupes us into perceiving these daubs of paint not as reality but, rather, as believable painted falsehoods.

PAINTING PROCESS

Bonnard once wrote, "Before you add color, you must see things once or see them a thousand times." Interestingly, he seldom painted from life but instead worked from memory or on the basis of small pencil sketches. A wall of his studio or his hotel room would be covered with several unstretched canvases, sometimes joined at the edges, tacked up in several rows, and often placed at uncomfortable heights. Bonnard would even paint more than one painting on a single piece of canvas. He used the same selection of paints on the several paintings he worked on simultaneously. He worked with a brush in one hand and a rag in the other while walking back and forth between the plates of paint on a table and the canvases on the wall. Bonnard's painting habits reveal him to be an artist who, literally turning his back on his subject matter, did not look at it directly, and recreated it from an accumulation of memories. It was quite common for Bonnard to work on a canvas on and off for months at a time, sometimes even years. This method led Picasso to say that he feared dissolving like a bar of soap after seeing one of Bonnard's paintings—for Picasso it was urgent to see a painting completed, while for Bonnard there was always the chance of seeing something anew and therefore of being given access to an endless array of fresh starts. (There are stories, in fact, of his sneaking into museums to touch-up his paintings.

Given the chance to alter a work today he would more than likely do so.) His own words perhaps best describe this attitude, "When one covers a surface with color, one should always be able to try any number of new approaches, find a never-ending supply of new combinations of forms and colors which satisfy emotional needs."

Once a painting was completed, Bonnard would secure the canvas to a stretcher, and if he had not painted it in a perfect rectangle, this meant either adding paint to some edges of the canvas or willingly losing a bit of the image in the process. He explained, "I like to work on an unstretched canvas that is larger than the intended picture. This gives me room for alteration."



94

The *Breakfast Table* (no. 73) tilts in such a way that we might initially see the red patterned area as the floor of the room, due to the breadth of space it seems to cover, almost reaching the far walls of the interior. It is only the contents on it—the teapot, plate, jar, and other objects—and the other face, seen in profile, that allow us to see that it is, in fact,



73

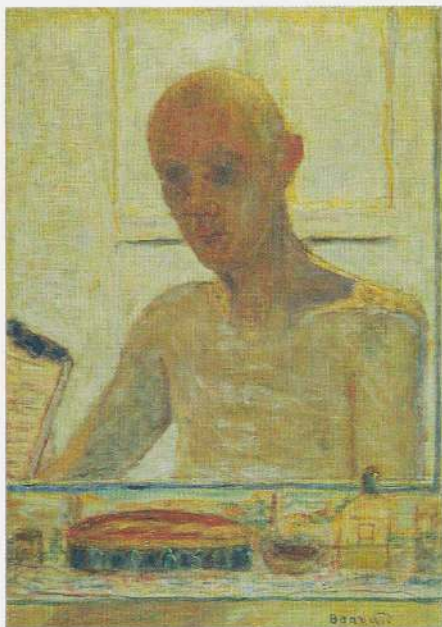
a table. The tiny figure at the rear that looks out from the scene also adds to the odd spatial play within the room. (Is she, in fact, a reflection in a mirror?) Even the walls seem to obey the push-pull patterning of the colors by shifting in unnatural juxtapositions of planes. In the shape of accordion bellows, the door on the left leads to a narrow wall, then shifts into the wall behind the radiator, then to the windows, and again another wall. Bonnard makes us look upon the scene with the same concentration of the profile face which stares out at the teacup (or a jar lid)—transfixed with the astonishment of seeing an object for the first time.

Late Bathers | GALLERY 7



“There is a formula, which fits painting perfectly,” wrote Bonnard, “many little lies create a great truth.” The explosion of efflorescent colors in *Nude in the Bath and Small Dog* (no. 94) almost bars us from making any sense of the painting were it not for a few key recognizable objects—notably the dog and the bathtub within which the immersed figure of Marthe slowly appears. This scene is fantastic enough as it is. We witness the inanimate becoming animate, the bathtub mutating to adhere to Marthe’s form: bulging to accommodate the bend of her right knee and expanding with the curve of her head. The walls seem to gently breathe like a living organism, warping in dazzling waves along with the ripples of the tub water. Ostensibly the scene is serenity itself, yet Bonnard allows us no rest in front of it. Not only does the bathroom sway in our vision, the whole of it will not come into focus at once from any one position. We must move from side to side and back and forth. By thus “performing” the painting we are made all the more conscious of our movement in contrast to the stillness of Marthe’s body. Marthe died in 1942, at age 72, before Bonnard had finished this work.

