

ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard  
Prints

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Spring 1984

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Pierre Bonnard. "At The Theatre." 1899. Color lithograph. 7 7/8" x 15 3/4" . . . . .	3
2	Pierre Bonnard. "Mallarme." 1896. Drawing Private collection, Paris . . . . .	5
3	Pierre Bonnard. "Reverie." 1893. Lithograph. 7 1/8" x 5 1/8" . . . . .	9
4	Pierre Bonnard. "Portrait of Renair." 1916. Etching. 10 5/8" x 7 7/8" . . . . .	10
5	Pierre Bonnard. "Portrait of Ambroise Vollard." 1924. Etching. 14" x 9 1/2" . . . . .	11
6	Pierre Bonnard. <u>Parallelement</u> . Illustrations for the poems of <u>Paul Verlaine</u> . 1900. Lithographs . . . . .	13
7	Pierre Bonnard. <u>Parallelement</u> . Illustrations for the poems of <u>Paul Verlaine</u> . 1900. Lithographs . . . . .	14
8	Pierre Bonnard. <u>Daphnis and Chloe</u> . Illustrations for the poems of <u>Longus</u> . 1902. Lithographs . . . . .	15
9	Pierre Bonnard. <u>Daphnis and Chloe</u> . Illustrations for the poems of <u>Longus</u> . 1902. Lithographs . . . . .	16
10	Pierre Bonnard. <u>Daphnis and Chloe</u> . Illustrations for the poems of <u>Longus</u> . 1902. Lithographs . . . . .	17
11	Pierre Bonnard. <u>Daphnis and Chloe</u> . Illustrations for the poems of <u>Longus</u> . 1902. Lithographs . . . . .	18
12	Pierre Bonnard. "The Laundry-Maid." 1896. Color lithograph. 12 1/4" x 18 1/8" . . . . .	20
13	Pierre Bonnard. "Avenue du Bois." 1899. Color lithograph. 12 1/4" x 18 1/8" . . . . .	21
14	Pierre Bonnard. "The Arc de Triomphe." 1899. Color lithograph. 12 5/8" x 18 1/2" . . . . .	22
15	Pierre Bonnard. "Boating." 1897. Color lithograph . . . . .	23
16	Pierre Bonnard. "Child With Lamp." 1897. Color lithograph. 12 5/8" x 17 3/4" . . . . .	25

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
17	Pierre Bonnard. "The Radiator." Color lithograph. 25 5/8" x 19 5/8" . . . . .	26
18	Pierre Bonnard. "Woman Seated In Her Bath." 1942. Color Lithograph. 9 7/8" x 11 3/8" . . . . .	27
19	Pierre Bonnard. "The Bathtub." Color lithograph 19 5/8" x 25 5/8" . . . . .	28
20	Edouard Vuillard. "Interior With Pink Wall-paper I, II, III." 1899. Color lithograph. 14" x 11" . . . . .	30
21	Edouard Vuillard. "The Avenue." 1899. Color lithograph . . . . .	32
22	Edouard Vuillard. "Across The Fields." 1899. Color lithograph . . . . .	33
23	Edouard Vuillard. "The Jardin des Tuileries." 1896. Color lithograph . . . . .	34

PRINTS: Pierre Bonnard and  
Edouard Vuillard

I chose to write on the graphic works of Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard because I identified with their imagery and use of printmaking. My work is based on rooms I have entered, where a corner or objects on a table quicken and stimulate me visually. This arrangement spells out something very personal; a culmination of reality shown through form. I feel these two artists also expressed their inspiration of reality through the use of interior space and objects belonging there. I also identified with their devotion to the Mallarmean idea of being acutely aware of personal experiences as an event; and in clarifying and giving merit to this it deepens and intensifies a significant experience.

THE NABIS

Vuillard and Bonnard were both identified with a group known as the Nabis, or prophets. It was Vuillard and his close friend, Ker-Xavier Roussel, who began studying at the Lycee Condorcet in 1879, and there they met Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Serusier, Felix Vallotton, and Paul Ranson. These were youthful artists who saw themselves as "decadent" and in rebellion against the Impressionist movement. They considered the group of a "...superior mentality and culture, not limited to the visual arts."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Chasse, The Nabis and Their Period, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1960), p. 12.



