THE FORMATIVE STAGES OF EDOUARD VUILLARD, 1886-1893

by

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ABSTRACT

Edouard Vuillard officially joined the radical group of young painters known as the Nabis in 1889. However, the mature style he developed by 1893 seems to bear little relationship to the kind of painting they advocated.

This paper attempts to clarify Vuillard's artistic debt to the Nabis through a close examination of selected works from his formative stages 1886-1893.

Chapter One considers Vuillard's student years, 1886-1890, showing the conventional nature of his artistic training, and revealing, by his visual reference to Chardin, an early inclination towards a quiet art of intimate scenes. During this same time, Vuillard established his association with the Nabis, which prompted some cautious experiments with their ideas, veiled by naturalistic appearances.

Chapter Two concerns Vuillard's experimental stage of 1890-1893. His artistic consideration of Nabi ideas was boldly evident at first, but his attention was soon attracted both by the works of recent avant-garde painters and by Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, as well.

In his formative stages, Vuillard developed formal means to synthesize the aesthetic approach he derived from the Nabis with his preference for an art of quiet intimacy. By 1893, he had married these in a delicate harmony, and achieved the very distinctive, personal style for which he is known.
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INTRODUCTION

Edouard Vuillard evolved a personal artistic style by 1893. He was then twenty-six. His painting career began in 1888 with a conventional course of instruction, but his student years ended abruptly in 1890. This was partly the result of his association during the previous year with a radical group of young painters known as the Nabis. Following this, Vuillard launched himself into a brief period (1890-92) of varied artistic experimentation from which he synthesized a personal style.

The coincidence of Vuillard's formative period and his involvement with the Nabis immediately suggests a significant influence on the style he developed. Maurice Denis, Vuillard's close friend and first expositor of the Nabi aesthetic, was apparently the first to acknowledge this in his 1934 article, "L'Epoque du Symbolisme," declaring:

Il n'est douteux que Vuillard doit beaucoup aux Nabis: la sensation transposée dans le plan ornamentale, le contrôle de la sensation, la rigoureuse possession de ses moyens....

But Denis's authoritative statement, if not overlooked, was minimized in subsequent Vuillard literature. Claude Roger-Marx in his 1946 monograph states:

For Edouard Vuillard, writes Maurice Denis, the crisis brought about by the ideas of Gauguin was of brief duration.

However, Roger-Marx failed to take notice of Denis's following comment:
He owes him, however, the solidity of Gauguin's system of touches on which he built up the intense and delicate charm of his compositions.3

He improperly used Denis's initial remark to dismiss any lasting effects of Vuillard's artistic encounter with Nabi ideas, and avoided a stylistic consideration of the issue.

This fault was only recently brought to attention by Stuart Preston with his fuller citation of Denis's observation in his book, *Vuillard* (197'). Preston, however, elaborated no further on the issue. Though he acknowledged from the works themselves the artist's experimentation with Nabi theories during 1890-92, he did no more than mention it. His entire discussion was limited to the following remarks:

As a part of Vuillard's total oeuvre, paintings adhering strictly to Nabi theory represent no more than a brief moment in his precocious development. The quality and conviction of paintings of this period clearly indicate that for a short time Vuillard must have been convinced of these ideas...4

Like Preston and Roger-Marx, André Chastel, in his book, *Vuillard, Peintures, 1890-1930* (1948), considered the artist's interest in Nabi ideas merely a passing fancy. Unlike his colleagues, however, Chastel attempted to defend his position:

*Vuillard fut l'un des Nabis, mais cette illustre chapelle ne vécut pas de l'adhésion à une fois.*5

He supported this with reference to his art, observing Vuillard's divergence from other Nabis in subject matter, and suggested that Vuillard's taste for intimate effects had supplanted a strict adherence to Nabi theories. This suggestion, though by no means incorrect, resulted from Chastel's focus on subject matter.

In 1953, Jacques Salomon echoed Chastel's judgment in *Auprès*
de Vuillard. He included Vuillard among the Nabis only at a friendship level, pointing out his silent participation in their activities and discussions. In a later book, *Vuillard* (1968), an essentially descriptive panorama of the artist's works, Salomon did recognize Vuillard's visual experiments with Nabi ideas, but like Chastel before him, he failed to consider the effect these may have had on Vuillard's mature style.

In 1954, Andrew Ritchie published *Edouard Vuillard*, the first work attempting any serious identification of sources for the artist's style. Again, the works from 1890-92 were discussed in terms of his encounter with the Nabis, and in them, Ritchie, like Chastel, observed Vuillard's selective application of their ideas:

He took from the synthetist credo only its technical formulation on colour and drawing and . . . avoided the anecdotal, peasant subjects inspired by Gauguin.

Ritchie, like his colleague, concluded that Vuillard's artistic interest in Nabi ideas was limited to this very brief period and consequently, did not pursue further stylistic discussion.

Perhaps the most valuable and comprehensive study of the man and his work to date is John Russell's book-catalogue, *Edouard Vuillard*, 1868-1940, produced for the 1971 retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Like Denis, Russell openly acknowledged Vuillard's artistic debt to the Nabis. In addition, he defended this position, with reference to specific works, attributing their decorative concerns, emphasis of the flat surface, and evocative mode of rendering to Nabi origins. While Russell established Vuillard's persistent application of Nabi features throughout the 1890's, at the same time, he was not hesitant to admit, in agreement with Chastel, that Vuillard "did not,
in short, confine himself to any one set of ideas,"\(^7\) and concluded that, "himself no theorist, Vuillard none the less absorbed what Denis had to give him."\(^8\)

Though Russell's work corrected the prevailing deficiency in the literature by identifying Nabi contributions to Vuillard's mature style, his treatment of the subject is insufficient. His attention was focused on Vuillard's decorative works of 1892-1913. Consequently, the Nabi question was only considered incidentally, and his observations were dispersed through the text in the course of his discussions of individual works.

What seems to be warranted, therefore, is a stylistic study of Vuillard's formative stages with a close, systematic examination of representative works which attempts to identify the principal sources for the style he developed by 1893, and appropriately substantiate its suggestions. It is the purpose of this paper to undertake that task.
FOOTNOTES INTRODUCTION


4 Ibid., p. 70.


8 Ibid., p. 21.
CHAPTER I

THE STUDENT YEARS, 1886-1890

Edouard Vuillard was the son of a soldier and, as is often the case, "it was the family intention to have him follow his father into the army by preparing him for the army college at St. Cyr."^1 He began his preparation at the Ecole Rocroy and in 1879, became a scholarship-holder at the fashionable Lycée Condorcet.

Besides preparing him for St. Cyr, the Lycée opened Vuillard to the arts. The curriculum included both drawing classes and frequent visits to the museums, galleries, and theatres of Paris. ^2 And here also, in 1884, Vuillard met three young men with artistic aspirations: Maurice Denis, Aurélien Lugné-Poë, and Ker-Xavier Roussel. Vuillard's friendship with these three must be seen as both an opportune and influential factor in his eventual vocation, for the death of his father in the previous year had removed the major stimulus toward a military career.

His father's death also caused his mother to set up a dress-making business in their Paris apartment, following in her own family tradition. This action to provide for her family created a new environment for the young Edouard: a scene crowded with busily working women and richly coloured, patterned fabrics. Claude Roger-Marx has pictured, perhaps wishfully, "the effect... of these multi-coloured samples, the silent symphonies, the precursors of the pots filled with pigment."^3 The effect which the new surroundings had on him clearly surfaced later in the visual appearance of his mature style.
In these early years the circumstances of his life both freed Vuillard from the family expectation and nudged him in the direction of the arts. Soon after he left the Lycée in 1886 he decided to pursue a career in the arts.

Painting was not a vocation that promised financial security and in the choice itself is revealed Vuillard's strength of mind. His decision was no doubt announced to his mother gently, with considerable reassurance.4

Only one course of action was available to the aspiring artist in nineteenth-century France: the officially-sanctioned training programme. It began at the atelier, or studio, of a recognized master of the craft. Here the newcomer was first introduced to drawing. As he progressed, he would move from copying engravings, to drawing from plaster casts and finally, to the live model. Only when his drawing was judged adequate at this last level could he begin painting.5

But the atelier was only the preparatory step for entry into the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Acceptance at the Ecole was subject to the recommendation of the atelier masters. And so, "enrollment in a private atelier was thus in practice a condition for admission to the Ecole."6

Upon admission, the student's training continued along the same course. He was expected to enter the various competitions, culminating in the famous "Prix de Rome", his gateway to glory. All these contests were preparatory for his future submission to the annual official exhibition, the Salon. If his work was accepted here, his name could come to the attention of patrons, bringing him sales and commissions.
The artist had to exhibit — his fame and success depended on it. But for the nineteenth-century artists in France there was only one place to exhibit, only one place which could set seal upon his success: the Salon.7

The system encouraged at every stage a conformity to accepted standards of style and content. Subjects were predominantly historical or literary, and were often allegorical in character. The prescribed style can be best described as a highly 'finished' naturalism.8 Figures were sculptural and placed in a well-defined space; colours were restrained to a quiet harmony.

