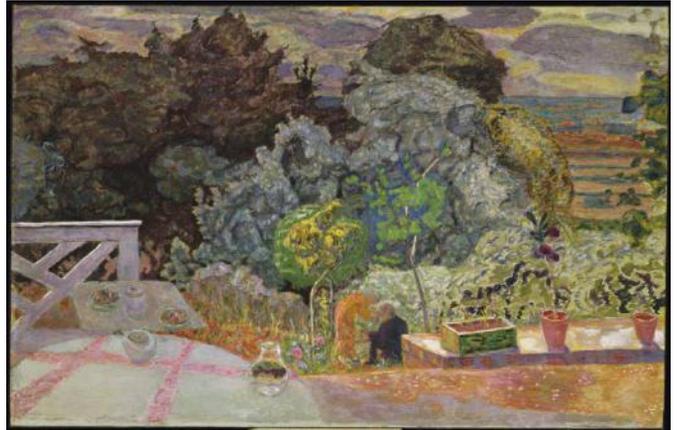


# The Phillips Collection: Bonnard Paintings

## Review by Tanya Roland

I'll call it the Bonnard room.

The Phillips Collection has in their possession, the largest group of Bonnard paintings outside of France. In this particular room hang six, along with one Vuillard, and one Beal. There are a few scattered in other rooms, but the majority of the cache is tucked away in storage for a rainy day.



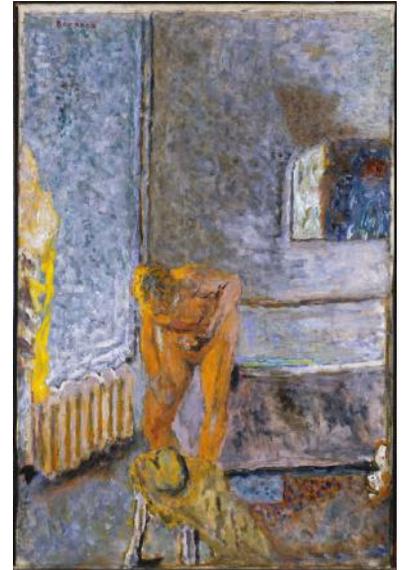
These six serve a satisfying taste of this member of Les Nabis (The Prophets), who rebelled and flourished in post-impressionist France. Like the impressionists, Bonnard seems far more interested in the mystically fleet qualities of color and light, than perfection of form; eyes and mouths are often just a line, hands barely defined, definitions lost in shadow smudges of purple or blue. He did not work from life. While he sometimes used a camera, relying primarily on memory and imagination helped to emphasize an emotional response to a scene, rather than a mere duplication of it.

In the middle of this roughly 14 x 22' room there's a padded bench that will suitably fit four. The lighting could be brighter, but perhaps this is supposed to add to the dreamy quality of the paintings. The scenes depicted are homey and intimate; a boy reads at the kitchen table, a young woman sits at an unfinished meal with a small dog in her lap, a woman plays with a kitten beneath an open summer window. These are moments that we've all shared. The images serve as a precious reminder of things valuable, free, and immediately at hand if we're willing to slow down and allow them to blossom before us. Prescience? Perhaps. The Fin de Siecle was a time of great transformation -- cultural upheaval, prelude to the 'great' war. These works, whose compass is unabashedly bent toward the optimistic, stop the rush of time and open up inner space, offering empathic beauty. They ground us in the universal found within the utterly mundane.

Edouard Vuillard was also a Nabi. His small interior echoes Bonnard's love of the immediacy of a domestic scene, although his color use in this particular piece is more earthy than bright. Gifford Beal, on the other hand, was an Impressionist, and his painting of couples beneath parasols, strolling out on a quay is a perfect nod to the genre that Les Nabis appreciated, yet also moved away from. It effortlessly captures the energy and light of a bright windy day on the water.

Color blazes on Bonnard's canvases, albeit often toned down with white. He worked and reworked his paintings, building up, tearing down only to rebuild again layers and layers of color, and these depths shine through to the surface. Juxtapositions of hue vibrate in shallow depths of field. Extreme foregrounds; the edge of a chair or table, the top half of a bottle, the floor of a circus ring spill us directly into the lap of the situation. He shouts to get our attention, then demands we immediately sit in stillness so we can grasp the depths of the message. The translucence, natural, like the psychedelic display on a soap bubble's surface on a summer day. Gauguin, the great beacon of inspiration for the Nabis, would be proud.

Sunlight in "The Terrace", paints the table in lavender, pale aqua, and pink. The couple in the garden (she in hues of pink and orange, he in purples and blues) pick flowers for their breakfast meal, unhurried. They've walked down to the arbor to gather some before they eat. The vase, already filled with water, awaits. Plates and cups are set, no utensils yet. This morning could last for days.



These "seers" loved nature, symbolism, and decoration. Similar to Art Nouveau, they sought to uplift the ordinary and everyday as art. Bonnard celebrates the sacredness found in simple pleasures; family, friends, sky, kitchen, patio. The figures and the scenes they play in are adorned in flowers, sunlight, and tenderness.

Les Nabis signed their correspondences with E.T.P.M.V et M.P..'en ta pause, mon verb et ma pens'....translated; in your palm, my words and my thoughts. Read; I trust you with my deepest essence. This entrustment is the stuff of life fulfilled. Love fuels Bonnard's creative fire and his vision brings the appreciation of possibility just when it is needed. Nabi indeed.