Vuillard and Bonnard were especially involved in making posters and illustrations for theatrical magazines, plays, poetry, and books. They grew up having art galleries and the theater (Fig. 1) as an integral part of their education. The atmosphere at the Condorcet was one in which "...they looked as though they are not working-because they live half on the school benches, half in the world."<sup>2</sup> It was part of a creative "gusto" and a refusal to divide art from everyday human experience. Bonnard stated: "Our generation always sought to link art with life. At that time I personally envisaged a popular art that was of everyday application."<sup>3</sup>

It was early in 1889 that the group officially elected to be called the Nabis, with Serusier and Denis as their spokesmen. This had been preceded by a trip to Brittany made by Serusier in 1888. Serusier had met and was under the influence of Paul Gauguin for that summer. He returned to Paris with an almost religious conviction for the values and theories developed by Gauguin. These principles became the "commandments" for the Nabis; and the idea made concrete appeared painted on the lid of a cigar box. It was a landscape of Bois d'Amour which "...demonstrated Gauguin's principles of flat, boldly outlined areas of color, signifying by their transformation and deformation of natural forms and colors the liberty of the individual artist to interpret nature according to his expressive needs."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Charles Chasse, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Bouvet, Bonnard: The Complete Graphic Work, (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, Edouard Vuillard, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), p. 10.



Fig. 1 Pierre Bonnard. "At The Theatre". 1899. Color lithograph.  
7 7/8" x 15 3/4"

The Impressionist wanted to capture nature and to put down what they saw. The Nabis "...strove for images that projected beyond the material limits of the natural world."<sup>5</sup> The spokesman Serusier articulated that "...the artist, while using the forms of the natural world for his subject, must not be limited by the appearance of these forms. The shapes of nature are to be freely altered, even distorted and flattened, and their colors transmuted to suit the individual expressive needs of the artist."<sup>6</sup> Denis simplified the Nabis attitude even further: "Remember that a picture -- before being a battle horse, a female nude or some anecdote -- is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."<sup>7</sup>

Not only was Gauguin a major influence to the Nabis, but also the French Surrealist poets. The greatest influence was Stephane Mallarme (Fig. 2), who Vuillard knew well through his attendance at the poet's famous Tuesday evening gatherings with other ardent supporters. Mallarme's attitude toward poetry and art followed and harmonized closely with the Nabis reaction:

Mallarme, speaking of the Parnassians -- the academic poets of his time, said that they 'take the thing just as it is and put it before us' -- and consequently they are deficient in mystery: they deprive the mind of the delicious joy of believing that it is creating. To name an object is to do away with the 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Vuillard, (New York: Wildenstein Co., Inc., 1964), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, p. 14.



Fig. 2 "Mallarmé." 1896.  
Drawing. Private  
Collection, Paris.  
Pierre Bonnard.

Mallarme was constantly aware of the life around him. He sifted through an experience in order to clarify it and give it a symbol.<sup>9</sup> This symbol afforded him a way to deepen and enhance a significant experience, and in doing so "...the artist knows there is something superior to sentiment."<sup>10</sup>

Most of the Nabis had a dedication to the decorative panel. Gauguin felt art was decoration. Albert Aivier, an art critic, wrote for the group that art should be "...decorative; for decorative painting...is nothing but a manifestation of art at once subjective, synthetist, symbolist and ideist...Painting can only have been created to decorate with thoughts, dreams and ideas the blank walls of human buildings."<sup>11</sup> Around 1890, the influence was to decorate the walls; but not to depict a perspective or horizon because the walls should be kept as a surface. Vuillard and Bonnard lifted this decorative idea to an advanced level by using a Japanese sense of pattern to negate levels of depth. These panels have an intricate arabesque of images woven together by checks, diamonds, lines, and color. The decorative condition did not go far enough for the Nabis because "...a picture had merit only when it possessed style;...when the artist succeeded in changing the shape of the object...and imposing on them contours and colour that expressed his own personality."<sup>12</sup> This style had to have the arabesques and also monumentality. Monumental did

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<sup>9</sup>Wallace Fowlie, Mallarme, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 29.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup>Charles Chasse, p. 13.

not necessarily mean big or large, but consisted of complexity and mystery similar to the Mallarmean ideology. This fantasy and complexity was created through carefully chosen detail, curving lines, and nuances of color.<sup>13</sup>

The Nabis were confident that with a joint effort they could agree upon a definition and participation in this common style. What evolved was the realization that style could have polar interpretations. For Denis and Serusier, style was "...a subordination of the detail to the essential."<sup>14</sup> For Bonnard and Vuillard, it was a more personal and intimate process. "Life flows from the gesture of the artist's hand in its pursuit of visual sensation."<sup>15</sup> This preoccupation with a group style eventually led to the disbanding of the Nabis after 1900.

#### BONNARD

After finishing his education, Bonnard earned a living and developed a reputation through illustration and lithography. Color lithography before 1870 had been employed primarily for commercial use.<sup>16</sup> Jules Cheret was a French artist who applied lively colors and bold images as a source for "fine art." The color theories of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists enhanced the already existing criteria, and this elevated the aesthetic appreciation for the medium. Between 1870 and 1900, the artist pursued color lithography with an organizational system using

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<sup>13</sup>Charles Chasse, p. 119.