Most ateliers geared their standards to this accepted mode and the Atelier Maillart, to which Vuillard was led in 1886, was no exception. His early training was conventional and he was aimed toward the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and its competition for entry, the "Concours des Places". After two unsuccessful attempts, Vuillard finally won admission to the Ecole in the autumn of 1888 and was put under the instruction of Jean-Léon Gérôme.

From this year dates his first recorded work, a conté drawing of his grandmother, Portrait de Madame Michaud (Figure 1), which was submitted to the Salon and accepted.9 Here, Vuillard demonstrated certain aspects of the accepted mode, but some independent interests are also revealed. He represented the woman naturalistically and yet the drawing was handled in an un-'finished' way. The figure is posed traditionally in a central triangle, but Vuillard countered the rigid frontality and strength of presence of such a pose by her averted glance, by the placement of her hands, by seating her in a large chair, and by viewing her from slightly above. Tonal contrasts focus attention on the figure, specifically on her face and hands. The woman's glance is carefully emphasized by aligning
it with the top of the chair; she seems caught in restful musing.

The kindly gentleness and humility Madame Michaud seems to radiate is carried along by the soft effect of the conté crayon itself in a manner not unlike contemporary works by Eugène Carrière. Like Carrière, Vuillard emphasized the expressive qualities of the medium and was clearly interested in subjective content. Such expressiveness was similarly accented by the more radical contemporary artists, particularly Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin.

Two other aspects of their avant-garde approach are also evident here: an interest in flatness and in symbols. Some symbolic intent on Vuillard's part is suggested by two elements behind the old woman: the candle, indicating the passing of time and life, and the door, sometimes symbolizing the passing of life into the realm beyond. The background area also reveals Vuillard's interest in flatness. Rather than three-dimensional space, it has been compressed into a plane of flat shapes behind the figure.

These three elements align Vuillard's pictorial interests in the drawing with those of the contemporary avant-garde painters. At the same time, its acceptance at the Salon indicates a relaxation of their standards, indicating a much narrower separation between the radical and the Academic at this time than is commonly supposed.

When Vuillard entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he was disappointed by the "coarse, barrack-like atmosphere." And despite the investment of time in gaining admittance, he did not stay long. Within three months, he abandoned it in favour of the Académie Julian, where he was attending evening classes concurrently with his studies at the Ecole. Here, Vuillard studied under William-Adolphe Bouguereau and Tony Robert-Fleury. Directed by Rodolphe
Julian, the Académie was far from typical.

Julian's studio, also known as the Académie Julian, prepared students for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts as other studios did, but some aspiring artists found a substitute for official instruction in the greater flexibility of the teaching. Rodolphe Julian was only a mediocre painter himself, but he was astute enough to have had the idea of providing potential candidates for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts — and also those who had already tried and been rejected — with a place where they could work without restriction. . . . One of the main advantages was that the studio was open every day of the week except Sunday from eight o'clock in the morning to nightfall, whereas the other studios, including those in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts itself, were closed in the afternoon. Another advantage was that students were accepted at any age and prizewinners who already had places at the Beaux-Arts often came back again. . . . There was no obligation to enter the monthly competitions or to attend when the teachers made their rounds and corrected pupils' work. . . . A young man of independent outlook would derive more profit from the advice of a comrade whose ideas he shared and would be quite ready to turn his canvas to the wall when the teacher came along and this kind of impertinence was quite generally accepted.15

Julian had previously taught at the atelier of Thomas Couture, which had also been an independent workshop. Couture had encouraged a less 'finished', more painterly mode which retained the character of the ébauche, or sketch.16 Apparently, Julian continued this kind of approach.

As atypical as the Académie Julian was, it did maintain the Beaux-Arts tradition of copying old masters as its chief method of painting instruction. When the student was judged ready to begin painting,

the master now shifted the emphasis from his personal instruction to the study of old masters congenial to the pupil's individual temperament.17

Vuillard's introduction to painting is exemplified by two works done about 1888-89: Lapin de garenne (Figure 2) and Pommes et verre de vin (Figure 4). Both derive from J.-B. S. Chardin
(1699-1779) and reveal his preference for a specific kind of realism\(^\text{18}\): ordinary household scenes and still-lifes which evoke a quiet, homey intimacy. His drawing of Madame Michaud had already evidenced this inclination.

Both Vuillard's studies are free interpretations in Chardin's manner.\(^\text{19}\) *Lapin de garenne* depicts a common subject in Chardin's still-lifes and can be best compared to *Hare, Gamebag, and Gunpowder Box* (Figure 3), a work owned by the Louvre at the time. Both are artfully arranged compositions set in a shallow space. In Chardin's picture, an intentional counterpoint was constructed among the vertical, horizontal, and diagonal movements on the picture-plane, and the empty, dark background prevents deep recession into space. A subtle balance results. The diffused quality of the light sets up a delicate interplay of light and shadow, softening the outlines, creating a harmonic and hushed atmosphere for the scene. This effect was achieved by using visible brushstrokes to softly blend the object into its surroundings.

Although Vuillard attempted to imitate Chardin, his study appears less refined in execution, very likely indicating his relative inexperience at this point. The lighting has a glaring quality, especially at the left and bottom, thus weakening the quiet harmony. In addition, his brushstroke is broader, and as a result, in some places the edges of the rabbit's form look ragged, rather than softened.

Vuillard's less sensitive approach is further revealed in the composition. The rabbit is viewed from closer, resulting in a sense of confrontation which detracts from the intimate atmosphere. His composition of the subject itself also disregards Chardin's concern.
for thematic unity: the glass of wine, in particular, seems a bit incongruous with the corpse of a wild rabbit.

In studying the paintings of the masters, Bouguereau taught his students,

not only to see to it that the same subtleties of perception and representation are presented . . . but that they are attained in the same way. . . . See not only how the painter did a certain thing but why. So that as you work, you follow him in the working out of his problems, and make it your problem also.20

Vuillard came closer to achieving Bouguereau's intentions in what is perhaps a slightly later study, Pommes et verre de vin (Figure 4).

In comparison to a typical Chardin fruit piece, Pears, Walnut, Glass of Wine, and Knife (Figure 5), the Vuillard study here evokes the same sense of intimacy. Although our viewpoint is no more distant than in Lapin, the confrontational effect is eliminated by a softer lighting and by the more restrained colours. Reinforcing this hushed effect, the smaller and more delicate brushstrokes fuse together, softening edges, and merging them into the background.

Like the Chardin, Vuillard's study conveys the same feeling of subtle harmony in the composition as well. To visually unify the picture, the soft light flows gently over the objects, relating form to form, knitting them together. The fabric-like unity of the surface results also from the visible brushstrokes scattering the colours, producing a harmony of their continual echoes. In keeping with Chardin's concern for pictorial balance, the brighter colour amassed in Vuillard's apples is attenuated by the correspondingly darker, duller cauldron and background. Even compositional subtleties, such as the diagonally-placed knife to counter the horizontally arranged fruit, are applied by Vuillard in the manner of Chardin. And here, compositional harmony can also be seen reflected on the thematic
level: the apples, knife, and glass of wine are compatibly grouped, the ensemble completely credible.

Vuillard's interest in Chardin illuminates something of this master's place in nineteenth-century French painting. Although Chardin was not a fashionable painter in his own time, he became the subject of a revived interest during the middle of the nineteenth century, encouraged, of course, by the Realists emerging at that time.21

A catalogue of his works was published in 1846 and studies after his works became rather frequent. A number of pasticheurs arose, among them, Bonvin and Vollon,22 who saw in Chardin's subjects a prototype for a homely counterpart to Courbet's Realism. The popularity of Chardin's work continued to grow, inspired, perhaps, by increased availability: an exhibition was organized in 1860, and the Louvre received a number of works from a bequest in 1869. Two works included in the bequest were the still-lifes just discussed; perhaps more significantly, these were later brought to public attention by Henri de Chennevières in the July, 1888 and February, 1889 issues of the Gazette des Beaux-Arts.23 This suggests a more precise possible date for the studies by Vuillard.

During the 1880's, the interest in Chardin shifted in emphasis:

The rediscovery of Chardin by collectors and painters was paralleled among artists by a whole post-Chardinesque movement inspired in the main by his handling of paint.24 In this regard, it was the rather un-'finished' appearance of his work and his denial of local colour which particularly aroused attention and interest.25

This may suggest why Chardin was frequently studied at the Académie Julian, a fact indicated in studies after Chardin by
Vuillard's fellow students, Roussel and Pierre Bonnard. In both Roussel's *Still-Life with Onions* (Figure 6) and Bonnard's *Le perdreau* (Figure 7), a different kind of sensitivity to the master's vision is exhibited than in the studies by Vuillard. Bonnard, in particular, manifested some very different artistic interests. Both works are more painterly: Roussel's study seems rather nervous and fussy, while Bonnard exaggerated the broken brushwork of the master, making it broader and more dynamic. In neither case are the qualities of intimacy evoked which seemed to concern Vuillard. In fact, Bonnard's version isolated the subject, totally eliminating all sense of place and mood. The differences not only suggest the more painterly approach encouraged at the Académie Julian, but certain ideas developing among a group of its students.  

