

The Museum of Modern Art

West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Circle 5-8900 Cable: Modernart

No. 53

FOR RELEASE:

Wednesday, October 7, 1964

PRESS PREVIEW:

Monday, October 5, 1964

11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

BONNARD AND HIS ENVIRONMENT, a major survey of 130 paintings, drawings and prints by the last of the impressionists, who through his audacious compositions and use of color became a forerunner of abstract expressionism, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from October 7 through November 29.

The exhibition includes a number of works never before exhibited from the artist's own estate which was tied up in litigation in France from his death in 1947 until last year. The 80 paintings, 20 drawings and 30 prints on view, dating from 1891 to 1946, show the degree to which Bonnard transfigured his environment -- streets of Paris, rooms in which he worked and lived, terraces and gardens, vistas through trees, seascapes, and beautiful women -- by more and more venturesome arrangements of subject matter, and by evermore daring and more subtle combinations of color.

The exhibition is directed by James Elliott, Chief Curator, Los Angeles County Museum, and Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions and Publications, The Museum of Modern Art. Under the sponsorship of the French Government, it is a joint presentation of The Museum of Modern Art, The Art Institute of Chicago and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Among the loans from private collections are such masterworks as The Studio at Le Cannet, with Mimosa (1938-46), Nude in Bathroom (Cabinet de toilette) (1932), Terrace at Vernon (Decor à Vernon) (c.1930-38), Nude before a Mirror (1933), View from the Studio, Le Cannet (1945), Nude in Bathtub (c.1938-41), Interior with Flowers (1924), Mediterranean Coast (c.1943), and Morning: The Open Door (c.1937).

In the book* of the same title, published by the Museum on the occasion of the show, James Thrall Soby points out that it is a paradox of Pierre Bonnard's long and most distinguished career that in the United States he has only lately come to great

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fame. "We have only begun to understand in this country that a convinced flouting of conventions of color and form was quite as important a part of Bonnard's achievement as his unmistakable intimacy and charm."

He also points out that in a very great number of Bonnard's paintings there is a curious and highly inventive use of what can only be called a hide-and-seek solution as to what is meant to be on view. "Time after time in viewing his work one feels a sense of apparition, as when what one assumed to be 'abstract' decorative elements turn into human figures or animals, sometimes only after prolonged observation."

James Elliott, in the title essay in the book, expands this: "Perceiving color with a highly developed sensitivity, he discovered new and unfamiliar effects from which he selected carefully, yet broadly and audaciously....Whether in narrow range or multitudinous variety, the colors move across the surface of his paintings in constantly shifting interplay, lending an extraordinary fascination to common subjects. Familiar sights...are given vivid life. Sights which escape normal attention are isolated for our pleasure....He probed the limits of color experience and discovered wonders seemingly beyond the natural, or precariously balanced on its edge...."

"Moreover, he unconsciously anticipated the latest revolutionary discoveries of the science of perception, which have led to practical application in such things as wide-screen film techniques dependent on peripheral vision to give the viewer a sometimes uncanny sense of actual participation in what is shown. Although he chose not to participate in the more abstract tendencies of his time, these searchings and probings took Bonnard ever closer to abstraction."

Bonnard, born in 1867, began to paint in the 1890s; the earliest paintings in the exhibition are dated 1891 and 1892. As a youth, with his close friend Vuillard, he was allied in the movement called "the Nabis" -- the Hebrew word for prophets. In the early decades of the 20th century he was the friend of artists, writers, magazine editors and impressarios of the stage in Paris. However, he spent most of
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his life in the country throughout France. He tended to restrict his subject matter to daily scenes and particularly to the rooms of family intimacy -- the kitchen, the bedroom, the bath.

Monroe Wheeler, in a biographical comment in the book, describes the artist's affection for his wife, Marthe de M^eligny, who appears in his pictures more than anyone else, his fondness for bicycling, boating and walking, and the enjoyment of motoring which gave him a mobility he loved. A leisurely driver, he stopped frequently to sketch. Though in his middle period when the great part of his work was begun while traveling around, it was finished in his studio. "Often he made use of a single great length of canvas which he affixed to the wall wherever he happened to be, marking on it different sized areas for various pictures. At the end of his sojourn, he would roll it up, put it in his car, unroll it again when he got home, and later cut it up."

The close of Bonnard's life was marked by a singular incident, which Mr. Wheeler relates, having to do with the inheritance of his pictures. When at last he married Marthe de M^eligny, on August 13, 1925, it was according to a provision of French law called "communauté des biens" -- joint ownership. She had always given him to understand that she had no living relatives; it was only when he married her that he learned her real name. She never made a will. After her death he found to his dismay and distress that, as a consequence of her intestacy, all his work would have to be listed and appraised and placed under seal.

Resenting the formalities of law involved -- under the misguiding advice of a lawyer, and confident that he was not acting to anyone's disadvantage, he drew up a will in her behalf, bequeathing to himself what surely belonged to him morally. He signed the will with her name, but did not attempt to disguise his own handwriting, and ingenuously even dated it six months after her death. Nevertheless, it was accepted by the local authorities, and thus he was able to conclude his life serenely, with no further uneasiness about the paintings in his possession. As it happened, he possessed a great many, either because he took particular pride in them or

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because he still hoped to improve them. After his death, the irregularity of Bonnard's situation inevitably came to light, when it was discovered that Madame Bonnard had four nieces. At first it seemed possible that the entire estate might go to these ladies, because of falsification of the will. A difficult sequence of litigations ensued, concluded by a compromise sixteen years later, when the pictures were divided between Bonnard's own family and his wife's.

In New York, the exhibition has been installed by Wilder Green and Alicia Legg. Dates for the other showings are: The Art Institute of Chicago, January 8 - February 28, 1965; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, March 31 - May 30, 1965.

***BONNARD AND HIS ENVIRONMENT** by James Elliott, James Thrall Soby and Monroe Wheeler. 112 pages. 55 black and white photographs. 41 color plates. \$7.50 hard-bound, distributed by Doubleday and Co., Inc.; \$2.95 paperbound, available at the Museum only. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York 10019, New York. Circle 5-8900.