<sup>14</sup>Charles Chasse, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 7.

flat color patterns and multiple overprinting. The individual artist used these devices to acquire personal "...luminous and graduated nuances of color modulation that envelop the image."<sup>17</sup>

After seeing a poster made by Bonnard, Toulouse-Lautrec immediately began working with Ancourt, Bonnard's printer. In 1896, Renoir saw illustrations made by Bonnard for Peter Nansen's book Marie. He wrote Bonnard saying: "You have a distinct quality of charm. Do not neglect it. You will encounter better painters than yourself. But yours is a precious gift..."<sup>18</sup> In looking at many of his line etchings and black and white lithography, there is an overwhelming concentration on line and a unique balance of spontaneity and control. In the lithograph "Reverie" (Fig. 3) the marks seem selected and economical, yet they still possess movement. The etchings "Portrait of Renoir" (Fig. 4) and "Portrait of Ambroise Vollard" (Fig. 5) have an element of caricature, especially those familiar with Bonnard. Erratic strokes in the handling of the needle were used in the Renoir print. As in a sketch, Bonnard was compiling the information as quickly as possible. Vollard seems calm and content to sit and stroke his cat. The gesture here is exact and pure; a symbol of the very character of serenity.

Bonnard made many illustrations for books and poems, most of these done in line drawing using etching or lithography. The specific dimensions for a book format disciplined him to a set size and forced him to consider composition more readily.<sup>19</sup> The lithographs for

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<sup>16</sup>Clinton Adams, p. 166.

<sup>17</sup>Clinton Adams, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 8.



Fig. 3 Pierre Bonnard. "Reverie." 1893.  
Lithograph. 7 1/8" x 5 1/8".





Fig. 4 Pierre Bonnard. "Portrait of Renoir."  
1916. Etching. 10 5/8" x 7 7/8".



Fig. 5 Pierre Bonnard. "Portrait of Ambroise Vollard." 1924. Etching. 14" x 9 1/2".

Parallelement, by Paul Verlaine, captures the women in very sensual and erotic gestures (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). An intimate interaction and exchange of affection is vivid in the prints of Daphnis et Chloe, poems by Longus. A gentle touch and embrace (Fig. 8, Fig. 9) or an amorous glance (Fig. 10, Fig. 11) gives a human condition to the art and precipitates emotion. Drawing in itself was an emotion for Bonnard: "Whether commas, dots, or swirl's, all the notations he invented express the rhythm of life itself, and also the way the thing observed is continually modified by the act of seeing."<sup>20</sup>

The color lithographs by Bonnard are intricate and sophisticated passages of color and vacillating shapes. The prints are full of "beautiful greys", which appear as gauzes or veils of pigment luminously layered one upon another. Bonnard recites: "I've discovered a lot that applies to painting by doing colour lithography. When you have to judge tonal relationships by juggling with four or five colours, superimposing them, you learn a great deal."<sup>21</sup> The European tradition at this time was to administer an average of five to seven color plates (or stones) to extend and develop the image.<sup>22</sup> Bonnard made few alterations or corrections in his graphic pieces. He worked from numerous sketches derived from watercolor and pen and ink.<sup>23</sup> The prints still possess a fresh, spontaneous demeanor beyond their premeditation.

Bonnard built his images on the Parisian's holidaying in the park, going to the theatre, strolling the boulevards day and night, and the

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<sup>20</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup>Clinton Adams, p. 170.

<sup>23</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 7.



Fig. 6 Pierre Bonnard. "Parallement." Illustrations for the poems of Paul Verlaine. 1900. Lithographs.



Fig. 7 Pierre Bonnard. "Parallelement."  
Illustrations for the poems of Paul  
Verlaine. 1900. Lithograph.



Fig. 8 Pierre Bonnard. "Daphnis and Chloe." Illustrations for the poems of Longus. 1902. Lithograph.



Fig. 9 Pierre Bonnard. "Daphnis and Chloe." Illustrations for the poems of Longus. 1902. Lithograph.



Fig. 10 Pierre Bonnard. "Daphnis and Chloe." Illustrations for the poems of Longus. 1902. Lithograph.