Although Bonnard in his *Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror* (no. 96) obviously depicts a reflection—we see the mirror's border to the right and the clamp attaching it to the wall—he, nevertheless, manages to restrict our entrance into the painting. Bonnard—aware of the scan path of our gaze and the natural hierarchy of looking at pictures—preys upon our instinct to seek the subject's eyes when first looking at the image. Even though Bonnard adheres to the traditional central placement in composition, dark recesses greet us where his eyes should be. This denial of access and the overall muted colors of the painting add to the sinister nature of this depiction. Our eyes are forced to wander over Bonnard's frail, sinewy body. His flat figure, its lack of shadows and modeling, and the lack of receding space within the room increase the claustrophobic atmosphere of the work. The shallow shelf with toiletries beneath the mirror, the subtle detail of molding behind Bonnard, and what we might presume is a sketchpad reflected in the mirror are our only diversions in this tightly cropped space. Bonnard forces the viewer to witness the intimate but simultaneously denies access to this intimacy. In 1946, the year he stopped working on this self-portrait, Bonnard wrote, "I hope that my painting will endure.... I should like to present myself to the young painters of the year 2000 with the wings of a butterfly." He completed the painting one year before his death.



Maria del Carmen González
Department of Education

96

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- 1867 On October 3 Pierre Eugène Frédéric Bonnard is born in Fontenay-aux-Roses, a Paris suburb. He has an elder brother, Charles, and a younger sister, Andrée.
- 1887 Starts his studies at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.
- 1888 Forms the group 'Nabis' (the Hebrew word for prophets) with other artists from the Académie.
- 1889 Competes unsuccessfully for the Prix de Rome. Meets the painter Edouard Vuillard. Wins first prize in a poster competition.
- 1891 Participates for the first time in the Salon des Indépendants.
- 1893 Meets Maria Boursin, who calls herself Marthe de Mélny (1869–1942). They will be lifelong companions. Marthe's likeness appears in over 380 of Bonnard's paintings.
- 1895 On November 22, Bonnard's father dies.
- 1896 The Galerie Durand-Ruel exhibits his first one-man show. Pissaro believes him to be "a total failure" and claims that Degas, Renoir, and Monet find the exhibition "hideous."
- 1899 Illustrates Alfred Jarry's *Petit Almanach du père Ubu*.
- 1900 Illustrates an edition of erotic poems by Paul Verlaine, *Parallèlement*.
- 1906 One-man show at Ambroise Vollard's. One-man show—the first of many—in the new Galerie Bernheim-Jeune.
- 1918 Meets Renée Monchaty who models for him and will become his lover.
- 1919 On March 16, Bonnard's mother dies. Exhibits three paintings, including *The Terrace*, at the Salon d'Automne.
- 1921 Spends two weeks in Rome with Renée Monchaty.
- 1923 Death of his sister, Andrée, and her husband, Claude Terrasse.
- 1924 Retrospective at the Galerie E. Druet.
- 1925 Bonnard marries Marthe de Mélny in Paris. Monchaty commits suicide in her Paris home.
- 1926 Buys the villa 'Le Bosquet' at Le Cannet, north of Cannes.
- 1928 One-man show at the de Hauke Gallery in New York; it is his first one-man show outside of France.
- 1930 Seven of Bonnard's paintings are included in The Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Paintings in Paris From American Collections*.
- 1934 Exhibition of forty-four works at the Wildenstein Gallery, New York.
- 1935 Exhibits at the Reid & Lefevre Gallery in London.
- 1942 Marthe dies on January 26 after suffering from lung disease for many years.
- 1946 Agrees to a large retrospective in 1947 to be organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in celebration of his eightieth birthday. The retrospective takes place in Cleveland and New York between March and September of 1948.
- 1947 Bonnard dies at Le Cannet on January 23.

PUBLICATION

Bonnard, a 270-page catalogue, with essays by exhibition curators John Elderfield and Sarah Whitfield, a chronology, 158 black-and-white illustrations and 115 color plates, is available at The MoMA Book Store. Cloth \$60, paperbound \$29.95. This publication is made possible by a generous grant from the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund.

This exhibition is supported in part by The Starr Foundation.

Additional funding is provided by Mrs. Melville Wakeman Hall and Catharine and Jeffrey Soros.

An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Touch monitors are provided by Elo TouchSystems.

The exhibition is organized by the Tate Gallery, London, in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art.

Brochure ©1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York