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Beauty Captured in an ‘Instant’:

Pierre Bonnard’s Transformation of the Everyday

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History of Art (PhD) The University of Edinburgh 2020
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“L’art du peintre, c’est de découvrir de la beauté, et de la faire découvrir à d’autres.” - Pierre Bonnard, 1942.
Introduction

‘Beauty’ revealed in the ‘instant’

Writing in his notebook in the late 1930s, Pierre Bonnard [1867-1947] makes an astonishing claim, describing works of art as essentially expressions of time brought to a stop: “L’œuvre d’art: un arrêt du temps.” At first, such a bold statement does not appear to ring true when applied to ‘art’ as a whole; it would seem absurd for instance to describe a novel by Dickens or a symphony by Beethoven, let alone an opera or a film, as representative of time at a complete standstill. However, if we take the liberty of disregarding the use of the generic term “l’œuvre d’art” and assume instead that Bonnard is referring to representational painting, his own chosen medium, this attempt at a definition does in fact pinpoint something inherent to it: the image of a painting, even one that aims to convey movement or a passage of time, is necessarily frozen permanently into place. In fact, it is my contention that, although Bonnard could be commenting on representational painting in general, his identification of this particular quality suggests it to be of intrinsic value in regards to his own work. Indeed, while any painting which depicts objects might by its very nature be said to automatically present a sense of time standing still, it is argued throughout the following thesis that Bonnard actively engages in this enterprise, producing images that, expunged from a sense of duration, can be said to represent an ‘instant’. It is therefore not merely a case of what is presented in the painting in question being static, but the way in which this content is arranged by the artist so that the image represents a sense of time having suddenly been brought to a stop.

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2 This is the first occasion in which I take advantage of the intentionally ambiguous tone of Bonnard’s aphoristic statements concerning art, in order to interpret his work. I shall expand on this in more detail later in the Introduction when I discuss my methodology.
Following on from this initial observation, the central argument of this thesis is that it is through the pictorial device of the instant that Bonnard presents the viewer with an expression of 'beauty', a term he uses throughout his career to describe what he wishes to convey in his work.\footnote{It is not my argument that Bonnard uses only this one strategy in order to express beauty. For instance, it is very hard to argue a case for the presentation of the instant in the artist’s landscapes – although not impossible – as these types of scenes often lack the pictorial cues necessary for such a strategy; namely, closely observed representations of people and the depiction of light interacting with objects. We shall see later just how important these things are in conveying the instant. Although I would personally claim the landscapes convey a sense of ‘beauty’, I have subsequently tended to pay less attention to this genre in the present thesis, although I have by no means ignored it altogether. I am also not claiming that the artist only ever pursues an expression of beauty in his work; for instance, I would argue that his portraits and self-portraits do not generally have this objective in mind. Nevertheless, it is my contention that the expression of beauty using the means of the instant is a consistent enough feature in much of Bonnard’s work from the early 1890s until his death in 1947 to warrant it being worthy of investigation.} For instance, Bonnard wrote in his notebook in 1932: “Représenter la nature quand c’est beau. Tout a son moment de beauté. La beauté, c’est la satisfaction de la vision.”\footnote{Bonnard, Observations sur la peintre, 30.} An in-depth discussion will take place below of what ‘beauty’, an admittedly loaded term, meant for Bonnard in particular, but it would be helpful to make a number of initial observations now. First of all, it can be said that, generally speaking, Bonnard uses it to describe the visible quality of an object or group of objects when it induces in the individual a feeling of wonderment or awe. ‘Beauty’ is therefore not an inherent feature of any given object, merely there to be discovered, but is rather something that the individual in certain circumstances might perceive in the world; it is clear therefore that for Bonnard it is something produced only through the relationship between the subject that is observing and the object that is being observed: “Beauty is the fulfilment of vision”. According to Bonnard, these experiences of beauty are usually registered by the individual for only a brief moment before they disappear: “Everything has its moment of beauty”. Secondly, in order for the artwork to be described as an expression of this conception of beauty, it must follow that it is a quality that Bonnard believes can be rendered in a painting: “Depict nature when it is beautiful.”. Here, it is important to distinguish between on the one hand the painting in and of itself being ‘beautiful’ - as we have seen, it is not a quality inherent in any object, including an artwork – and on the other the artist producing an expression of beauty.
is therefore not a question of Bonnard merely transcribing something he deems to be beautiful onto the canvas, as the first instance would suggest, but rather the way in which he organises the contents of the picture in order for it express the relationship between the individual and the world, thus allowing a moment of beauty to be discerned. It is my contention that, in producing a depiction of the instant, Bonnard produces these brief moments in which beauty is recognised by effectively representing this relational process between the observer and the observed. It will be argued therefore that Bonnard establishes a correlation between the momentary recognition of beauty experienced by the individual in reality and the expression of beauty exhibited on the canvas through the instant. Put simply, it is within the framework of the instant that Bonnard produces an expression of beauty.