Fig. 11 Pierre Bonnard. "Daphnis and Chloe." Illustrations for the poems of Longus. 1902. Lithograph.

life of the family and home. The objects of familiarity are obscured by a deeper sense of anticipation and mystery. "What remains constant is marked preference for the unusual and unexpected and, underlying the humour and irony, a distinct empathy with his models."<sup>24</sup> This empathy is prevalent in "The Laundry-Maid" (Fig. 12), in which the viewer discerns the weight of the maid's basket and the limp in her gait. An awkward balance is set up between the basket and umbrella, and at any moment she may topple. There is a sense of isolation and poverty evoked from her solid black body, but humor and animation enter with the stiff-legged dog approaching her.

"Avenue due Bois" (Fig. 13) and "The Arc de Triomphe" (Fig. 14) have an immediacy in the character of the lines and the excitement and movement of the city. Nothing is concrete; the trees and sky are as agitated and alive as the horsemen riding in the avenue. The subtlety of the ochre and brown colors accentuates the excited marks.

The color lithograph "Boating" (Fig. 15) celebrates the pleasure of boating on a sunny day or lounging seated next to the water. The print seems broken by the shapes from the land, figures, and the river; a patchwork composition held together by the connecting green color. Bonnard took "...delight in the power that can take these simple pleasures and translate them into a life-enhancing vision."<sup>25</sup> It is the city, with its many people crowding to the parks and rivers on a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

Bonnard exchanged into visual terms the epitome of domestic life. These are glimpses of private moments in the home. He took the

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<sup>24</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>Bonnie L. Grad, p. 256.



Fig. 12 Pierre Bonnard. "The Laundry-Maid." 1896.  
Color lithograph. 12 1/4" x 18 1/8".



Fig. 13 Pierre Bonnard. "Avenue du Bois." 1899. Color lithograph.  
12 1/4" x 18 1/2".



Fig. 14 Pierre Bonnard. "The Arc de Triomphe." 1899. Color lithograph. 12 5/8" x 18 1/2".

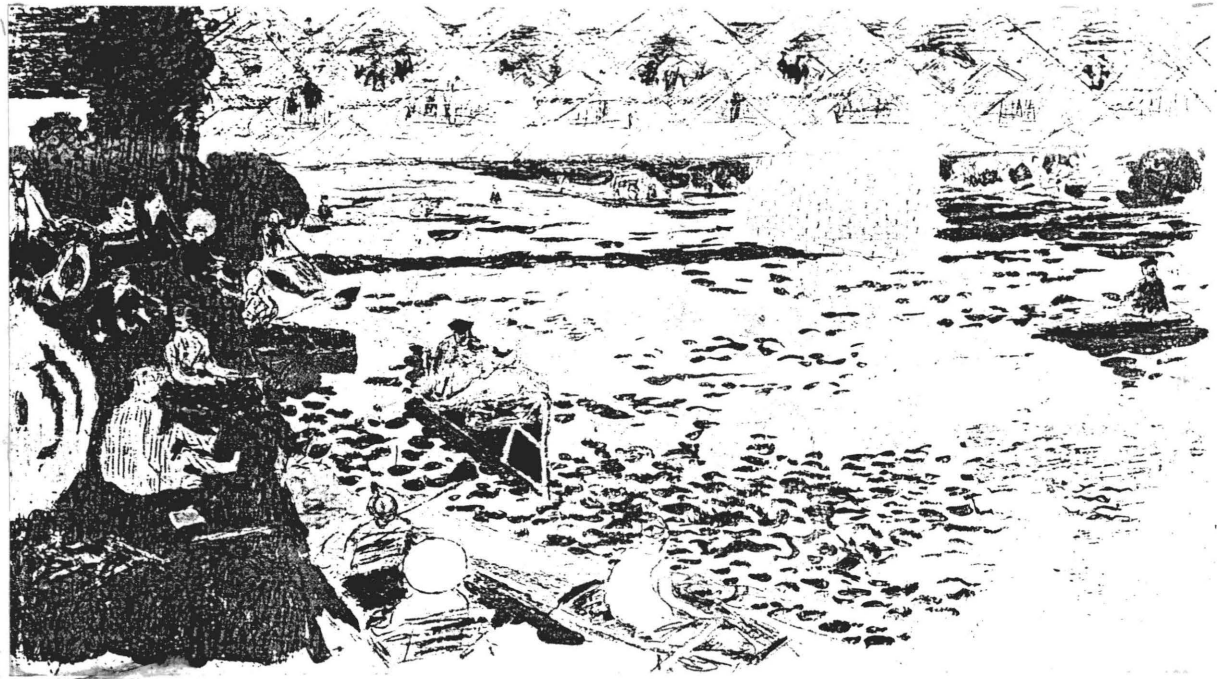


Fig. 15 Pierre Bonnard. "Boating." 1897. Color lithograph.

commonplace and made it original. Searching for the distinctions, he developed a new form following his own reality and integrity.

