



Edouard Vuillard

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

"I DON'T PAINT PORTRAITS; I paint people in their homes," the French artist Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940) once proclaimed of his enigmatic *mise-en-scènes*, which provide an important link in the narrative of modern art between Impressionism and early 20th-century movements. The most famous of his works, *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*, 1893, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, shows the matriarch, a widow who ran a dressmaking shop below the apartment she shared with her children, seated in a domineering posture, and his sister stooped and cowering against the wall, the plaid of her dress melting into the dappled wallpaper. By creating spatial confusion between flickering patterns of textiles, wallpapers, and floral arrangements that enfold and even camouflage his subjects, Vuillard entwined

them formally and psychologically with their surroundings.

"He developed this way of painting individuals where the slightest attributes of color or light would assist one in understanding what the artist was feeling in being with that person," says Stephen Brown, who is organizing "Edouard Vuillard: A Painter and His Muses, 1890–1940," on view at the Jewish Museum from May 4 through September 23. The first New York exhibition of the French artist in two decades, it will focus on the portraits and interiors of Vuillard's circle of wealthy Jewish benefactors.

While his classic interiors have always been esteemed and sought after, Vuillard's place in history has been less assured. His work was judged as radical early in his career yet came to be viewed as more conservative as the 20th century

The flat expanses of color in *Les couturières*, 1890, offered at Sotheby's London with an estimate of £3 million to £5 million (\$4.7–7.8 million) last month, are a hallmark of Edouard Vuillard's early Nabi period.



From top: Vuillard's landscapes, such as *Les toits mauves*, 1909, which sold for \$50,000 at Cornette de Saint-Cyr, Paris, last July, are often passed over by the market; the record-holding *Fillettes se promenant*, ca. 1891, achieved \$7,993,000 at Christie's New York in May 2008.

which presages Fauvism a decade later, says Lampley.

Simon Shaw, head of Impressionist and modern art at Sotheby's New York, concurs. "For a great Nabi masterpiece by Vuillard at the very top end, you've seen this significant increase; the same is true of Bonnard," he says. Shaw also points to Vuillard's panoramic landscapes around Place Vintimille, where he lived and painted repeatedly throughout his life; these include *Berlioz Square (La Place Vintimille)*, 1915, which sold at Sotheby's New York in 1996 for \$3,082,500. "A good one could make more than \$3 million, but there's a real lack of supply," says Shaw. A lesser example, *Le Square*, 1917-18, was offered last fall at Sotheby's with an estimate of \$2 million to \$3 million and found a taker immediately postsale for just under \$2 million.

There is a wide gulf in price, however, when it comes to post-1900 interiors and portraits, which typically range from \$400,000 to \$800,000. Anisabelle Berès, of Galerie Berès in Paris, who handles frequent sales of Vuillard, much prefers his earlier output. "He was a very good artist, and you can find some later works that are ravishing, but they are the exception," she says. It was a later painting, in fact, that caught the attention of Brown at the Jewish Museum, which in 2010 acquired *Lucy Hessel lisant*, 1913, a painting of Vuillard's secret love poring over a book and framed in her luminous bedroom, at Christie's London for £289,250 (\$464,000), above the estimate of £120,000 to £180,000 (\$190-287,000). "Here was a wonderful picture that I felt other people perhaps didn't understand," says Brown, whose show positions the mature works as a visual corollary to what Marcel Proust was doing contemporaneously in literature: making keenly observed studies of the mood and milieu of the gilded class.

"A lot of those pictures are actually more interesting than they look at first sight, even if they're not flat and abstracted," says Newhouse, who has seen constant demand for Vuillard's works on paper since she began showing them at her New York gallery in the late 1990s. She sold *Femme étendue*, 1892, a small Nabi pastel on paper, for about \$150,000 in 2003; now it is easily worth \$350,000, she estimates. More recently *Landscape at Saint-Jacut*, 1909, a large-scale distemper on paper over canvas, sold for approximately \$500,000. While initially dubious about a show emphasizing Vuillard's later years, when he did many portraits for hire, Newhouse is impressed with the tight selection of works Brown has made, largely of the women who defined the artist's world: "I think it's going to help people rethink those pictures." ■



From the Files

- 2003 was a landmark year for Vuillard scholarship, with a retrospective that toured Washington, D.C., Montreal, Paris, and London, and the publication of a catalogue raisonné.
- His auction record in prints is \$162,000 at Sotheby's New York in 1995 for an 1899 lithograph from the "Landscapes and Interiors" album.
- Vuillard's collector base comes largely from France, England, and the United States.
- Vuillard's portrayals of dramatic tension between players on a domestic stage was informed by his work for the experimental Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