This particular group involved Bonnard, Paul Séruisier, Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, and Henri-Gabriel Ibels. In the permissive atmosphere of the Julian, their radical artistic ideas flourished. Vuillard's sympathy with avant-garde interests, already evident in *Madame Michaud* (Figure 1), suggests his natural attraction to this group, and his friendship with Denis, a former classmate at the Lycée Condorcet, drew him into their midst. He grew increasingly close to them, and their ideas were instrumental to his formation as a painter, providing him with some timely and thought-provoking alternatives to the official prescriptions of the Ecole.

The group banded together shortly after Vuillard's arrival at the Julian in the fall of 1888 when their excitement was aroused by a small work done on a cigar-box lid, entitled *Bois d'Amour*. This work, soon famous as the *Talisman*, was the result of Paul Séruisier's
summer study with Gauguin at Pont-Aven. It portrays an abstracted landscape, an interpretation using forms and colours freed from their traditionally representational duties. Gauguin's directives were recorded by Denis:

'Comment voyez-vous cet arbre, avait dit Gauguin devant un coin du Bois d'Amour: il est bien vert? Mettez donc du vert, le plus beau vert de votre palette; — et cette ombre, plutôt bleue? Ne craignez pas de la peindre aussi bleue que possible.'

"Into a design resembling . . . cloisonné work, Sérisier laid the colors that Gauguin dictated." In this was seen the prophecy of a new kind of painting, and Sérisier, Denis, Bonnard, Ranson, and Ibels were eager to be its prophets. The little group called themselves just that, using the Hebrew equivalent, "Nabi".

The legacy of Gauguin to the Nabis was two-fold: "Le mot d'ordre, le principe commun est d'exalter la couleur et de simplifier la forme." Behind these was the aim to evoke the sensation or effect received from the subject/object and to translate it into plastic equivalents. The critic, Albert Aurier, characterized this kind of art as:

1. Ideistic, because its only ideal will be to express the idea;
2. Symbolist, because it will express this Idea through forms;
3. Synthetic, because its mode of understanding is general, and these forms, these signs will be inscribed in accordance with that mode;
4. Subjective, because it will never consider the object as an object but always as the sign of an idea, perceived by the subject (the artist);
5. (This is a consequence from the foregoing): Decorative, because decorative painting properly so called, as it was understood by the Egyptians, and very probably the Greeks and the Primitives, was nothing if not the manifestation of an art at once subjective, synthetic, symbolical, and ideistic.

These basic notions inspired further articulations by both Sérisier
and Denis, each one in his own way expanding, interpreting, and embellishing them.

For the Nabis, Gauguin had liberated painting from what were considered its old representational intentions, and Sérisier took this as a newly found freedom to be symbolic. His approach was philosophical. Ancient ideas of an underlying universal harmony particularly fascinated him, as did the attempts he saw within primitive cultures to express this idea symbolically.

Although similarly oriented toward the mystical, Denis concerned himself in his early writing with pictorial elements. In his famous manifesto of 1890, "Définition de Néotraditionnisme," he emphasized:

> Se rappeler qu'un tableau — avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote — est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées.

He sought to awaken the "decorative" potential of painting, calling art "the sanctification of nature." Consequently, painting was no longer to analyse and report, but to synthesize and evoke.

At a stylistic level, Sérisier and Denis held the same basic concepts for the new art. By distinguishing their aims from both those of the Ecole and the Impressionists, they made clear what the Nabi approach was not; by retaining a conceptual nature in their aesthetic, they allowed and encouraged individual interpretations. Each Nabi incorporated the Gauguin directives into his own artistic interests. As a result, the works of the Nabis have only a loose family resemblance.

Instead, the cohesiveness of the group was furnished by the close friendships among its members and by a communal spirit. They
were bound together from the start in a sort of semi-secret society with strange phrases and terms in their speech, and cryptic signs and symbols often incidentally included in their paintings. Regularly, they gathered at a monthly dinner at Paul Ranson's or the 'Temple', as they called it. These occasions,

began when the presiding Nabi, raising a staff which resembled a bishop's crozier, intoned: 'Sounds, colours, and words have a miraculously expressive power beyond all representation and even beyond literal meaning of the words.'

Their theories and their enthusiasm at these gatherings made for animated discussions which were,

not confined exclusively to the visual arts but ranged over many subjects. Musicians, philosophers, writers, and dramatists were often invited to participate.

In spite of the excitement generated by the Nabis, Vuillard held himself aloof from the group at first, seemingly intent to learn his craft within more acceptable bounds. He resisted domination by their ideas just as he had rebelled from the imposing manner of the Ecole. However, even though his painting was never overtly mystical in content, Vuillard did ponder Nabi ideas of style, considering their relevance for his own work.

This hypothesis is based on a self-portrait from about this time, Vuillard coiffé d'un canotier (Figure 9). In this work the image of Vuillard leans slightly into the centre, suggesting, in conjunction with the fixed glance and firmly-set mouth, a thoughtful questioning within. From visual evidence, the subject in question is apparently the straw hat he wears; Vuillard seems to wonder how the style suits him. The hat dominates the painting with its size, highlights, and brighter colour, and its importance is ac-
knowned in the title as well.

The significance of the straw hat lies in its social connotations. This style, the "canotier" or "boater", was introduced into France during the later nineteenth century along with the sport it accompanied; as such, it was not a formal adornment, but one suitable for sporting pursuits and informal social gatherings. Here, the "boater", worn along with customary dark coat and white collar in the newly fashionable mode of informal town wear, indicates Vuillard's style-consciousness, his concern for an acceptable appearance. The title of the picture, as recorded by Vuillard's nephew, Jacques Salomon, supports this reading, not only citing the "canotier" specifically, but referring to it in terms of "coiffé", or dressed fashionably.

In this light, the picture suggests an analogy to Vuillard's confrontation with the new painting style then being conceived among his friends, illustrating some cautious experiment with their new ideas on style. Distinctively different from his previous works is the looser handling of paint, now bearing more resemblance to that in Sérisier's Talisman than to that of Chardin. Another divergence from the Chardin manner appears in the flatness of his right shoulder.

The results of such musings were apparently positive, for in the winter of 1889, Vuillard's conversion to the Nabi persuasion became official as Sérisier witnessed: "Je t'envie quand tu me parles du nouveau frère [footnoted as Vuillard] que Jahvé a dirigé vers nous." However, his silent participation in Nabi activities and the comparative restraint in his works prompted Aristide Maillol, another newcomer to the group, to judge that "Vuillard is not one of
us. He does not share the ideas which have come down to us from Gauguin." But Maillol's judgment is much too dogmatic. Though Vuillard apparently rejected the mystical content espoused by Sérusier, he responded favourably to the Nabi ideas concerning formal means of expression. Maillol can be excused for not recognizing this, however, for Vuillard's application of these ideas was cautious and often veiled, especially at first, as in Vuillard coiffé. His reaction to the Nabis and their theories is perhaps best characterized by his own words: "'N'ayant rien de révolutionnaire, je ne nie pas les bienfaits de révolutions.'"

This sentiment is reflected in Self-Portrait in a Mirror (Figure 10) where Vuillard continued to cautiously explore the Nabi idea of flatness, veiling his study behind a naturalistic appearance. Vuillard's image as the painter, garbed in his artist's smock, is centrally positioned, suggesting its importance. However, in view of his other portraits, its comparatively small size and the vague, expressionless appearance signify otherwise. In fact, the greater attention paid to the outer areas shifts the pictorial emphasis to the mirror frame and the wallpaper around it.

Within the mirror, the slanted edges make references to depth, but recession is prevented by the strong lighting, rendering only flat shapes. The bamboo frame, in forcing recognition of the mirrored surface, both emphasizes and justifies the flatness within. Surrounding this, the pattern of the wallpaper is, of course, similarly flat in both treatment and nature. Visible along the bottom is a mysterious, paint-splattered strip which serves as a reminder, perhaps intentional, of Denis's dictum that a painting "est essent-
iellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs."\textsuperscript{40}

The caution Vuillard exhibited with Nabi ideas at this stage perhaps resulted from his perseverance towards a conventional kind of success which required being acceptable by Salon standards. This is suggested by Maurice Denis's remembrance that,

à cette époque [i.e. 1888-9] Vuillard recherchait les conseils de Rixens, grand médaillés du Salon, qu'il admirait, disait-il, pour la parfaite exécution de ses tableaux.\textsuperscript{41}

After his submission to the Salon of 1890\textsuperscript{42} was rejected, however, he abandoned official competitions which naturally released him from the bondage of conforming to its standards. Claude Roger-Marx observed that Vuillard by this time was filled with a "horror of absolute certainties which he had acquired at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts."\textsuperscript{43}

"He was determined, headstrong, in revolt against any domination."\textsuperscript{44}

With this attitude, it is not surprising that Vuillard also left the Académie Julian in 1890, dismissing himself completely from the system's authority, and formally ending his career as a student.
FOOTNOTES CHAPTER I


8 "Naturalism" is used here to refer to style, to an art concerned for illusionistic appearance.