The "Child With Lamp" (Fig. 16) personifies the intensity and concentration of everyday experience. The child is enveloped in his own world; the interior space becomes the interior mind. The objects and arrangements in Bonnard's rooms have as much character and validity as the figure. It is hard to distinguish the women in the doorway of "The Radiator" (Fig. 17) from the other elements. It is after prolonged observation that what appears to be a decorative element becomes a person. Every item is an integral part of the interior space. In "The Radiator", the chair at the bottom left peeks out from the corner, just as the women peeks through the doorway.

The figure, slumped over with rounded shoulders, methodically washes her feet in the "Woman Seated In Her Bath" (Fig. 18). The agitated line quality is like water reflections disturbed by movement. The figure in "The Bathtub" (Fig. 19) sits meditatively staring at her washcloth. The flesh of both women is treated like the bathroom tile, each reflects the "...play of light and shimmering colors."<sup>26</sup>

Bonnard took the simple pleasures of domestic Parisian life and made them an event. Like Mallarme, he sifted through an experience to clarify it with visual images. The marks he made were an emotion brought to life: "It was for the observer to explore the meaning for himself, to read between the lines -- lines which, as Bonnard noted, could be 'calm, vehement, pure, irregular, animated, wavering.'"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 8.



Fig. 16 Pierre Bonnard. "Child With Lamp." 1897. Color lithograph. 12 5/8" x 17 3/4".





Fig. 17 Pierre Bonnard. "The Radiator."  
Color lithograph. 25 5/8" x 19 5/8".



Fig. 18 Pierre Bonnard. "Woman Seated In Her Bath."  
1942. Color lithograph. 9 7/8" x 11 3/8".



Fig. 19 Pierre Bonnard. "The Bathtub." Color lithograph.  
19 5/8" x 25 5/8".

## VUILLARD

Vuillard studied printmaking through the same master printer that Bonnard had used, Ancourt. He preferred a thick lithographic pencil which glided easily over the stone.<sup>28</sup> He often scratched back into the stone with the scraper to produce airy, delicate half-tones and modulations.<sup>29</sup> Vuillard's smaller lithographs were published as programs for L'Oeuvre, a theatrical production company, and for the magazine Revue Blanche. Ambroise Vollard commissioned "The Garden of Tuileries" and "Children Playing" for his album of prints. Vuillard's color lithographs were complex innovations, usually employing five to six different images on stone for each color necessary.<sup>30</sup> His most impressive contribution to printmaking is the album of thirteen lithographs entitled Pasages et Interieurs. These passages are a maze of pattern, line, and color. The pigment in the "Interior with Pink Wallpaper" (Fig. 20) is vivid; they are absolutes of strawberry red, blueberry blues, and the yellow of lemons. The color entices the viewer, but the incessant movement of line and complex pattern draws the eye inward to search through and around the forms. Similar to Bonnard, a figure peeks from behind a door, but there are passages beyond each opening leading to other rooms. The perspective is awkward, but it holds a mystery - an interest for the print. "Unity for Vuillard was the discontinuous arabesques and the calligraphic sinuosities of Japanese manner."<sup>31</sup> He was brilliant at

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<sup>28</sup>Claude Roger Maux, Vuillard: His Life and Work, (London: P. Elek, 1977), p. 183.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup>Charles Chasse, p. 63.