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In addition to this overarching argument, the other key claim that I put forward in this thesis is that Bonnard's work as a whole can only be fully appreciated if it is placed in context with the aesthetic debates that took place in the late nineteenth century among those artists and writers connected with the French Symbolist movement. As a matter of fact, it will be claimed that the very nature of Bonnard's objective in expressing beauty came about through a direct result of his participation as a young man within this particular milieu. One of the purposes of this Introduction is to set out why I think Bonnard's early years of activity when he was involved in Symbolist circles are important for an understanding of his overall output. First of all, it will be argued that Bonnard's artistic practice in regards to beauty and the instant came about as a result of a crisis that had beset Symbolist painters in the mid-1890s. I then intend to expand upon the way in which Bonnard uses the word 'beauty' in regards to his artistic objectives. Following this, I examine the appearance of a brushstroke in Bonnard's output during this crucial period of gestation that was inspired by Impressionism, a technique he would continue to use in varying ways throughout his career. Rather than viewing this as signalling a break with
Symbolism, as has often been assumed, I shall argue instead that it was in fact a technique Bonnard believed was better suited to express the same set of objectives he had already acquired. It will also be claimed that it was particularly through the work of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) that Bonnard was able to formulate an aesthetic that, while at odds in many ways with those of some of his contemporaries, continued to have a Symbolist agenda. Having outlined why I believe that Bonnard’s relationship with French Symbolism is of such importance, it will then be proposed that, in making this claim, the current thesis differs from many other recent surveys of the artist’s work, which have tended to ignore the earlier output. This will allow me to critique a generally accepted proposition that Bonnard had “effectively two careers”, consisting of an early and a late period, a point of view that until now has been the dominant framework in which the artist’s work has been analysed.

A further benefit of providing this preliminary account of Bonnard’s relationship with Symbolism – the main point of discussion in the first two chapters of the thesis – is that it provides me with an opportunity to fully address why I have chosen to focus on the instant as a pictorial device that Bonnard employs in much of the work discussed over the course of this thesis. However, given that the ‘instant’ is not a term which Bonnard used frequently, I shall explain why I have chosen this word to describe a particular feature of his work. Moreover, once again it will be argued that such a strategy is in adherence with Symbolist principles, in this case the insistence that the painted image is both non-mimetic and self-contained. In positioning the work in this way, it will be argued that the current trend to interpret his work as a depiction of memory is misleading, as it undermines the status of the image as a unique entity in its own right.

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Before ending the Introduction with a brief synopsis of each chapter, I shall outline the methodology I have used throughout this piece of work, allowing me to offer further examples of why I believe that the following thesis provides a fresh insight into so enigmatic a painter.

**Symbolism in crisis**

The pictorial strategy of the instant was, I believe, developed by Bonnard in response to what Marryanne Stevens has described as a crisis that many Symbolist painters faced in the 1890s, as they sought ways in which to express abstract ideas through pictorial means. The crux of the problem for such artists lay in how physical objects could be depicted in order to suggest concepts that are not available to the senses. Such considerations came about in the first place when a number of painters looked to align their work with the aesthetic principles that had been set out in literature during the previous decade by certain poets associated with the Symbolist movement. Influenced by Neo-Platonism and the anti-empirical philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), poets such as Gustave Kahn (1859-1936) and Jean Moréas (1856-1910) argued that art should not be a copy of nature, but should aim instead towards revealing an abstract realm of ‘ideas’ – what they frequently termed the ‘Idea’ – which exists beyond the world of appearances. For instance, in his manifesto of 1886 entitled ‘Le Symbolisme’, Moréas proposes that, because the Idea is an abstraction that cannot be conceived of in terms of images, the poet should avoid describing things and instead use formal means such as rhythm, rhyme and structure in order to *suggest* it.²