9 The date, medium, and figural subject of this work suggest it as a possible submission to the "Concours des Places".

10 Albert Boime in *The Academy and French Painting*, p. 17, terms Carrière a "juste milieu" artist, defining this as one who employed both Academic and independent features and, in so doing, "gratified the public taste for modernism combined with traditionalism by modifying the disquieting features of Impressionism and rejecting the polished technique of the academic painters." Madame Michaud exemplifies a similar approach.


13 This is evident from André Michel's review, "Salon de 1888," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 37, 2ème période (1 June 1888), pp. 441-54; 38, 2ème période (1 July 1888), pp. 21-31; and 38, 2ème période (1 August 1888), pp. 137-53, and from Henry Houssaye's *Le Salon de 1888* (Paris: Boussod, Valadon and Co., 1888).

14 Claude Roger-Marx, *Vuillard, His Life and Work*, p. 11.

16 For further information on Couture's atelier and his approach, see Albert Boime, The Academy and French Painting, pp. 65-78.

17 Albert Boime, The Academy and French Painting, p. 42.

18 "Realism" is used here to refer to the content of art: the ordinary figures and events drawn from the local, contemporary world.

19 One is reminded here of Edouard Manet's similar study of Chardin, Nature Morte, Lapin. In Edouard Manet, 1832-1883 (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1966), p. 115, Anne Coffin Hanson claims that the work synthesizes three paintings on the same theme by Chardin; Vuillard's Lapin de garenne is perhaps a free interpretation in the same sense.


25 Significantly, these are the features particularly brought to attention by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt in French XVIII Century Painters, trans. R. Ironside, (London: Phaidon, 1948), first published in 1873 and known to have been read among the artists of the time. Van Gogh specifically comments in reference to Chardin (The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, Vol. II (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, n.d.), p. 431): "I am more convinced than ever that the true painters did not finish their things in the way which is used only too often, namely
correct when one scrutinizes it closely. The best pictures, and, from a technical point of view the most complete, seen from near by, are but patches of color side by side, and only make an effect at a certain distance."

26. The more radical appearance of Bonnard's study likely results from its comparably later date of 1889.


32. Maurice Denis, Théories, 1890-1910, p. 1

33. Ibid., p. 12.

34. F. Selvig, "Les Nabis: Prophets of the Vanguard," p. 65. Selvig neglected to give the original source of this quotation.

35. Ibid.


42. Vuillard's submission of 1890 went to the Salon of the "Société nationale des beaux-arts"; Jacques Lethève noted (in *The Daily Life of French Artists*, p. 112), that by this time "the great annual Salon had split into several parallel ones. A rival "Société nationale des beaux-arts" was formed in 1884 as a result of a split within the "Société des artistes français" itself: a split which owed more to personalities than to principles."

43. Claude Roger-Marx, *Vuillard, His Life and Work*, p. 16.

44. Ibid., p. 15.
In 1890 Vuillard set aside his cautious approach to the stylistic developments in the works of his colleagues, and undertook a series of boldly experimental works. He acknowledged: "I was hunting in all directions. I hardly knew what I was aiming at."¹ According to Pierre Véber and Maurice de Coppet, "what fired his enthusiasm ... was the meetings of the little group who called themselves the Nabis. ..."² To them Vuillard naturally turned for artistic direction. He soon joined Denis, Bonnard, and Lugné-Poë in a shared studio, and here was both liberated from the old constraints and encouraged to explore their artistic ideas freely and more fully.

La visite (Figure 11), which Vuillard painted in 1890, reveals his more venturesome application of Nabi ideas at this time. Respect for the flat surface of the canvas is clearly expressed, the figures and background compressed into a single, middle-ground plane. Overlapping makes a token reference to depth, but in countered by a simplification (or, "deformation", in Denis's terms) of objects which renders them flat, as urged by Gauguin. As a result, the figures take on a silhouette quality. There is no attempt at portraiture, the figures appearing virtually faceless. Neither is there an objectively descriptive view of the interior surroundings. Instead, Vuillard presented the general idea of a visit, expressed
suggestively through forms, gestures, and composition. The visitor is clearly the figure on the right, separated spatially from the others and still dressed in hat and coat, while the two figures on the left apparently belong to the home environment. In this, the ideistic, subjective approach of the Nabis was applied: the intention was to express the idea through forms, making the objects inseparable from the idea.

Despite the indications in this work of a fuller response to the Nabis, Vuillard continued to resist artistic domination, still cleaving to elements rooted in his past. Building from a preference for ordinary household scenes, he expanded from the portrait and still-life to an interior scene of daily life. A sense of immediacy is maintained, conveyed both by viewpoint and gesture, and carried along by the warm harmony of colours, brightened in the Nabi manner.

For a short time during 1890 Vuillard virtually abandoned himself to the Nabi style. He commented to Denis that:

There was a moment when everything turned to ashes.... One thing after another was eliminated until the group of formulated ideas in which I still believed was reduced to its basic elements. . . . The area in which I was quite certain of anything got smaller and smaller; all I could do was the simplest possible kind of work. Luckily I had good friends. They helped me to believe that simple accords of colour and form could be meaningful in themselves.³

Artistically, Vuillard found himself disheartened, bewildered, and lonely. In such a state, he was susceptible, ready to surrender his art, albeit briefly, to the Nabi style. Le liseur (Figure 12) is representative of this phase. The work is experimental in nature, a fact indicated by its small size and cardboard ground. The subject is viewed in an intimate close-up, with the eyes averted,
a portrayal not unlike that of Madame Michaud (Figure 1). However, the title shows that the intention here is not portraiture. The anonymity of the subject both calms the scene and frees the figure to be treated as shape, recalling the approach of Edouard Manet. The subject itself has precedents in works by Manet and the Impressionists (e.g. Manet's Liseur of 1861 (Figure 13), or Renoir's Portrait of Claude Monet of 1872), but Vuillard attempted to treat it suggestively as he had La visite. In this, he was unsuccessful. There is a discord between subject and mode: the quiet mood natural to reading is shattered by the bright, bold colour.

In addition to exalting the colour, Vuillard simplified the forms, gaining a flattened, cloisonné appearance with the introduction of outlining. The work is stylistically reminiscent of Denis's Ascent to Calvary (Figure 14) of 1889. Both works exhibit the Nabi approach to form and colour which emphasizes the flat surface: the abstracted, unmodelled shapes of figure and ground fuse into one plane, pressed flatly against the picture plane:

Although Le liseur indicates an experimental abandonment to the Nabi mode, other works by Vuillard from 1890-91 suggest that this was short-lived, his eye quickly wandering elsewhere for additional ideas, particularly an appropriate subject matter.

One source of apparent interest to Vuillard in this regard was Honore Daumier (1808-79). His Un wagon de troisième classe (1863-65) (Figure 15) seems to be the source for Vuillard's painting of the same title (Figure 16). Vuillard's use of Daumier as a source at this time was not an isolated case. Eugenia Herbert, in The Artist and Social Reform, stated that there was a fresh wave of social consciousness
which spread through the Paris art world in the late 1880's and early 1890's. She claims that,

this tendency had its roots in the preceding period. Daumier had done some paintings in the late 1850's and the 1860's of the life of the lower classes which implied a critical contrast to the elegant pastimes of the upper classes. . . .

This growing social consciousness revived interest in Daumier's work at this time, evidenced by two large exhibitions at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (in 1888 and 1889), and by the first monograph publication by Arsène Alexandre in 1889. Vuillard may have been familiar with Daumier's art, and specifically with Troisième classe, from these sources. However, his personal acquaintance with Alexandre, and with Roger Marx, an important Daumier collector, coincidentally began in 1891, the same year to which his version of Troisième classe is usually dated.

Vuillard's version also seems to have derived its viewpoint and earthy colouring from the Daumier, and perhaps such details as the woman's face, which is reminiscent of Daumier's central figure, and the man-in-profile, who appears behind her at the left. Both versions portray an isolated family group: for Daumier, it was an opportunity for direct social commentary, while for Vuillard, it was an idea to be evoked in the Nabi way. In the Daumier, the background acts as a foil for the close-knit family, whereas in the Vuillard, it is empty and compartmentalized, suggesting separation. The raised crutches further emphasize this impression by severing the main figures from each other as well. Emptying the background enabled Vuillard at the same time to abstract it into flat shapes, compressing figure and ground to maintain the flat surface urged by
Vuillard's Troisième classe continued his experimentation with Nabi means of expression, but reveals by its reference to Daumier that he did not confine himself solely to their ideas on the content of art. His choice of Daumier at this particular time suggests his interest in a socially relevant art. However, in view of the experimental character of Vuillard's work at this stage, Troisième classe should be seen as a flirtation with such issues, a tentative alternative to the mystical content preferred by most of his Nabi friends.

His sense of social consciousness is again expressed in Les débardeurs (Figure 17). The dock workers are pictured against the colourful backdrop of evening, here perhaps a deliberate attempt at social commentary since it calls attention to their long hours of work. The result is a stark contrast of the offensive and the beautiful. Vuillard's scene seems to have a counterpart in Edouard Manet's Le port de Boulogne-sur-Mer au clair de lune (Figure 18) of 1869, a work in the possession of the Galerie Durand-Ruel after 1872. Vuillard's tight grouping of figures may have been suggested by the central group in Manet's work. But Manet's broader, more removed viewpoint renders a general scene of modern life, while Vuillard focused on one class — the workers. The anonymity and silhouetting of these figures add to the social commentary of Les débardeurs by evoking an impression of separation and loneliness, not unlike the last work, Troisième classe.