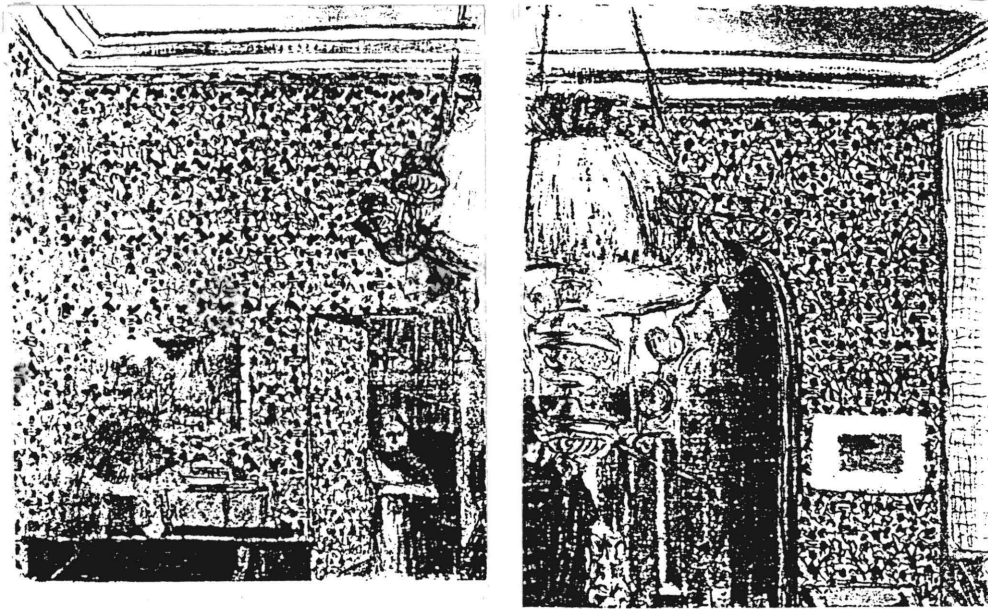


Fig. 20 Edouard Vuillard. "Interior With Pink Wall-paper I, II, III." 1899. Color lithograph. 14" x 11".

expressing the idea of intimacy and fusion between the figure and his environment.<sup>32</sup>

Like Bonnard, Vuillard sought to describe the middle-class lifestyle, and he used the outdoor urban space of the parks and avenues to do so. In "The Avenue" (Fig. 21), Vuillard "...generated a feeling of expansiveness, luminosity, and movement."<sup>33</sup> The figures seem to float along and everything is permeated with a golden, atmospheric light. The high horizon forces the viewer downward to the street and blocks of grass, similar to an anchor holding the image firm.

The color lithographs "Across the Fields" (Fig. 22) and "The Jardin des Tuileries" (Fig. 23) express open vistas and an air of relaxation. Vuillard seems to accentuate the idea of uninterrupted skies and large bands of lawn. The people stroll along the path, but they do not venture into those open areas. They proceed along, one following the other. Vuillard does not suggest a dark, ugly side to the life in and around Paris. His fascination appears to be with the brightly patterned figures and interiors; perhaps as a celebration of style and the arabesques of life.

Pierre Bonnard and Eduoard Vuillard were both men of the late 19th century and especially of Paris. They were initially influenced by Gauguin and the Nabis, and by the French Surrealist poets. Mallarme harmonized with their idea of evoking an image, and with sifting through an experience to clarify and deepen the exposure; the exposure of thoughts, ideas, and inspiration on the blank walls of human buildings. The

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<sup>32</sup>Charles Chasse, p. 64.

<sup>33</sup>Bonnie L. Grad, p. 11.