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In a series of articles in the early 1890s, the poet and critic Albert Aurier (1865-92) made the first attempt to apply Symbolist theory to painting, arguing that the work of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) heralded a return to a more primitive type of visual art that was able to evoke the Idea in its preference for the decorative over the descriptive. Nevertheless, being an abstract notion, painters at the time struggled to find a way that might allow the Idea to manifest on to the canvas without resorting to practices that instead privileged the depiction of objects; as Stevens has pointed out, it was undoubtedly easier to suggest the Idea through words rather than through the means available to painters. Bonnard first became acquainted with these notions towards the end of the 1880s, when they were conveyed to him through Paul Sérusier (1864-1927) and Maurice Denis (1870-1943), two fellow students he had met at the Académie Julian in Paris the mid-1880s. The three of them would soon join with a number of other young aspiring Symbolist artists, such as Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940), Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867-1944) and Paul Ranson (1864-1909), to form a group who called themselves the Nabis. After Bonnard had made the acquaintance of Sérusier and Denis, these two other artists fell under the influence of Gauguin, an association which came about at a pivotal moment in the older artist’s career. At the time, he had only recently abandoned the Impressionist technique that he had been using during the previous decade under the tutelage of Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), and was now, along with the painter Émile Bernard (1868-1941), beginning to develop a painterly equivalent to Symbolist poetry that privileged the inner mind or imagination of the


\(^10\)It was Sérusier who christened the group the Nabis, a name that was based on the Hebrew word ‘Nebiim’ meaning ‘prophets’. Claire Fréches-Thory and Antoine Terrasse, *The Nabis*, tr. Mary Pordoe (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 15.


individual over naturalist description.

It will be claimed that Bonnard’s response to the crisis in the form of the instant demonstrates how his aesthetic priorities differed from other Symbolist painters like Denis and Sérusier; while much Symbolist theory privileged form over content in order to convey the Idea, Bonnard’s solution relies on a co-operation between these two aspects so that neither is given prominence. We shall see how, in devising the instant as means of expressing 'beauty', the symbolic import of the painting is built into the very fabric of the physical world of appearances depicted on the canvas. Consequently, instead of treating the subject matter of the painting as primarily a vessel in which the Idea can be transmitted to the viewer, Bonnard’s aesthetic is dependent on the physical world and its portrayal in order to communicate through the image a deeper, more ‘universal’ meaning.13 Such a deviation from the Symbolist emphasis on form is, I propose, evident in Bonnard's own use of the word 'beauty' when discussing art, a term which he seems to use in place of, but not synonymous with, the notion of the Idea. While the Idea is something that supposedly exists separately from the physical world and can thus only be intuited by reason, 'beauty' implies something that, while also pertaining to a subjective experience, is discernible to the senses.14 The use of the word ‘beauty’ thus better captures Bonnard’s desire to convey through the image a symbiotic relationship between the outside world of appearances and the inner mind of an individual interpreting such data. This is borne out by Bonnard’s artistic practice, in which the initial idea for a painting was usually based on a

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13 On several occasions, rather than using the word ‘beauty’ to describe what Bonnard sought to express through his work, I shall instead refer to the ‘universal’. The artist uses both of these words to describe what he wishes to express with an image, but whereas ‘beauty’ encapsulates something perceived or felt in the physical world, the ‘universal’, a more general term, does not. The ‘universal’ will therefore only be used when it seems apparent that the artist is using the imagery of the painting to express something over and above the particular scene presented in the painting, but which is not necessarily a depiction of beauty.

14 According to another of the Nabis painters Dom Willibrord Verkade, while Gauguin’s work “proceeded from the perception of the senses”, he also insisted that the depiction of the physical world must be tempered “through the application of the eternal laws of artistic representation, which intuition or the experience of ourselves and others teach us.” Dom Willibrord Verkade, *Yesterdays of an Artist-Monk*, tr. John L. Stoddard (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons Publishers, 1930), 67.
drawing he had made from nature, often an observation of a motif that moved him emotionally, which would then be transcribed onto the canvas to further pronounce the moment of beauty he had momentarily witnessed.

As argued in the previous section, beauty for Bonnard is something that both appears in the physical world [“la beauté, c’est la satisfaction de la vision”] and can also be expressed in a painting [“représenter la nature quand c’est beau”]. In an interview in 1942, Bonnard would articulate this in even more simple terms: “The art of the painter is to discover beauty, and to make others discover it.”15 Moreover, as the second part of Bonnard’s note to himself suggests, beauty is something that materialises only briefly [“tout a son moment de beauté”], a measurement of time that I have classified for the purposes of this thesis as an ‘instant’. It would therefore be helpful to explain in more detail how I arrived upon the term the ‘instant’ as useful in regards to this particular feature of Bonnard’s work – it is not a word he uses himself with any regularity – and how I shall be using it. This will also enable me to make clear how, in pinpointing the instant as a particular feature in Bonnard’s work that privileges the autonomous status of the image, the present thesis goes against many interpretations that claim his work depicts memory. However, before doing so, I shall first look at how it was through the examples provided by both Impressionist technique and Mallarméan aesthetics that Bonnard was able to further develop a response to the crisis among Symbolists painters in the 1890s. I shall also demonstrate how my interpretation resists categorising of Bonnard’s output into ‘early’ and ‘late’ periods.

Mallarmé and the Impressionists

Despite Bonnard developing an aesthetic from the theories he had absorbed during his involvement in the Symbolist milieu of fin-de-siècle Paris, given his reluctance in expressing the abstract idea in favour of a beauty more attuned to the senses, I shall argue it is unsurprising that he soon began to incorporate into his work a technique associated with Impressionism. It will be claimed that by using a series of loose brushstrokes with their prominent mark-making, Bonnard was better able to express in his work what was for him an integral relationship between subject matter and content.

Bonnard’s application of an Impressionist brushstroke is intriguing because, although by the mid-1890s he had abandoned many of techniques associated with the Nabis, he would always comply with the anti-realist privileging of the decorative that was expounded by the group, insisting that the painting as an object was fundamentally separate from nature. He later said: “When my friends and I decided to pick up the research of the Impressionists, and to attempt to take it further, we wanted to outshine them in their naturalistic impressions of colour. Art is not nature.” Nonetheless, similarly to Bonnard, the Impressionists placed an engagement with nature at the forefront of their artistic practice, striving to articulate on the canvas their ‘sensations’, a term they often used to describe their subjective interaction with their immediate environment. The technique of applying loose brushstrokes was thus a means to express on the canvas a subjective ‘impression’ of nature, a mark that aspired to represent both the spontaneity and the uniqueness of the contact between the artist and the object at a particular moment in time. As Richard Shiff has highlighted, Impressionism’s loose mark making acts as

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18 Ibid., 10.
a sort of ‘imprint’ on the canvas, suggesting a physical contact between the artist and the external world,¹⁹ thus indicating to the viewer that the artist was present before the motif, something that became fundamental to what Bonnard wanted to convey himself. As the artist himself puts it in a note to himself written in 1939: “That the inner feeling of beauty coincides with nature, that’s the point.”²⁰

Crucial to Bonnard’s incorporation of Impressionist technique into the framework of Symbolist theory, I shall argue, was his engagement with the poetry of Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898). Crowned the ‘Prince of Poets’ by the Symbolist review La Plume in 1896, Mallarmé was also a supporter of the Impressionist painters, some of whom he counted among his closest friends. Most importantly in terms of this discussion was his espousal of le Rien, his belief that beyond the world of physical matter there is only void or nothingness, an attitude that puts him at odds with some of the more esoteric theorising of other Symbolists like Sérusier,²¹ but which would have appealed to Bonnard.²² In a letter to his friend Henri Cazalis, Mallarmé wrote: “Yes, I now know for a fact, we are just pointless forms of matter, and thoroughly sublime ones for having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend! that I intend to treat myself to this spectacle of matter – of matter wholly conscious of being just matter and yet crazily launching itself into our world of Dream that it knows does not exist – singing of the Soul and all the other impressions of the divine that have accumulated in us since earliest times and proclaiming these glorious lies in the Nothing that is the real truth! ...I shall sing as a man who is without hope!”²³

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²⁰ “Que le sentiment intérieur de beauté se rencontre avec la nature, c’est là le point.” Bonnard, *Observations sur la peintre*, 46.

²¹ According to Jan Verkade, Sérusier once told him: “It is certain that we cannot know the truth without a general acquaintance with the world perceptible to the senses, yet truth has its seat above all in the intellectual power and the spiritual life of the soul. They key of the universe is, before all else, *the soul*.” Verkade, 77.

²² Bonnard is reported to have made fun out of some of the more esoteric beliefs of his fellow Nabis. Julian Bell, *Bonnard* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), 11.

Drawing on his nihilistic view of reality, Mallarmé developed a Symbolist aesthetic that used the dialogue between the subjective imagination and nature as its starting point – one of the criticisms that had been levelled at Impressionism by Aurier –\(^{24}\) emphasising the primeval human capacity for creating meaning from this nothingness. He was particularly drawn to the fact that, from time immemorial, countless civilisations had fashioned for themselves symbolic meaning from the ‘solar drama’ of the sun as it rises and sets each day.\(^{25}\) For Mallarmé then, the ‘Idea’ was not something that actually exists in another realm, as it was for Neo-Platonists such as Aurier;\(^{26}\) but purely an expression of the imagination. It was therefore the role of the artist or poet to satisfy this primeval urge that craves to produce a sense of meaning from the contingent data of the phenomenal world. In an essay on the poet Théodore de Banville, reprinted in an 1897 collection of prose work called Divagations – a book Bonnard would have been familiar with –\(^{27}\) Mallarmé describes the capacity the imagination has for changing “facts into the ideal” as “the divine transposition, for the accomplishment of which man exists”.\(^{28}\) Mallarmé’s notion of the ‘Idea’ as being something that is invented by humankind, as image or ideal, rather than existing in and of itself, would therefore provide Bonnard with a framework more in keeping with his own way of thinking than the theorising of Denis and Sérusier.

Subsequently, when Bonnard began incorporating a more descriptive technique into his work so as to make more explicit the bond between imagination and matter, it will be argued that he was able to draw on the work of Mallarmé in particular in order to negotiate a synthesis

\(^{24}\)“Impressionism is and cannot be anything but a variant of Realism … The starting and terminating point of the [Impressionist] art is the material object, the real thing.” Aurier quoted in Stevens, ‘The Transformation of the Symbolist Aesthetic’, 199.

\(^{25}\)Pearson, 40-1.

\(^{26}\)”[Those who do not know about the Idea, nor are able to see it, nor believe in it, merit our compassion, just as those poor stupid prisoners of the allegorical cavern of Plato did for free men.” Aurier, 89.

\(^{27}\)Fellow Nabi Ker-Xavier Roussel is known to have frequently cited a passage from *Divigations* to his friends, including Bonnard. André Chastel, ‘Vuillard et Mallarmé’, reprinted in André Chastel, *Fables, Formes, Figures II*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2\(^{nd}\) edition, 2000), 413.

between the Impressionists’ subjective portrayal of nature and the Symbolists’ prioritisation of the decorative. In fact, even before Bonnard began to use the loose brushstroke of Impressionism in his work, the influence of Mallarmé can be detected. In his first major painting called *Twilight* (1892) [fig. 1], for instance, it is the portrayal of the ‘solar drama’ that provides the image with its symbolic significance. As will be discussed in Chapter One, this painting also marks the first occasion in which Bonnard incorporates into the composition a representation of the instant, with the depiction of the brief moment that the sun sets through the trees. Although Bonnard was still persevering with a Symbolist technique at the point, it is the inclusion of this fleeting natural occurrence, rather than the manner in which the picture is rendered, which infuses the scene portrayed in *Twilight* with a sense of otherworldliness. As we shall see, this ambition to provide everyday situations and objects with symbolic significance was one that he shared with Mallarmé, and would remain his primary motivation throughout his career.

‘Early’ and ‘late’

The importance that I place on Bonnard’s early career in understanding his overall output goes against many of the recent surveys of the artist’s work, which have tended to frame his career within the spurious categories of ‘early’ and ‘late’ periods. For instance, the most recent exhibition on Bonnard at the time of writing, which took place at Tate Modern Gallery, London, in 2019, before travelling to Copenhagen and Vienna, did not include any paintings before the turn of the century and even then only a handful were from the years between 1900 and 1910. Such a seeming lack of interest in the earlier work is also reflected in the catalogue,29 which not only barely mentions a career before the twentieth century, but reproduces only one pre-1900 painting.30 It is of course common for exhibitions to concentrate on a particular period of an

29 Matthew Gale (ed.), *Bonnard: The Colour of Memory*.
30 The painting reproduced in the catalogue is *Twilight* (1892). On the same page, there is also a photograph of
artist's career, but the lack of any work pre-dating the twentieth century was strange in this instance as it otherwise presented itself as a retrospective. The lack of representation of the earlier work makes sense, however, when we learn that it is the opinion of the curator that Bonnard’s “position as a twentieth-century artist” came about because of a “significant change in direction in his painting around 1912”. In this way, the exhibition followed a similar critical stance to the one that was taken by the organisers of a presentation of the artist’s work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris three decades earlier, where a decision was also made to only display artworks from the turn of the century. In fact, both exhibitions began their survey with Bonnard’s seminal painting from 1900 Man and Woman [fig. 2]. Simply titled “Bonnard” when it was held at the Paris location from February to May, 1984, the exhibition was renamed “Bonnard: The Late Paintings” when it subsequently relocated to Washington, D.C. and then Dallas. This exhibition was of particular importance as it has been seen as the culmination of a gradual reassessment of Bonnard’s œuvre starting in the 1960s that eventually cemented his reputation as an artist, yet it appears the curators only felt this could be achieved by ignoring the work produced before the turn of the century. Unfortunately this critical stance appears to have set the tone for how Bonnard’s career has subsequently been treated in other exhibitions. Moreover, both of these exhibitions are indicative of an ever-growing tendency since Bonnard’s death to write about his output as consisting of two distinct periods of practice in which anything he produced before roughly 1913 is treated as ‘early work’ and after this date.

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32 Hyman, 11.
33 It is likely that it was felt that the relevancy of Bonnard’s work depended on it being portrayed to be ‘modern’, and it was therefore necessary to ignore the nineteenth century output. In his introduction to the exhibition, John Russell wrote: “If I understand it correctly, the ambition of this exhibition is to stress the modernity, even the actuality of Pierre Bonnard.” John Russell, ‘Introduction’ in Sasha M. Newman (ed.), Pierre Bonnard, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984) 8.
34 Recent retrospectives that have avoided demarcating Bonnard’s œuvre in this way are: “Bonnard: The Work of Art Suspended in Time” held at the Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris, in 2006, “Pierre Bonnard” held at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel in 2012 and “Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia” held at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, the Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid and the Fine Arts Museum San Francisco between 2015 and 2016. However, as with the literature in general, some of the essays in the catalogues for these exhibitions resort to discussing the work in terms of an ‘early’ or a ‘late’ period.
as ‘late work’. Analysing his work through this framework was explicitly stated in the titles given to two other exhibitions since the one held at Pompidou, the first called “Pierre Bonnard: Early and Late”, which took place at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., in 2002, and “Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still-Lifes and Interiors” held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2009.

It is my belief that categorising Bonnard’s output in this way is misleading, resulting in various interpretations which fail to recognise his overarching development as an artist, one which saw him continue to explore throughout the twentieth century the same painterly concerns and theoretical issues which had occupied him in the 1890s. Admittedly, Bonnard’s own acknowledgement of having experienced a crisis in regards to his work in around 1913 has helped forge this impression of there existing a caesura separating his work into two different phases. During this period, Bonnard is supposed to have told his nephew Charles Terrasse: “I want to forget all that I knew, I’m trying to learn what I do not know.” This ‘midlife crisis’ is often viewed as having being brought about by a feeling that he had been surpassed by a younger generation of artists, thus compelling him to re-think his own strategy in order to once again claim a relevant position within the avant-garde. It is certainly true that by the second decade of the twentieth century, Bonnard had become aware that his work had become to be seen as less relevant; when discussing the work both himself and Vuillard had produced after the turn of the century, he would later recall: “Society was ready to welcome Cubism and

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35 In fact, the catalogue for the exhibition divides his work into three separate sections: early, middle and late.
37 In the catalogue for the recent Tate exhibition, Gale writes: “Whether or not Bonnard was aware that his work was being consigned to history … the painter began a revision of his art, whether in response to criticism such as that of Apollinaire, or due to his alertness to the developments among younger artists around him.” Gale, 10. Also see Dita Amory’s bold assessment that Bonnard’s later work is “more radical at times than that of the Fauves … his imagery more complex and mysterious than that of either Cubism or Surrealism.” Dita Amory, ‘The Presence of Objects: Still Life in Bonnard’s Late Paintings’ in Dita Amory (ed.), Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 4.
Surrealism before we had reached our objective. We found ourselves in some sense suspended in the air.”\textsuperscript{38} But in treating the paintings he subsequently produced as embodying a ‘late period’ that in some way represents a reaction to this predicament, art historians have ignored a more fundamental reason for Bonnard’s change in direction: he now questioned whether the means of expression he had developed were adequate in order to convey the same artistic objectives he had been pursuing since his early days in Paris. Instead of regarding the paintings post-1913 as representative of a ‘late period’, one of the purposes of this thesis is to demonstrate how they in fact display a continuation of the very same objectives that Bonnard had formulated as a young man. Interpreting them in this way will, I believe, cast a new light on the work Bonnard produced in the twentieth century. Writing about the Symbolist generation from the vantage point of the 1930s, Denis concludes his article by reviewing the subsequent trajectories of the different painters who had shared in their youth the same ambitions as him, singling out Bonnard as the one who had, in his words, “remained faithful to his first aesthetic attitude”. Denis continues: “[Bonnard’s] latest works are justly praised for their enduring youthfulness.”\textsuperscript{39} What marks Bonnard out as different from some of the other artists of his generation then is not that he ultimately unshackled himself from the heritage that he shared with them, but rather that he continued to develop as an artist while adhering to the same convictions he had acquired at the end of the nineteenth century.

\textit{The ‘poetic instant’}

Alongside the statement quoted at the beginning of the Introduction, Bonnard made several remarks throughout his career which allude to events that seem take place in an instant. One of these, the only time he uses the word ‘instant’, is a rather cryptic observation about human

\textsuperscript{39} Denis, ‘The Symbolist Era’, 79.
psychology written in his notebook in 1939: “The instant we say that we are happy, we are no more.”

Although this remark does not directly refer to the artistic process, the fact he chose to include it in his “observations on painting”, the title he himself came up with for a collection of his notebook entries published posthumously in the magazine *Verve* in 1947, suggests that he associated the sentiment it conveys in some way with his own work. On a further occasion however, Bonnard was to make a more direct link between the notion of instantaneity and his art, saying that he wanted his paintings to “show what one sees all at once when one suddenly enters a room.”

Given that Bonnard only uses the word ‘instant’ once, and not in direct relation to art, it is appropriate that I explain why I have chosen this word for my own analysis. In using this term, I make a direct correlation between this feature of Bonnard’s work and the notion of the “poetic instant” put forward by the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose writing on the subject is the main framework through which the discussion will place. According to Bachelard, an image expunged from a sense of duration can be said to represent what he identifies as a “poetic instant”, a trope he especially associates with the work of nineteenth century French writers, some of whom like Mallarmé had a direct influence on Bonnard’s own views on art. For Bachelard, the poetic instant is an image which, instead of unfolding, articulates “vertical time”; free from causality, the “poetic instant” is thus able to reveal a new and revelatory way of experiencing the world that had hitherto remained hidden. Although it is true that Bachelard discusses this conceit in terms of poetry, it is a central argument of this thesis that Bonnard

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42 The other writer who Bachelard pays particular attention to in regards to his notion of the “poetic instant” is Charles Baudelaire. The possible influence Baudelaire had on Bonnard is discussed in Chapters Three and Four.
devised various ways in which to produce his own plastic equivalent of the instant.

It is also the case, I argue, that the strategy of the instant conforms to a Symbolist notion that demands of an image a self-contained logic of its own, rather than its adhering to the dictates of nature, what the critic Félix Fénéon described as *étanche* meaning ‘watertight’. Over the course of this thesis, it will be demonstrated that Bonnard never lost sight of this aesthetic principle in which the solipsistic ‘world’ presented in the image is demarcated from the preserve of nature, making it, in Bonnard’s words, “an enclosed world.” Writing in his notebook in 1937, Bonnard would continue to insist on a distinction between nature and art, claiming that, while the former is infinite, the latter is by contrast “finite, legible [and] surrounded by hostile neighbouring objects.” Taking this into account, what would usually be experienced in nature as ephemeral is reimagined through the instant as an autonomous and unique image that presents its subject matter as timeless and permanent; put simply, it is the world presented anew. Moreover, it will be argued that in doing so, Bonnard infuses into a depiction of the everyday a sense of otherworldliness, a transformation that encourages the viewer to reassess their relationship with apparently familiar objects and spaces.

**Memory and dream**

My treatment of the image as an imaginative “poetic instant”, an entity that is both autonomous and unique, means that the analysis of Bonnard’s output presented in this thesis differs from other recent surveys of the artist, which have claimed his work is an expression of memory. This

