

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

local general

FOR RELEASE: WEDNESDAY
April 7, 1954

PRESS PREVIEW: TUESDAY
April 6, 1954; 2 - 5 p.m.

No. 37

VUILLARD EXHIBITION AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first major retrospective exhibition in this country of paintings and prints by the French symbolist Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from April 7 through June 6. Almost one-third of the 130 oils in the exhibition, organized by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, were borrowed from European private and public collections. Many have never been exhibited in this country, including two large decorative panels flown to New York from the Comédie des Champs-Élysées in Paris for this show.

The paintings date from 1888, when Vuillard was 20 years old, to 1937, three years before his death. The great majority, however, are the mysterious and enchanting interiors, portraits of his dressmaker mother and his sister and of his famous friends, and Paris park scenes painted in the 1890s when Vuillard was successful and much admired, not only by his painter-contemporaries such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Bonnard, but also by poets and writers such as Mallarmé and Andre Gide.

As Vuillard seldom exhibited his work after 1905 when his personal style began to run counter to the vigorous movements of the day -- fauvism, cubism and surrealism -- his work fell into a kind of critical obscurity. There has, however, been a renewed interest in him since a retrospective exhibition in Paris in 1938 and particularly, Mr. Ritchie points out in the exhibition catalog* with the revival of interest in the symbolist movement generally which has coincided with the revelation of Vuillard's distinctive contribution to it. In summing up Vuillard's importance to the art of our time, Mr. Ritchie says:

"...the extraordinary quality and maturity of his early work can never be denied and it may well have a peculiar relevance for us today. Is there possibly some connection between the striving of a Vuillard to retain something of that inwardness, that self-searching narcissism which was the symbolist's answer in the '80s and '90s to the materialism of the impressionists and the academies, and the struggle of artists today to maintain their artistic integrity at all costs? ... As disillusionment has followed these tragic events (of the last half century), the individual has been forced in on himself in an attempt to discover some personal standards on which to base his conduct. The sensitive artist has likewise felt compelled to formulate, or express himself through, an increasingly personal imagery. Vuillard's private world of images, derived from the objects and persons intimately associated with him, may take on a new meaning, then, in the light of present-day artists' needs and desires. And in the same way that symbolist poets like Verlaine and Mallarmé have had a profound influence on 20th century poets, it is possible that the symbolist values of Vuillard's "intimate" paintings still have a potential significance for painters today."

Vuillard was one of a group of young rebel art students in Paris who, influenced by Gauguin's art and Mallarmé's symbolist poetry, banded together in 1889 and called themselves the Nabis, a name derived from the Hebrew word for prophet. Maurice Denis

(more)

* EDOUARD VUILLARD, by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie. 104 pp.; 88 illus., 25 in color; \$3.50 cloth; \$2.50 paper.

and Paul Sérusier, the principle spokesmen, and Pierre Bonnard were also members of the group. The symbolist movement, with which the Nabis were in sympathy, was then at its height, with Mallarmé in poetry and Gauguin in painting as two of its leaders. "In some ways a latter-day revival of the romantic movement of the first half of the 19th century," Mr. Ritchie points out, "it [the symbolist movement] sought to counter the documentary realism of the naturalist movement in letters, typified by the novels of Zola, and the literal translation of visual sensations by the impressionist painters. At the same time it fought the neo-classic verse techniques of the academic poets, the so-called Parnassians, and the mechanical 'finish' of academic painters."

The Dressmakers (1891), Little Girls Walking (1891) and The Wood (1892) demonstrate Vuillard's reaction to the Nabi symbolist theories. The flat, boldly outlined areas of color, signifying by their transformation and deformation of natural forms and color the liberty of the individual artist to interpret nature according to his expressive needs, and the narrow range of colors are typical of this period of his work.

Like his friend Bonnard, Vuillard chose to paint the world he knew intimately, his home and his mother's dressmaking workroom and the familiar parade of people in the parks and gardens of Paris. But his eye found a different meaning in the common things.

"Having explored to his complete satisfaction the extreme possibilities of the redness of red, the greenness of green, the blueness of blue, and having assembled his colors in a striking variety of orders, retaining to the full the flatness of his panel or canvas, he proceeded to explore as early as 1893, in what one feels is a Mallarméan spirit, the mysterious possibilities of an infinite gradation of color hues to extract thereby the subtlest overtones, the essential perfume of intimate objects and activities in and about his home," Mr. Ritchie says.

Vuillard's relationship to Mallarmé was very close. He was an intimate friend of the symbolist poet and attended the famous Tuesday evenings in his apartment on the rue de Rome. One of the four paintings he did of Mallarmé's house at Valvins is in the exhibition. Many of his pictures of the '90s, Mr. Ritchie points out, follow Mallarmé's dictum on poetry - "To name an object is to do away with three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem which is derived from the satisfaction of guessing little by little: to suggest it, to evoke it -- that is what charms the imagination." "By a process of telescoping planes in a picture, for example, as in the Interior at l'Etang la Ville or Mother and Baby, the foreground, middleground and background overlap and fuse into a pulsating space that bears a kind of relation to the fusion of imagery in a poem by Mallarmé," Mr. Ritchie continues.

Vuillard insisted on the primacy of art over nature and like Mallarmé, in order to emphasize and clarify the process of symbolic transformation of nature, he chose the simplest, most intimate objects in his room, a curtain, a vase, or a lamp.