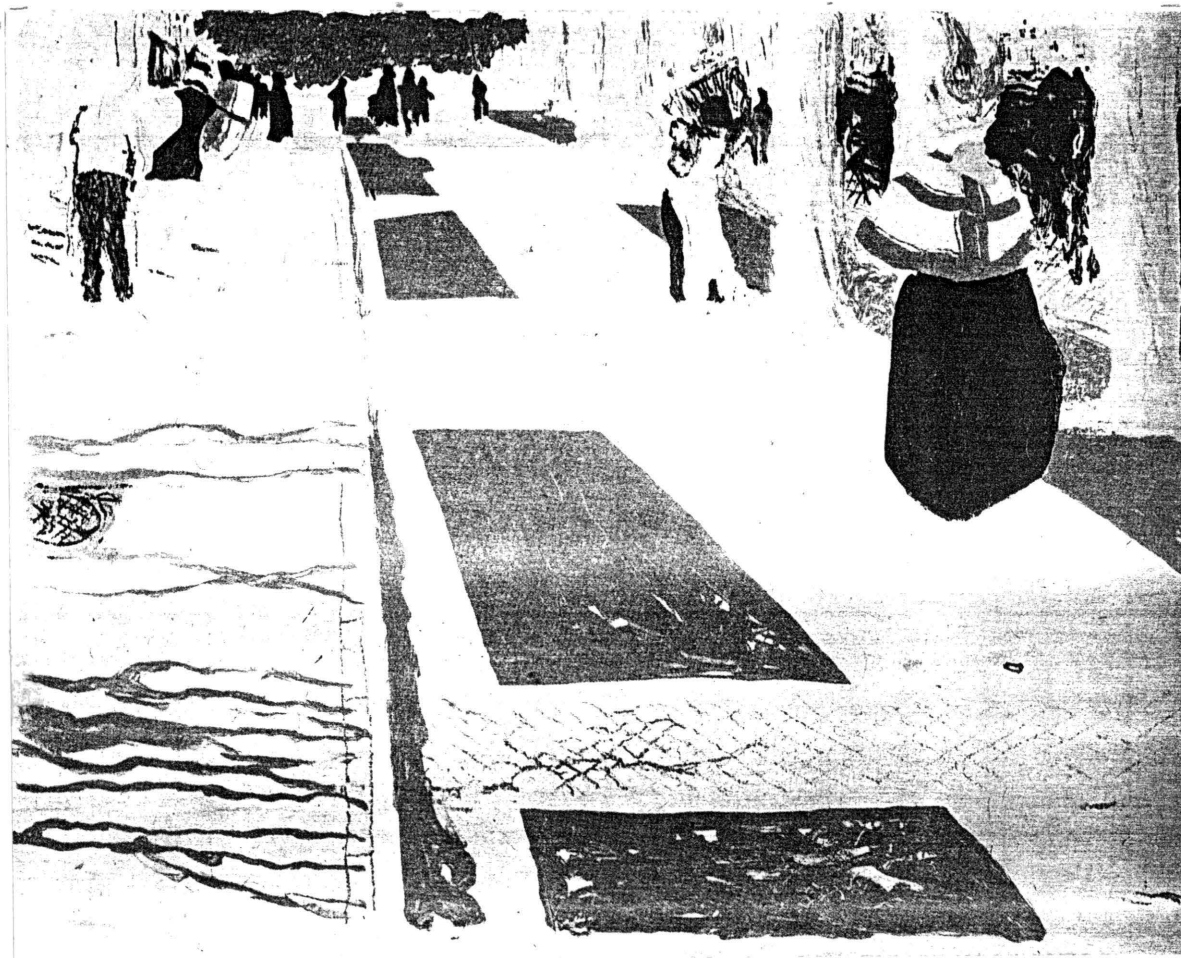


Fig. 21 Edouard Vuillard. "The Avenue." 1899. Color lithograph.