This approach to the figure also resembles that in the later work of Georges Seurat. His La parade of 1888 (Figure 19) prompts
the feeling of separation in the same way, and carried it further by allowing a physical and emotional distance between the figures. Each seems immobile, frozen into position by the work's compositional structure. The figural arrangement of Les débardeurs is similarly fixed within its banded composition, and a comparable sense of detachment exists between the central group and the two solitary figures flanking it.

Both Vuillard and Seurat complemented the loneliness evoked by the figures with a horizontal emphasis in format and line, thereby suggesting a compatible feeling of static calm. Seurat harnessed other pictorial elements to contribute to this mood: warm colours were balanced with the cool, and dark tones, with the light. As William Homer observed,

in La Parade Seurat systematically practiced, for the first time in a major work, a rationalized method of uniting color, line, and value in expressing a single state of feeling -- in this case, calmness.

But Vuillard only followed Seurat's example in part. Though there seems to be a corresponding balance of tones in Les débardeurs, the warm colouring Seurat associated with gaiety predominates, disrupting a peaceful harmony. Even more disquieting to the scene are the boldly applied dots which activate the whole surface, completely overwhelming any atmosphere of calm repose. At a first glance, the work appears to disregard Seurat's ideas on the expressive function of line, tone, and colour, but Vuillard may have deliberately misrepresented his theory to add an intellectual irony to his picture of the workers.

The boldly dotted surface of Les débardeurs can also be read as a subtle comment in itself. It apparently imitates Seurat's "point-illist" style, but does so with little respect for the artist's
optical theories; the crudeness of its appearance was perhaps con-
sciously intended to embody qualities generally associated with an
upper class view of workers.

At the same time, Vuillard's exaggerated version of Seurat's
technique seized upon its inherently decorative effect. This
aspect of "pointillism" was gradually developed in the works of the
Neo-Impressionists as well, but their progression towards it began
only after 1893. Decorative painting was anticipated by the Nabis
as a visual consequence of their theories and began to be consciously
sought at this time by members of the group such as Vuillard's studio-
mate, Maurice Denis.

His Avril of 1891 (Figure 20) also made use of the "pointillist"
style in a decorative fashion. But, unlike Vuillard, Denis varied
the dots in scale, exaggerating them at the lower right to individ-
ually represent flowers and diminishing them in size, density, and
clarity to suggest a recession in space. Despite this indication of
depth, his treatment of the dots exhibited their potential to ren-
der a unified, evenly patterned surface, both flat and decorative in
its effect.

Vuillard continued to pursue a decorative painting along with
his Nabi friends, and once more resorted to dots to render this
effect in Self-Portrait (c. 1891) (Figure 21). Again he applied them
with no regard for "pointillist" theories, using them merely as sur-
face embellishment.

Though superficially reminiscent of Seurat, Vuillard's Self-
Portrait seems more indebted to the ideas and work of Vincent van Gogh,
a fact revealed by a comparison of this work with the older artist's
Self-Portrait of 1886–88 (Figure 22). A relationship between the
two works is suggested by a similarity in the pose and its confronting glance, in the close-up view and scant surrounding space, and in the very peculiar placement of the dots about the head.

Van Gogh adapted the "pointillist" technique for his own purposes, aiming,

to paint men and women with that something which the halo used to symbolize. . . .

Surely that is real painting: to think of one thing and to let the surroundings belong to it and follow from it.  

This was visually expressed by van Gogh's peculiar placement of the dots as if they emanate from the head. Vuillard applied this treatment, dispersing the brightly-coloured dots both to integrate figure and ground into a single, decorative surface, and to set a lively mood.

Vuillard's concentration on the happy, decorative quality of surface design again masks a comment based on his source. The gaiety evoked by Self-Portrait when viewed in relation to the van Gogh portrait and considered in the light of the older artist's tragic death the previous year suggest, again, a deliberate irony. Van Gogh's death made him a very contemporary example of the lonely, unappreciated artist struggling with his art. Vuillard's reference to him, particularly in the form of a self-portrait, seems intentionally metaphorical. Implied is a psychological indentification with that image, a subtle and veiled expression of "the moment when everything turned to ashes" in his own life. This allusion likely resulted from the attention given van Gogh after his death. A retrospective exhibition of his works was held at the Salon des Indépendants in March, 1891, and Vuillard would undoubtedly have attended.

A revision of the Self-Portrait in 1892 (Figure 23) again seems
to picture Vuillard as the lonely, struggling artist. Its method of expression is no longer veiled and cerebral, however. Here, the point is conveyed directly through pictorial elements such as colour and lighting. Dramatic highlights wrest only a representative portion of the figure out of the darkness and into view; the remainder is engulfed by the deep shadows. There is warmth in the visible portion of the face but the black of the shadows overpowers it. The dramatic lighting and the dominant use of black in the work set a sombre tone, vividly suggesting his "moment of ashes".

This work bears a striking resemblance to Odilon Redon's *Portrait de Redon par lui-même* of 1867 (Figure 24) where the face also emerges from the depths of a shadowed ground. Redon was notably influential to the Nabis:

"Qu'y avait-il, demandait Denis, au fond des théories de Sérusier, reflet des idées de Gauguin et de Bernard, et j'ajoute d'Odilon Redon?"  

His association with the younger artists predated Vuillard's *Self-Portrait* of 1892, for Roseline Bacou reported that "Redon s'intéressait à toutes leurs tentatives; il ne manquait pas une des expositions chez Le Barc de Boutteville..." the first of which was in 1891. His instructive role in the Nabi circle was later visually recorded in Denis's *Hommage à Cézanne* of 1900 (Figure 25). This work pictures the Nabis and a few close friends gathered around a still-life by Cézanne. Redon's presence at the left, more of a focus than the painting, indicates his influential role, making the work a homage to Redon as well. Denis clarified his inclusion of Redon by saying that,

le sujet de Redon est plus subjectif, le sujet de Cézanne plus objectif, mais tous deux s'expriment au moyen d'une méthode qui a pour but de créer un objet concret, à la fois esthétique et représentatif d'une sensibilité.
In a similar way, Vuillard's Self-Portrait visually combines both the subjective expressiveness of Redon in its sombre mood and the objectified image of Cézanne in its Nabi approach to form and colour.

Vuillard continued to look at the work of older contemporary artists in the period but the serious, intellectual associations, the ironic personal and social commentary, and the dark mood disappeared. Self-Portrait was apparently the last work of this solemn phase.

A lighter, brighter outlook seems first evident in Vuillard's L'élegante (Figure 26), painted about 1891. Pictured here is an elegant woman, her graceful proportions accentuated by the low viewpoint and vertical emphasis of the composition. She is caught in a significant pose, apparently leaving to attend an informal social gathering. She remains anonymous, being viewed objectively from behind, and thereby becomes universal in character, an embodiment of beauty, as the title suggests. L'élegante seems to affirm the Nabi principle that painting should be beautiful and decorative in purpose. The former serious associations, social commentary, and darker mood of Vuillard's work are here rejected.

L'élegante also reveals Vuillard's attraction to the work of Edgar Degas. The source for this work appears to have been Degas's print, At the Louvre: Mary Cassatt in the Painting Gallery (1879-80) (Figure 27). At a glance the two works relate to each other by their long, narrow format and similar, casually-placed, standing female figure. They are further linked by a corresponding detail: it is an open book in Mary Cassatt, a clutched purse in L'élegante. Degas's version, with the figure behind the doorway, evokes the momentary, the caught-in-action, while Vuillard's, by placing her in front of the doorway, is more static, suggesting a pause in the action. Both
artists present the figure as a silhouetted form, a feature common to Nabi painting of the period, and visible in works like Denis's *Ascent to Calvary* (Figure 14).

Besides its formal similarities to Mary Cassatt, Vuillard's *L'élegante* incorporated some of the decorative aspects of Degas's work. These pertain less to superficial embellishments than to its subject and composition: a woman is naturally decorative in form and adornment, and Degas's partitioned background is a correspondingly decorative structure, embellished with surface patterns, such as the herringbone floor and marbled column. Vuillard employed these ideas cautiously, following Degas in subject and compositional technique, but confining himself to horizontal and vertical divisions to maintain the figure's motionless character. His counterpart to surface patterning is timidly rendered in a rectangle to the left of the figure's upper body. The effect produced in *L'élegante* is naturally less elaborate, resulting from the tentative quality of Vuillard's experiment; however, his interest in these decorative features is acknowledged.

Vuillard developed this interest, allowing the decorative elements freer expression in other works like *Ouvrières au chiffonier* (Figure 28), *L'atelier de la corsetière* (Figure 29), and *Les oreillons* (Figure 30).

The decorative character of *L'élegante* was further prompted by Vuillard's return to a lighter, brighter colouring. This, as well as the subject type, perhaps derive from contemporary works by his studio-mate, Bonnard, such as *Femmes au jardin* of 1890-91 (Figure 31). Again, Vuillard's treatment was cautious by comparison. His restraint did add to *L'élegante* a suitable air of sophistication, however.
Both L’élégante and Femme au jardin are visually similar to Degas's Mary Cassatt in their subject, format, and decorative quality which suggests that Vuillard and Bonnard may have seen this work on one of their frequent visits to the Galerie Durand-Ruel, which had exclusive rights to Degas's work after 1866. The interest provoked by these visits was indicated by Thadée Natanson's observance that often, "ils [Vuillard and Bonnard] parlent des musées et des toiles de leurs aînés que l'on peut voir à la Galerie Durand-Ruel. . . ."  

Vuillard's visual reference to Degas in L'élégante presaged his attraction to Japanese prints. Colta Ives has called Mary Cassatt "the most deliberately Japanese of Degas's prints." Ives attributed its long, narrow format, which Vuillard adopted in L'élégante, to the Japanese hashira-e print, so designed to be hung on a pillar. Degas's focus on the casually-placed female figure, like Vuillard's, also corresponds with Japanese prints in theme; the elegant woman was a particularly favoured type, especially in the work of Utamaro. In addition, Degas's placement of the figure in a doorway was prefigured in such Japanese prints as Harunobu's An Evening Visit (Figure 32). Here also is found the same kind of decorative effect achieved in Mary Cassatt and prudently attempted in L'élégante by the partitioned background embellished with surface patterns and supported by the correspondingly decorative nature of the woman in her form and adornment.  

The artistic features attracting Vuillard to Mary Cassatt were precisely those Degas drew in turn from Japanese prints; Vuillard likely realized this, for Degas's interest in, and conscious application of, Japanese effects had been brought to public attention as early as 1870. In this light, Vuillard's experimentation with
Japanese features in *L'élegante* should perhaps be seen as another example of his caution in dealing with artistic ideas outside the French tradition.

The fact of Vuillard's eventual affiliation with the Nabis and their aesthetic directly encouraged him to take an interest in Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints. Members of the Nabis had been directed towards this source since their earliest association with Gauguin during 1888 when both he and,

the whole group at Pont-Aven looked upon the Japanese print as an example and an authority. They were all captivated by the expressive boldness of the stylizations, the purity of line and the powerful and dynamic outline of the shapes...

The Nabis upheld this reverence for Japanese models, a fact confirmed by Maurice Denis's "Définition de Néo-traditionnisme" of 1890 which called for "l'arabesque pure, aussi peu trompe l'œil que possible" and cited the Japanese *kakemono* as an example to follow.

At a stylistic level, by following Gauguin's initial directive "d'exalter la couleur et de simplifier la forme," early Nabi paintings such as Denis's *Ascent to Calvary* (Figure 14) unwittingly embodied two characteristic features of Japanese prints. However, not until Bonnard's works of 1890-91 is a direct link discernible. His *Femmes au jardin* (Figure 31), painted prior to the Salon of 1891, is apparently the first Nabi picture to result from the influence of Japanese prints. Bonnard's source of inspiration is unmistakable in view of the work's intended function as a wall screen, a structure indigenous to the Orient. Stylistically, *Femmes* is specifically linked to Japanese prints by its expressive silhouette, its gently curving black outline, and its emphasis of flatly rendered surface patterns.

Bonnard's close association with Vuillard during 1890-91
may have provided the necessary impetus for prompting Vuillard's artistic interest in Japanese prints. His first Japanese-inspired picture appears to be Le déshabillé ovale (Figure 33), painted about 1891. In its format, Ovale is not unlike the circular one often used in ukiyo-e portrait prints like Kuniyoshi's O Kane, A Strong Woman from Omi Province (Figure 34). In subject, it depicts an intimate view of an alluring young woman: she is closely viewed and carefully posed so the focus falls on the nape of her neck, a feature seen by the Japanese as an indication of beauty, and widely represented in prints such as Utamaro's Two Girls Dressing their Hair (Figure 35). Vuillard's attempt to combine in one view the nape of her neck and her décolletage, its counterpart in Western eyes, demonstrates his concern here for an expression of beauty. The idea of beauty conveyed is complemented in his execution by its consciously-composed curves and soft colouring, a treatment typically found in Japanese prints. Ovale's empty, yellow background may have also derived from ukiyo-e prints, being perhaps a conscious attempt at imitating the yellow paper frequently used, as in Utamaro's Two Girls, for example.

Some elements incorporated into Ovale are even more characteristically Japanese. First, the figure's hair was arranged on top of her head in the Japanese manner, revealing two prominent peaks of nape hair, a distinctive feature in prints like Utamaro's Two Girls. And behind the figure, to the right, is a striped, pillow-like shape, similar to the Japanese obi (a wide sash worn over the kimono) in its form, fabric, and positioning. Above this, the black, chairback-like structure adds a complementary surface pattern, not unlike the decorative feature found in Degas's Mary Cassatt, and at the same time,
reminiscent of the large, cropped characters seen in prints like Shuncho's *Visitors to the Masaki Inari Shrine* (Figure 36).

*Ovale* clearly demonstrates Vuillard's close study of *ukiyo-e* prints, and also marks his return to an intimate subject matter. Though this particular preference was evident in his earliest work, its presence in Japanese prints seems to have stimulated his latent interest.31

A debt to Japanese sources continues to be evident in the intimate scenes more firmly dated to 1891. One of these, *Au Lit* (Figure 37), portrays a reclining woman with eyes closed and knees up, resting in bed. It is a quiet, intimate scene not unlike *Le déshabillé ovale*, and like that work, it also incorporates some unmistakably Japanese features. Though no visual relationships seem to exist with specific prints, an obvious indication of its debt occurs in the woman's Oriental-like complexion. Behind her, the empty, grey background recalls the mica-dust grounds of Japanese prints like Kunisada's *Rokusaburo the Carpenter* (Figure 38). And following the Japanese manner, Vuillard again consciously arranged and outlined the forms to accent the gentle curves as he had in *Ovale*, here achieving the flowing quality more characteristic of landscape prints such as Hokusai's *Fuji from the long sloping hillside of Inume in Kai Province* (Figure 39). This movement was carefully counterbalanced by the angular folds and their wedge-like shadows; Vuillard's treatment of these elements is visually reminiscent of Japanese ink brush technique seen, for example, in Hokusai's *Femme* (Figure 40), a work coincidentally illustrated in *Le Japon Artistique* in April, 1891. Complementing these linear surface movements is an underlying structure of horizontal bands, a compositional approach not unlike his earlier
work, Les débardeurs (Figure 17). Au Lit's horizontal axis induces a spatial interpretation of the bands, but Vuillard seems to have deliberately thwarted this reading with contradiction. For example, the bottom band is logically understood as the receding floor plane, an assumption confounded by the stiffness of the overlapping sheet. Depth perception of the two upper bands is similarly confused. In its position directly above the figure, the lower of these two bands seems to be spatially closer, an effect visually supported by the accents of Vuillard's signature on the top left and the bold "T" on the right. At the same time, this "T" form, enigmatic by itself, suggests a bedside crucifix, thereby presuming the overlap of the upper band. These apparent conflicts can perhaps be seen as a deliberate simulation of the typical Western confusion in viewing an Oriental depiction of space, ultimately forcing the viewer's recognition of the flat surface in harmony with Nabi doctrine. Reinforcing the result are the inconsistency of the light source, the unmodelled application of colour, and the flattening effect of the signature and "T" form. This last element, in its visual function, is again not unlike the enlarged Japanese characters in prints like Shuncho's Visitors to the Masaki Inari Shrine (Figure 36). Like these characters, the "T" also has meaning beyond itself: as a severed crucifix, it is both identified with traditionally Christian symbolism and allows Nabi-inspired mystical associations by its preceded appearance in Gauguin's Yellow Christ (1889) and Ranson's Christ and Buddha (c. 1890). Ursula Perucchi-Petri suggested the "T" was perhaps intentionally ambiguous, leaving the viewer to his own explanation.

Regardless of Au Lit's possible relationship with the Nabis on a
mystical level, its pictorial debt to them is clearly demonstrated by the simplification of forms into flatly coloured, outlined shapes. However, the soft, restrained colour reveals an obvious divergence from the Nabi aesthetic. This should be seen as a deliberate reversion on Vuillard's part, following his return to an intimate subject matter; the quiet tones of his earliest works appear to be purposefully reinstated to evoke a suitably hushed mood for the scene.

Vuillard's concern for an intimate expression was reaffirmed in his Portrait of Lugné-Poë (Figure 41) of 1891. Lugné is closely viewed, seated at a table with head and eyes directed to what is apparently a piece of paper his fingers tightly press. He appears intensely absorbed by the task-at-hand. The work's specific title seems to contradict Vuillard's vague, unrecognizable rendering, yet its suggestive character, coupled with the warm, quiet harmony of colours, evokes a feeling of emotional intimacy befitting a picture of the artist's close friend. Though Lugné shows Vuillard's friend in an intimate view, it is clearly not portraiture, in the traditional sense. The figure's identity is distinguished only by the title.