(more)

Mr. Ritchie continues, describing three pictures in the exhibition:

"...there is in such pictures as The Green Lamp, Room under the Eaves, and Mystery, a haunting note of sadness, a mysterious gloom that is truly Mallarmean. And the very compactness of these pictures, their smallness, packed to the edges as they are with suggestive imagery, recall Mallarmé's compressed, highly concentrated short poems. Above all, there is a Mallarméan narcissism in Vuillard's constant pre-occupation not only with himself in his self portraits but, by extension, with his mother - reading, preparing meals, at work as a dressmaker, engaging in all the endless little activities of a bourgeois housewife. It is as if he sees in her and in the beloved furnishings and patterned walls of his home a constant reminder, a projection of his whole being. This is the mystery, this is the secret of Vuillard, as narcissism in varying degrees is the secret of all his fellow symbolists."

In addition to these small paintings of his home and the park, ("Black Cat in Courtyard" measures only 7 3/8 x 6 3/4"), the exhibition also includes five of the large decorative panels Vuillard painted for the homes of his friends and patrons, among them Alexandre Natanson, one of the editors of the Revue Blanche, and novelist Claude Anet. Mural painting was of particular interest to the Nabi group, who believed that a work of art should be decorative. As Verkade, the Dutch painter who became a Nabi, said

"Painting must not usurp a freedom which cuts it off from the other arts! The painter's work begins where the architect decides that his work is finished! Give us walls and more walls to decorate! Down with perspective! The wall must be kept as a surface, and must not be pierced by the representation of distant horizons. There are no such things as pictures, there is only decoration."

Vuillard's tree-defined intervals of space, the arabesque of figure and branch set off against the verticals of tree trunks and the blocking out of the horizon by cutting the composition off at top and sides across the thickset mass of foliage as in Under the Trees, (1894), commissioned by Natanson, is typical of the spatial devices he used to achieve an all-over flatness of effect in order not to destroy or penetrate the wall he was decorating.

"His park scenes have a curious quality of the indoors about them, so enclosed and sheltered are the spaces he describes, so lacking in movement or drama are the incidents he observes - figures among the trees, almost as static as the trees themselves, a nursemaid with her charges, a woman reading in a garden, or simply sitting in a garden, figures in a room, and around a piano. Here he presents the quiet, ordinary relationships of the animate and the inanimate, the fusion of person and thing until both become one, and every shape, every color, every accent merges into a sustained tapestry-like rhythm comparable to the continuum of sound in a passage of Wagner or Debussy,"

Mr. Ritchie says, comparing Vuillard's painting to music by two composers much admired by the Nabi group.

Mr. Ritchie goes on to say that by his particular selection of decorative devices, his closed hermetic compositions, his use of arabesque motifs and in the overall pattern of his designs, Vuillard made a notable contribution to the Art Nouveau style that sprang into fashion in the '90s.

Although many of the stage sets designed by Vuillard and other Nabi artists, have been destroyed, fortunately the most important theater decorations by Vuillard were painted for the foyer of the Comédie des Champs-Élysées and survived. These 1913 panels, one a scene from Molière's Le Malade Imaginaire and one a scene from

(more)

Bernard's Le Petit Café have been lent to the exhibition for the New York showing only. These panels have never been seen out of Paris before.

The thirty-two prints by Vuillard in the exhibition date from a color lithograph Siesta (The Convalescence), made in 1893, to an etching made in 1937. As with the paintings in the show, however, the majority of the prints were made during the '90s when Vuillard and the other Nabis were active in this medium. "Although limited in quantity and restricted in period," Mr. Lieberman, Curator of Prints at the Museum of Modern Art, says, "a few of Vuillard's single prints are landmarks in the history of modern printmaking. And in color lithography nothing has ever excelled the brilliance and freshness of his album Paysages et Intérieurs." *

After 1900 the Nabis practically disbanded as a group. Each went his own way, and almost without exception it was a way that ran counter to all the major movements of 20th century art. "Their idealist, decorative program was so completely at odds with the temper and changing ideologies of the new century that all but one of them, Bonnard, found himself more or less stranded on the sidelines. Even Vuillard, perhaps the most brilliant of the Nabis, could not quite escape the fate of his friends," Mr. Ritchie says.

Vuillard's painting after 1900 reflects his new connections with the fashionable world as opposed to the old life of cafe discussions, literary inspirations and the close, germinal atmosphere of his own private existence at home. He began to paint commissioned portraits, and as Mr. Ritchie comments on these later pictures, "...in an excruciating effort to record the most minute detail, he came to sacrifice, more often than not, unity in his compositions and harmony in his color orchestration." But in a few of these later pictures, such as Dr. Gosset Operating or Dr. Louis Viau in his Office or a study for a painting of Bonnard in his studio, he brings a Degas-like perception of the unconventional pose or incident.

Among the major works from abroad which Mr. Ritchie obtained for the exhibition and which will be seen for the first time in this country are two large decorative panels lent by James Dugdale, Esq., of Crathorne, Yorkshire, England, Interior with Cipa Gedebski and Missia lent by Sir Alexander Korda, Mother and Baby from the Glasgow Art Gallery, Two Women by Lamplight from the Musée de l'Annonciade à Saint-Tropez, France and a famous Interior of 1893 from the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland.

* "Notes on Vuillard as a Printmaker," Edouard Vuillard, by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie.