

# Ahead of His Time:

## ***THE VISION & EXPERIMENTATION OF ÉDOUARD VUILLARD***

Although this turn-of-the 20<sup>th</sup>-century artist is often overlooked in the art-historical documentation of Modernism, it is now apparent that Vuillard's aesthetic vision both anticipated and surpassed that revolutionary movement. *by* ALLISON MALAFRONTÉ



**Henri and Marcel Kapferer in Their Dining Room**

1912, oil on board. Private collection.

All artwork this article courtesy The Jewish Museum, New York, New York, in conjunction with the exhibition "Édouard Vuillard: A Painter and His Muses, 1890-1940."



**Lucy Hessel at the Seashore**

ca. 1904, oil on hardboard. Collection Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.

**F**rench artist Édouard Vuillard's (1868–1940) work has been resurfacing with a timely irony in recent years, and the recognition he has received stands in stark contrast to the relative obscurity he has suffered since his death. Although this has been the case for countless artists throughout history, for Vuillard in particular it further confirms how far ahead of his time he was. As a forward-thinking, experimental artist, Vuillard incorporated various cultural

and aesthetic influences into his work and followed an unpredictable trajectory. He was a painter who disrupted his own momentum in the interest of growth; he played with perspective, patterns, concepts, and color the way a child would, blissfully unencumbered by the potential for failure. But Vuillard was no fool. He was one of the most intelligent, deliberate artists of his time, and his radical approach is only now beginning to receive the attention and understanding it deserves.





OPPOSITE PAGE

**Madame  
Marcel  
Kapferer at  
Home**

1916, glue-based distemper on paper, mounted on canvas. Private collection.

LEFT

**Madame  
Jean Bloch  
and Her  
Children  
(second  
version)**

1930, reworked 1933 and 1934, glue-based distemper on canvas. Private collection.

BELOW

**Misia and  
Vallotton at  
Villeneuve**

1899, oil on cardboard. Collection William Kelly Simpson.

Vuillard came of age as an artist in one of the most enchanting times in cultural history. By 21 he was firmly situated in Paris, the burgeoning capital of the international avant-garde, and surrounded by some of the most important painters, poets, playwrights, and patrons of the time. By late 1889 he became part of the group known as the *Nabis*, which is an Arabic and Hebrew word for “prophets.” Inspired both by Gauguin’s *synthetism* (derived from the French word “synthétiser,” which means the synthesizing of two distinct forms to create a new) and by Art Nouveau and Japanese prints, the Nabis were interested in work that

was visionary, decorative, and characterized by attention to the flat picture plane. They also moved away from the Impressionists’ interest in outdoor light and focused on creating emotive interpretations of interior life. During this time Vuillard became close friends with fellow painter Bonnard and was heavily influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec, with whom he created large-scale sets and promotional illustrations for several Parisian theatre companies. The confluence of these artists’ individual aesthetics, as well as their interest in new social and cultural concepts, helped set the stage for the Modernist movement already in motion.



“Édouard Vuillard: A Painter and His Muses 1890–1940,” a recent exhibition at The Jewish Museum, in New York City, focused on the artist’s later output and his relationships with the artistic, literary, and theatrical innovators who informed his work. According to curator Stephen Brown, the exhibition aimed to show the significance of the artist’s work by way of his social interactions and patronage. “Questions have long surrounded the art of Édouard Vuillard, in particular with regard to his oeuvre after 1900,” said Brown in a recent interview. “While drawing on rich traditions in European art and culture, Vuillard’s art may be seen as a ‘mirror of his times.’ In effect, he joins in his art what the poet and critic Baudelaire identified as the twin elements of modern art: the ephemeral (modernity) and the eternal (great art of the past).”

After viewing the exhibition, several things became clear. First, Vuillard is an indisputable master of the interior portrait. Every painting—whether a decorative, whimsical view of domestic life, such as *Misia and Vallotton at Villeneuve*, or a profound portrait rife with layers of meaning, such as *Madame Marcel Kapferer at Home*—offers the viewer a closely observed view of the friends, family, patrons, and muses who shaped Vuillard’s life and work. Second, in terms of his stylistic execution, Vuillard was able to walk the line between illustration and fine art better than almost any artist in history. It is rare for a narrative artist of both grand observation and bold expression not to sacrifice the storyline to the paint handling,







**LEFT**  
**Marcelle Aron (Madame Tristan Bernard)**  
1914, glue-based distemper on canvas.  
Collection The Museum of Fine Arts,  
Houston; Houston, Texas.

**ABOVE**  
**Sam Salz**  
1930, pastel.  
Collection  
Janet T. Salz.

but Vuillard frequently achieved this balance effortlessly. Third, it is no coincidence that Vuillard is being brought to light at this exact moment. I feel we are once again at that point in history—very similar to what happened in Paris on the eve of Modernism—where a new movement is being birthed, and the artists who represent the future embody both the understanding of the past and the awareness of the present that Brown alludes to in referencing Baudelaire.

Comparing Vuillard’s motivation to that of literary greats is certainly no stretch, considering how contemplative and intentional he was as a painter. One writer with whom Vuillard is often associated is Marcel Proust; for both men, art was achieved through an accumulation of many layers of meaning. The artists ran in the same circles, and while they were never close friends, they were inspired by each other’s understanding and lyricism. Proust’s

famous work *In Search of Lost Time* explores such themes as the power of memory, the nature of art and its ability to capture what has been lost, the idea of not belonging or being a refugee, and the representation of reality. These themes can also be applied to Vuillard’s output, as well as to the role he played in shaping the society and culture around him.

By the age of 30, Vuillard had gained popularity and steady patronage, but he struggled to find where

**RIGHT**  
**Guelder Roses and the Venus de Milo**  
1905, oil on cardboard.  
Collection Art  
Institute of Chicago;  
Chicago, Illinois.

**BELOW**  
**The Park (Square de la Trinité)**  
1894, reworked 1908,  
glue-based distemper  
on canvas. Collection  
The Museum of  
Modern Art, New  
York, New York.

he fit in the quickly morphing avant-garde landscape. As he contemplated what had come before him and the changes that were taking place around him, he fought hard to understand his place in the continuum between Impressionism and Modernism: “Everything that can be conceived has a value of equal life, which is susceptible to each faculty of appropriation,” the artist wrote in one of his notebooks. “I do not need to care about making this better or worse than this or that thing, nor of employing this or that procedure rather than another. To have confidence in that which truly expresses my emotion. To invent is to state, to see.”

Vuillard had a long and prolific career—he created more than 3,000 paintings in his lifetime—and although he started out experimental and decorative, toward the later half of his life he became increasingly realistic and traditional, creating masterful portraits more reminiscent of Degas or Manet than his contemporaries Matisse, Picasso, and Soutine. Some historians have remarked that Vuillard reached his peak at 30 and lived too long, but I would say his life can now be viewed as a metaphor for the kind of art he created. In both his life and art he maintained a deep commitment to the painters of the past while allowing himself to be influenced by the present, serving as an enduring mirror of his time. And in retrospect, we can see that Vuillard was not only reflecting his time but also transcending it. **A**

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## Read More About Vuillard

“Édouard Vuillard: A Painter and His Muses, 1890-1940,” which was on view at The Jewish Museum earlier this year, was the first exhibition devoted to the artist’s work in New York City in more than 20 years. The show was accompanied by a 144-page book published by Yale University Press and authored by curator Stephen Brown, with an essay by Richard R. Brettell. To purchase a copy, visit The Jewish Museum’s website at [www.thejewishmuseum.org](http://www.thejewishmuseum.org), and click on “Shop.”