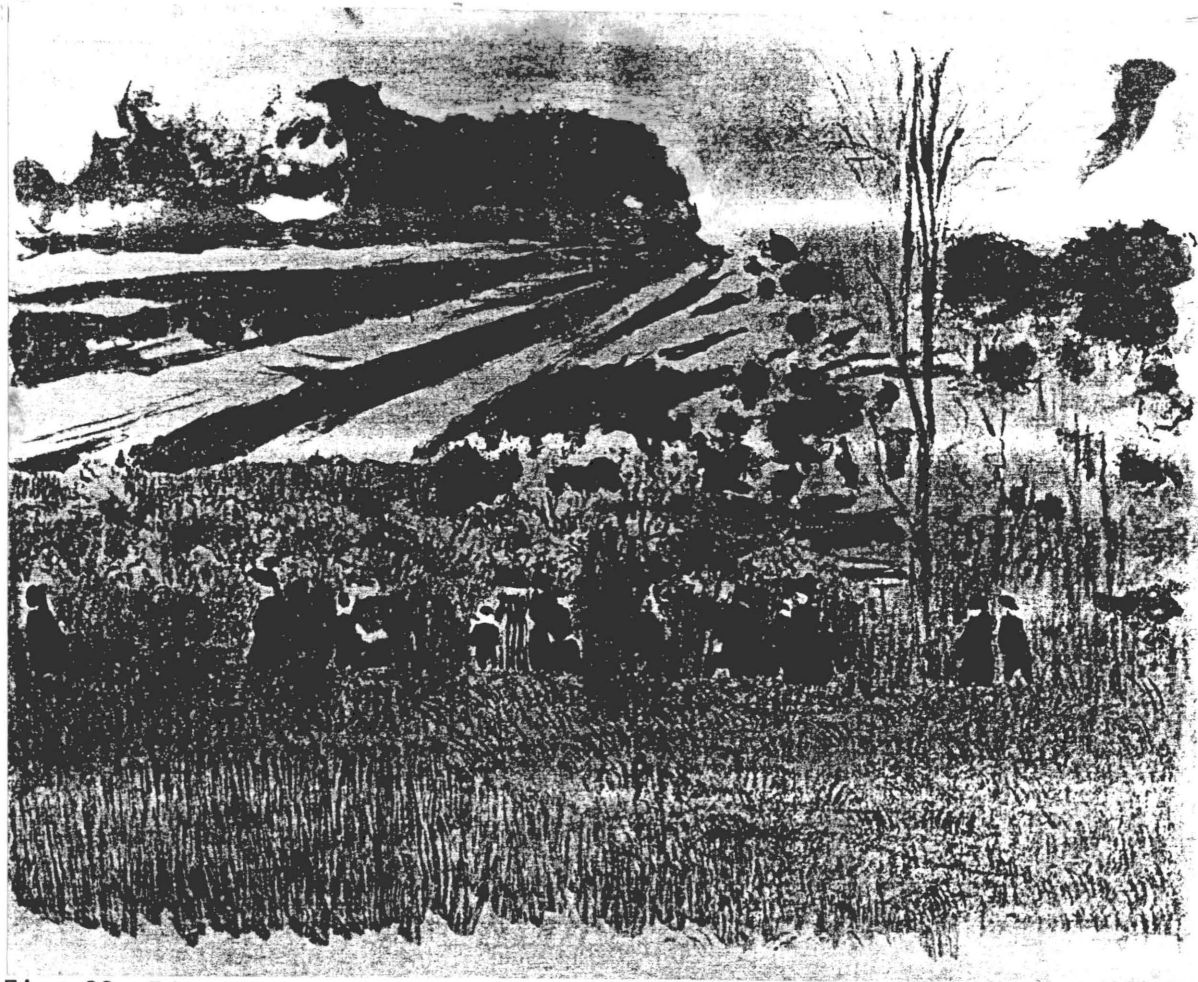


Fig. 22 Edouard Vuillard. "Across The Fields." 1899. Color lithograph.



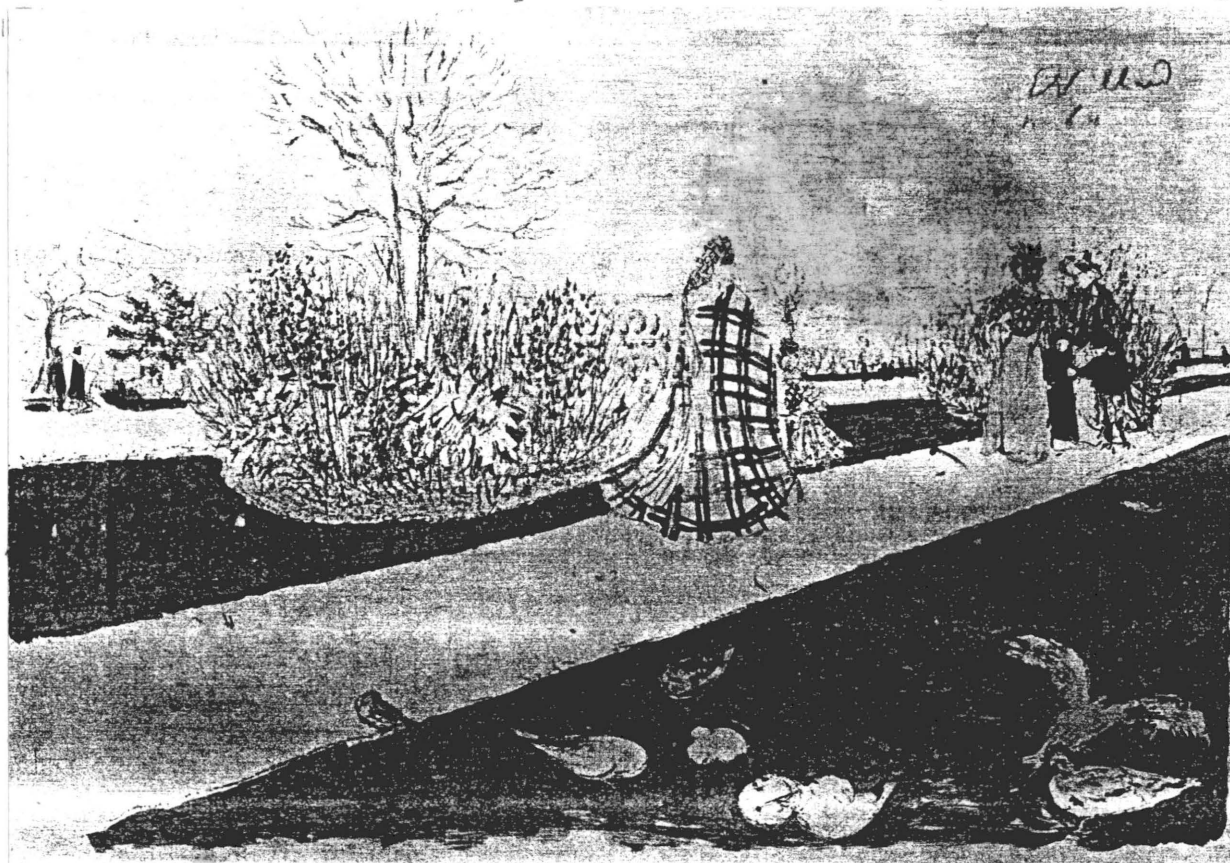


Fig. 23 Edouard Vuillard. "The Jardin des Tuileries." 1896. Color lithograph.

images produced by both of these artists consisted of a complexity and mystery created through carefully chosen detail, curving lines, and nuances. Bonnard and Vuillard expressed delight in the visual world and in the idea of intimacy and fusion between the model and his/her environment. These prints "...are like a private diary in the way certainty and doubt are committed to paper with total honesty."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Francis Bouvet, p. 10.

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