ARTIST DOSSIER

From top: *La couseuse*, 1893, a lithograph with gouache and watercolor, offered for \$869,000 at Galerie Berès, Paris; a prime interior, *Le pot de grès*, 1895, earned \$7.5 million at Sotheby's London in June 2006.



progressed and the leading edge of the avant-garde turned toward abstraction. "To a certain extent he was overshadowed and not really integrated into the major artistic exposure that artists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Duchamp had," says Brown. "Our exhibition casts light on the forms his art took after 1900 and allows us to reappraise it."

Born in Burgundy, Vuillard moved to Paris with his family at age 10. He spurned the expectation of a career in the armed forces and instead studied at the Académie Julian before entering, in 1887, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he briefly studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme. In 1889 he joined an avant-garde group of painters that included his former schoolmate Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, and Paul Sérusier, who dubbed themselves the Nabis, or prophets. Influenced by Paul Gauguin, they experimented with decorative patterning, flattened forms, and symbolist imagery. These techniques came to the fore in Vuillard's paintings from around 1890, such as *Les couturières* and *Le lecteur*, in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay, in Paris, in which the figures and background seem pieced together from shapes of flat, unmodulated color in a manner evocative of Japanese woodblock prints.

Vuillard was prolific, working in oil, distemper, pastel, watercolor, ink, and pencil, as well as prints. Unmarried to his death in 1940 (and still living with his mother until her death in 1928), he often depicted women at work or going about domestic chores, as in the 11-by-11½-inch oil on board *Madame Vuillard cousant*, a quiet, effacing picture painted around 1895 of the artist's mother bent over her sewing, which raced past its \$700,000-to-\$1 million estimate to achieve \$2,648,000 at Christie's New York in November 2006. As Brooke Lampley, senior vice president and head of the house's Impressionist and modern department, notes, "While size matters for all artists to a degree, Vuillard is actually one of the art-

ists who challenge that notion the most." Indeed, the intimacy of the subject matter in his works is served by their smaller scale, and collectors can still buy rewarding 7-by-5-inch drawings for \$8,000 to \$12,000, according to New York dealer Jill Newhouse.

After a decade of close association with the Nabis, Vuillard shifted his personal and professional orbit and began to organize his life around bourgeois friends and patrons, most significantly Jos and Lucy Hessel, beginning in 1900. A partner at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Jos exhibited Vuillard annually there until World War I, when the dealer went independent but continued to represent the artist personally. Lucy became his muse and intimate. Vuillard was a nightly fixture in their house, with sketchbook constantly in hand, chronicling the upper strata of society, including Josse and Gaston Bernheim, Marcelle Aron, and David David-Weill, who would gather in the Hessels' drawing room. Vuillard painted commissions of decorative panels and portraits for this circle, and over time he employed a more realistic treatment of space and color. Yet his painted interiors still seemed to bristle with the relationships and secrets of the people in them. Although his avant-garde credentials faded, Vuillard in his lifetime was recognized as a leading artist by the establishment and was honored with a 1938 retrospective at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Demand has always been strong for the artist's classic mid-1890s interiors such as *Le pot de grès*, 1895, in which four women around a table almost fade into the riot of floral patterning around them. It sold at Christie's New York in 1998 for \$4,732,500 and again at Sotheby's London in 2006 for £4,040,000 (\$7.5 million). But the current trend in Vuillard's market clearly favors the bolder, more colorful works of his Nabi period. A record of \$7,993,000 was set at Christie's New York in 2008 for *Fillettes se promenant*, circa 1891, which focuses on the gawky body language of two girls linking arms on an outdoor path, viewed from behind, with their assertively patterned dresses popping against a broad, flat expanse of green. The slightly earlier *Les couturières* fetched £5,081,250 (\$7.3 million) at Christie's London the following year. "The appreciation has moved toward some of the more strikingly modernist pictures," says Lampley. She cites the recent success of two of the artist's works from 1890: *Autoportrait au miroir de bambou*, a probing image playing with windows and reflections that sold last November for \$1,594,500, well above its \$500,000-to-\$700,000 estimate, and *Autoportrait*, painted several months later, with the artist's face reduced to puzzle pieces of heightened color and dark shadows, going for \$2,658,500 in 2010 over an estimate of \$1.2 million to \$1.8 million. "These really celebrate the arc from more naturalistic representation to the Nabis' focus on color," »