The generalized nature of the image is reminiscent of portrayals in Japanese prints; Vuillard's sensitive view of the subject and tender colour harmonies specifically recall those favoured by Harunobu. The Japanese inspiration of Lugné is again apparent as it was in Au Lit by the empty, grey background and by the rhythmically arranged curves of the figure and its outline. This last element reveals another idea perhaps prompted by Japanese prints. Its distinctive warm brown colour, not unlike the reddish colour used in Kiyomitsu's A Beauty of Eastern Japan (Figure 42), is that of the wood ground beneath. Vuillard has allowed it to show through and per-
form the function of an outline. At the same time, he brings the painting's flat surface to attention. This treatment corresponds with the Oriental principle of involving the surface within the picture by investing it with a positive artistic function.

Vuillard also transformed his signature to a Japanese-like signature. This mode of signature was not unique to Vuillard, but as Philip Cate noted, its introduction into nineteenth-century French art derived from a Japanese inspiration, beginning with Whistler's "butterfly" in the 1860's; Vuillard's adoption of the monogram in 1891 followed the direct example set by his friends, Denis and Bonnard, in 1889 and 1890 respectively.

Vuillard's incorporation of the monogram-in-cartouche in Lugné, like his exposure of the wood ground, puts a compositional emphasis on the flat surface; this together with the work's subjective character shows a coincidence between the Nabi aesthetic and the manner of Japanese prints. During 1891-93, Vuillard apparently tried to integrate the intimate subject matter he preferred with the artistic approach of the Nabis, finding the pictorial means to do so prefigured in Japanese prints.

Vuillard's Seamstress (Figure 43) of 1891 was once again visually derived from Japanese prints, and clearly attempted to combine Nabi concepts with the hushed subject matter he favoured. The ambiance created by the colouring carries the mood of the subject, a seated woman quietly absorbed in her sewing, a theme commonly found both in the French tradition (not surprisingly, in paintings by Chardin) and in ukiyo-e prints. Vuillard's generalized rendering evoked the subject in the Nabi manner, removing the burden of objective representation and freeing him, like them, to emphasize the
picture's flat, decorative quality. As in Lugné, the plane surface was again brought to attention by Vuillard's use of the monogram-in-cartouche, here juxtaposed against the equally intense colour of the floor band, enhancing its flattening effect. In a similar way, Vuillard placed different patterns together, creating a visual synthesis of figure and ground, and accenting its flattened surface by a deliberate exposure of the wood panel beneath. More obvious, however, is the decorative value of the patterns, a feature previously demonstrated in Les débardeurs (Figure 17). Artistic precedents for Vuillard's patterning of the surface existed in ukiyo-e prints which characteristically emphasized patterns in both costume and setting; at the same time, the decoratively patterned surface suggests a direct connection with contemporary works by Bonnard such as Femmes au jardin (Figure 31).

Though Vuillard's use of surface patterning in Seamstress supported his visual expression of Nabi concepts, the work is perhaps unsuccessful: the scale of the patterns is too bold, disturbing the quiet, intimate effect he seems to have sought.

Vuillard more successfully incorporated an intimate subject with Nabi artistic ideas and Japanese-like features in Little Girls Walking (Figure 44), another work dating from 1891. Here, two young girls are shown strolling together along a wooded path. The picture recalls Harunobu's Two Girls (Figure 45) in subject, pose, and sentiment. A sense of intimacy is conveyed in both works through pose, the touching gestures and averted gazes of the figures, and through the subdued colouring and close harmony of tones; to these was added an arrangement of background shapes which create a cloistered feeling. Vuillard upheld the quiet tenderness of Little Girls, alleviat-
ing the disquieting effect sensed in Seamstress with a slight re-
finement in pattern scale.

His abstract interpretation of the background foliage apparent-
ly derived from the similar approach evidenced in prints like Harunobu's
Two Girls and applied by his friend, Bonnard, in Femmes au jardin
(Figure 31); at the same time, the pattern created in the bush at
the right is reminiscent of tarashikomi, a mottled paint technique
appearing in works by Sotatsu and Korin.38 Regardless of its spec-
ic source of inspiration, Vuillard's patterned treatment of natural
forms in Little Girls seems more arbitrary than in Seamstress where
all patterns are explained by the choice of subject. Thus Little
Girls Walking marks Vuillard's adoption of the patterned surface as
a compositional principle. It could support both the Nabi aesthetic and
the intimate mood he apparently sought to express. During the next
two years, he progressively refined his use of this stylistic tech-
nique. The outcome can be seen in Le prétendant (Figure 46), a work
dating from 1893. Two women are shown, busily working amidst a
clutter of textiles, while a man leans into the picture arresting the
attention of the one at the left. It is an intimate confrontation:
the man and woman hold each other's glance, distracted from the busyness
of the scene, and suspended in a moment of mutual concentration. The
man appears to be Roussel. This, the work's fabric-filled setting,39
and date of 1893 suggest a visual document of Roussel's marriage to
Vuillard's sister, Marie.

However, its generalized title and suggestive presentation main-
tained the Nabi approach, expressing the meaning through the pose and
glances of the man and woman, the subtle alteration of the patterning
between them, and the intimate mood evoked by the quiet, almost mono-
tone colouring and warm underglow of the cardboard ground. Vuillard's exposure of the ground again functions in harmony with the Nabi aesthetic as it did in Seamstress (Figure 43) to identify the painting's flat surface and unify the whole through its continual echoes. Vuillard treated colour in the same way. It was deliberately faded to achieve an opaque quality, enhancing the picture's natural flatness, and scattered over the surface in tiny touches to create a fabric-like unity. Beneath the surface embellishments of the painting lies an equally patterned structure of horizontal and vertical partitions; this feature was previously noted in L'élégante (Figure 26), and ultimately ascribed to the example of Japanese prints like Kiyonaga's A Room at the Komeikan Brothel at Susaki (Figure 47). This print, like Le prétendant, depicts a confrontation of two figures, and this, along with their similar poses and placement, suggests a visual debt on Vuillard's part; the configuration, however, is not an uncommon type in Japanese prints, making its specific attribution to Kiyonaga's Room at the Komeikan Brothel difficult. Nevertheless, the fact of the likeness shows that Vuillard's artistic debt to Japanese prints continued through 1893.

Their visual example presented Vuillard with forms and techniques capable of expressing both his personal disposition towards quiet, intimate scenes and the formal ideas and decorative purpose he derived from the Nabis. During 1891-93, Vuillard refined the means he adopted from Japanese prints, developing them into the delicate and decorative mode visible in Le prétendant. A style was formed, a distinctive, personal language which suitably expressed and beautifully integrated his artistic concerns.
FOOTNOTES CHAPTER II


3 Edouard Vuillard, "Letter to Maurice Denis (1898)," quoted in Russell, Edouard Vuillard, p. 64.

4 For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see Eugenia Herbert, The Artist and Social Reform (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).


6 Daumier's Troisième Classe exists in two almost identical painted versions, both of which were exhibited at Durand-Ruel's in 1888, and one of which was exhibited at the "Exposition Centennale" in 1889.

7 The ochre patch at the left of the woman's shoulder is enigmatic from a representational viewpoint, an element perhaps contrived to emphasize the flatness of the surface, not unlike the mysterious strip in Self-portrait in a Mirror (Figure 10).

8 Social interests were evident among other members of the Nabi group: Lugné-Poe was a known subscriber to the leading anarchist journal, Le Révolte, while Ibels began contributing illustrations to the anarchist weekly, Père Peinard, by 1893. Roussel attempted social criticism in his Noli me Tangere (Touch Me Not) of 1894, where he translated the traditionally religious theme into a social one, a treatment not uncommon during that time (see: Marcel Proust, Swann's Way, trans. Scott Moncrieff (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), p. 414).

9 The same kind of calculated contrast was portrayed earlier in Seurat's drawing, Factories by Moonlight (1882-3), and may have inspired Vuillard's idea for Les débardeurs.


11 The use of irony was not uncommon during this time. In fact,
an ironical trend can be seen from Manet through Seurat, particularly in regard to pictures of the lower class. Specific instances of this were observed by Bradford R. Collins in "Manet's Rue Mosnier decked with Flags and the Flâneur Concept," Burlington 117 (November 1975), pp. 709-14, and Ian Thom in "Georges Seurat: Une Baignade à Asnières," (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1978).

12Aurier recognized the decorative intentions inherent in the Nabi aesthetic as cited in Chapter 1, p. 10, and Denis confirmed this in his Théories, p. 165, saying "...nous tirions cette sage maxime que tout tableau a pour but de décorer, doit être ornamentale." The term "decorative" as they used it and as used in this paper simply means "intended to be beautiful, to ornament".

13Françoise Cachin discusses Signac's stylistic progression toward the decorative in Paul Signac, trans. M. Bullock (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971), pp. 75-9. She cites 1893 as the year when both he and Henri-Edmond Cross realized a need to reorient their approach in this direction.


15Stone, Dear Theo, p. 450.

16Edouard Vuillard, "Letter to Maurice Denis (1898)," in Russell, Vuillard, p. 64.

17The fact that his friend, Bonnard, exhibited some works at that particular Salon would have encouraged his attendance.


19Bacou, Redon, p. 189.

20Denis, Théories, p. 245.

21The light tonal character along with the woman's informal dress suggest an afternoon gathering, making clear her distinction from the working class.


Ibid.

Utamaro was especially familiar to Parisians, a fact evidenced by the comparatively large number of prints (86) included in the 1890 exhibition at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and by the monograph published by Edmond de Goncourt in 1891.


Vuillard began to date his works during 1891; this painting, however, is not dated, suggesting, along with its Japanese elements, a date during the early part of that year.

In this particular form, the cross also has associations with Egypt, being the sign attached to Hebrew doorposts at the Exodus, and later, the attribute of St. Anthony, father of Christian monasticism. For further discussion of its significance as a cross, see: E. S. Whittlesey, *Symbols and Legends in Western Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), pp. 73 and 327, and J. E. Girlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Sage (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1971), pp. 16-8, and 69.


This discussion brings to mind the well-known monogram of Toulouse-Lautrec, which, however, only appeared after 1892.
This conjunction is not surprising in view of the vogue of the Japanese in Paris during the time the Nabis were formed, together with Gauguin's influence both by this taste and on their formation.

Louis Gonse's article celebrating the work of Korin coincidentally appeared in *Le Japon Artistique* 23 (March 1890), pp. 133-43.

It will be remembered that after the death of his father, Vuillard's mother established a dressmaking business in their Paris apartment.
CONCLUSION

This scrutiny of Vuillard's formative stages reveals two prevailing concerns in the evolution of his personal style. The earliest to surface was his preference for an art of quiet, intimate scenes. This was apparently a natural inclination, as evident from his earliest recorded work, Portrait of Madame Michaud (Figure 1). During 1888-89, this was directly stimulated by the young artist's visual attention to the work of Chardin; Vuillard attempted to emulate the master's homey subjects and quiet colours in works like Lapin de garenne (Figure 2) and Pommes et verre de vin (Figure 4).

At this point in his career, Vuillard was exposed to the artistic ideas of the Nabis. At first, these were subtly manifested in his work, cautiously veiled by naturalistic appearances as in Self-portrait in a Mirror (Figure 10). However, Vuillard soon put aside his inhibitions and embarked upon a series of bold Nabi experiments during 1890-91, exemplified by works like Le liseur (Figure 12). During this stage, he also considered the work of contemporary avant-garde painters like Seurat, van Gogh, and Degas, apparently seeking within each, techniques to embellish the Nabi manner. Though Vuillard's visual manifestation of Nabi theories mellowed in appearance after 1891, his flat, decorative painting and evocative approach continued throughout the 1890's. What this shows is his adoption of an essentially Nabi means of expression.

During 1891, Vuillard re-introduced intimate subject matter and
quiet colouring, as shown by Au lit (Figure 37) and Portrait of Lugné-Poë (Figure 41). Over the next two years, he attempted to integrate these with the Nabi approach he embraced. At this stage, Vuillard's attention was attracted by Japanese ukiyo-e prints, which provided visual examples of intimate scenes evoked in a Nabi-like fashion. These apparently inspired the growing suggestiveness in Vuillard's work, and prompted his adoption of a patterned surface. This last feature, first applied in works like Seamstress (Figure 43), naturally embellished the decorative character he pursued in his art. By 1893, Vuillard developed this technique beyond its obvious eye-pleasing function, enlisting it for expressive purposes in works like Le prétendant (Figure 46), to capture the homey essence of interior scenes. At this point, Vuillard had synthesized subject and mode into a delicate harmony, and created a style of intimate art uniquely his own.
Figure 1. Portrait of Madame Michaud, c. 1888, conté crayon on paper, 42 x 36 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 2. Lapin de garenne, c. 1888, oil on canvas, 41 x 32 cm., Paris: Claude Roger-Marx collection.
Figure 3. Chardin. Hare, Game Bag, and Gunpowder Box, c. 1727, oil on canvas, 82 x 65 cm., Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Figure 4. Pommes et verre de vin, c. 1888, oil on canvas, 20 x 39 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 5. Chardin. *Pears, Walnut, Glass of Wine, and Knife*, c. 1760, oil on canvas, 33 x 41 cm., Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Figure 6. Roussel. Still-life with Onions, c. 1890, oil on wood panel, 17 x 27.5 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 7. Bonnard. Le perdreau, 1889, oil on canvas, 22 x 16 cm., Paris: Raoul de Ricci collection.
Figure 8. Chardin. *Partridge, Pitcher, Apple and Orange*, c. 1726-28, oil on canvas, 52 x 43 cm., private collection.
Figure 9. Vuillard coiffé d’un canotier, c. 1888, oil on canvas 35 x 31 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 10. *Self-portrait in a Mirror*, 1888-90, oil on canvas, 45 x 52 cm., Los Angeles: Lew Wasserman collection.
Figure 11. La visite, 1890, oil on canvas, 18.5 x 23 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 12. *Le liseur*, c. 1890, oil on cardboard, 35 x 19 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 13. Manet. *Le liseur*, 1861, oil on canvas, 98 x 80 cm., St. Louis: City Art Museum.
Figure 14. Denis. Ascent to Calvary, 1889, oil on canvas, 41 x 32.5 cm., St. Germain-en-Laye: private collection.
Figure 15. Daumier. *Un wagon de troisième classe*, 1863–65, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 90 cm., New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 16. *Un wagon de troisième classe*, c. 1891, oil on cardboard, 48.75 x 60 cm., New York: Sam Salz collection.
Figure 17. *Les débardeurs*, c. 1890, oil on canvas, 47 x 64 cm., New York: Arthur Altschul collection.
Figure 18. Manet. *Le port de Boulogne-sur-Mer au clair de lune*, 1869, oil on canvas, 82 x 101 cm., Paris: Musée du Jeu de Paume.
Figure 19. Seurat. *La parade*, 1888, oil on canvas, 100 x 151 cm., New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 20. Denis. *Avril*, 1891, oil on canvas, Paris: E. Druet collection.
Figure 21. Self-portrait, c. 1891, oil on cardboard, 28 x 36 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 22. Van Gogh. *Self-portrait*, c. 1886-88, oil on canvas, 41 x 30.5 cm., Laren: V. W. van Gogh collection.
Figure 23. Self-portrait, 1892, oil on cardboard, 28 x 36 cm., Los Angeles: Sidney Brody collection.
Figure 24. Redon. Portrait de Redon par lui-même, 1867, oil on canvas, 35 x 25 cm., Paris: Ari Redon collection.
Figure 25. Denis. Hommage à Cézanne, 1900, oil on canvas, 160 x 240 cm., Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne.
Figure 26. *L'élegante*, c. 1890-92, oil on canvas, 27.5 x 15 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 27. Degas. At the Louvre: Mary Cassatt in the Painting Gallery, c. 1879-80, etching, aquatint, drypoint and crayon électrique, 29.3 x 12.4 cm., Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art.
Figure 28. Ouvrières au chiffonier, c. 1890, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 29. L'atelier de la corsetière, n.d., oil on wood panel, 35 x 27 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 30. Les oreillons, c. 1895, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 31. Bonnard. *Femme au Jardin* (one panel of four), 1890-91, oil on canvas, 160 x 48 cm., private collection.
Figure 33. *Le déshabillé ovale*, c. 1891, oil on cardboard, 25 x 35 cm., Paris: private collection.
Figure 34. Kuniyoshi. O Kane, A Strong Woman from Omi Province, c. 1843-47, colour woodblock print, Springfield, Mass.: Bidwell collection.
Figure 35. Utamaro. Two Girls Dressing their Hair, late 18th century, colour woodblock print, 38.8 x 26.4 cm., private collection.
Figure 36. Shuncho. Visitors to the Masaki Inari Shrine, c. 1821 colour woodblock print, Tokyo: Tokyo National Museum.
Figure 37. *Au lit*, 1891, oil on canvas, 74 x 92 cm., Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne.
Figure 38. Kunisada. Rokusaburo the Carpenter, early 19th century, colour woodlock print, 38.8 x 26.4 cm.
Figure 39. Hokusai. Fuji from the long, sloping hillside of Inume in Kai Province, early 19th century, 25 x 37 cm., Paris: Henri Vever collection.
Figure 40. Hokusai. *Femme*, early 19th century, brushed ink on paper, as published in *Le Japon Artistique*, Vol. III, no. 36 (April 1891), Plate BIF.
Figure 41. Portrait of Lugné-Poë, 1891, oil on wood panel, 21.8 x 25.6 cm., Pittsford, N.Y.: Fletcher Steele collection.
Figure 42. Kiyomitsu. *A Beauty of Eastern Japan*, 1808, colour wood-block print, 37.5 x 25.8 cm.
Figure 43. Seamstress, 1891, oil on board, 25 x 22 cm., Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne.
Figure 44. *Little Girls Walking*, 1891, Oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm., New York: Walter Ross collection.
Figure 45. Harunobu. Two Girls on the Hagi-no-Tamagawa in the Moonlight, mid-18th century, coloured woodblock print.
Figure 46. *Le prétendant*, 1893, oil on cardboard, 44 x 51 cm., Northampton, Mass.: Smith College collection.
Figure 47. Kiyonaga. A Room at the Komeikan brothel at Susaki, late 18th century, colour woodblock print, 38 x 24.5 cm., Paris: Henri Vever collection.
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