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46Le pourquoi de la transposition: la nature est infinite, l’œuvre est finie, limitée, entourée d’hostiles voisins…” Bonnard, *Observations sur la peinture*, 42.
particular interpretation has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, as the title “Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory” used for the recent Tate exhibition demonstrates. Specifically, it is claimed in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition that memory is “reinvented through colour” in Bonnard’s work.47 This notion that Bonnard “reinvents” memory on the canvas is also proffered in a slightly different way by John Elderfield, one of the curators of the previous Bonnard retrospective that was held at Tate; this time it is suggested that the artist presents an image that recreates on the canvas the sensation of recalling the past: “Bonnard paints from memory paintings that, representing perception, represent the creation of memory.”48 In the catalogue for another major Bonnard exhibition that took place in between the two just mentioned, Rika Burnham claims that “[what] was alive in Bonnard’s memory came to life again in his work.”49 And although it has become a popular theory particularly in the last two decades, other critics going back further than the examples above have also argued that Bonnard’s paintings are in some way or other representative of memory. For instance, David Sylvester claims that “there are several qualities in the paintings ... which suggest remembered rather than actual images” and that Bonnard was “painting in order to recapture, to recover, moments of perfect pleasure lived a long time ago”.50 Meanwhile, in contrasting Bonnard with the Impressionists, Helen Giambruni has said: “[Bonnard] held to a more arbitrary approach and his works recorded a memory rather than a moment of visual pleasure.”51

47Morris, Andersen and Brugger, 9. This statement is never really fully explored in the rest of the catalogue, but what it suggests in my opinion is that, rather than using colour descriptively, Bonnard uses it instead to evoke a sense of memory.
50Sylvester writes: “There are several qualities in the paintings themselves which suggest remembered rather than actual images ... this adds up to the interpretation that Bonnard was painting in order to recapture, to recover, moments of perfect pleasure lived a long time ago.” David Sylvester, ‘Still Life: Cézanne, Braque, Bonnard’ in About Modern Art: Critical Essays, 1948-1997 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1997) 109.
Although I do not dispute that memory played a crucial role as part of Bonnard’s artistic practice, I shall demonstrate that it does not necessarily follow that this is what the eventual painting represents. If it was the case that Bonnard “reinvents” memory, then the image produced would be mere copy of something – in this instance a representation of the past – and its status as something that is autonomous and unique would be undermined. Avoiding this reductive analysis, which confuses method for content, I shall instead investigate the ontology of the image in order to highlight its status as an autonomous entity, arguing in particular that the imaginative process of ‘dreaming’ – another important concept for the French Symbolists – was just as important for Bonnard in his conception of the eventual painting. Interviewed for a magazine article in 1942, Bonnard explained his artistic process thus: “I have all my subjects to hand … I look at them. I take notes. And then I go home. And before painting I reflect, I dream.”

While much has been made of Bonnard’s declaration that he reflects before commencing work on a painting, art historians have been slower to recognise the significance of his further claim that he dreams. But in stating that he dreams, Bonnard describes an imaginative process that does not purely use for its subject matter content retrieved from the past but searches for new forms of imagery and expression. Even if it was a memory which sparked the initial idea for a painting, I shall argue that the picture is ultimately an imagining of something fresh and unique which exists solely as it appears on the canvas.

**Methodology**

In order to form an understanding of the ways in which Bonnard might have been grappling with the concerns mentioned above, I conducted an extensive reading of the relevant philosophical literature that deals with these ideas. This included not only the writings of those

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whom Bonnard is likely to have either read or at least have had a second-hand knowledge of, such as Plato (c. 428-348 BC), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941), but books by philosophers Bonnard is unlikely to have known or engaged with for various reasons, like Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Bachelard. In many ways, I have found the latter writers more beneficial in regards to my analysis of Bonnard’s work, as I discovered in both Kierkegaard and Bachelard an attempt to formulate into theories the same questions that the artist examines in his paintings. In particular, it is Bachelard’s analysis of both the ‘instant’ and how poets have expressed this infinitesimal measurement of time which allows for a fresh perspective through which to view what I believe to be an integral feature of much of the output that I discuss. In determining a correlation between the “poetic instant” as described by Bachelard and the way Bonnard often presents an image, I was thus able to use the ‘instant’ as a framework through which to analyse the painterly strategy he deploys.

53Having won an award at school for Classics, and also given his love of Ancient Greek culture, it can be safely assumed that Bonnard would have read Plato in the original language. Works by Plato I have found especially enlightening in terms of this thesis are: Parmenides for its discussion of the ‘instant’ (Plato, Parmenides, tr. Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996); Timaeus for its discussion of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ (Plato, Timaeus and Critias, tr. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and both Symposium (Plato, Symposium, tr. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Phaedrus (Plato, Phaedrus, tr. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) for their discussions of ‘Beauty’. Although there is no evidence that Bonnard read Hegel, he would have at least absorbed some of the philosopher’s ideas when, according to Denis, he was regularly brought up by Sérusier in discussions among the Nabis (Maurice Denis, ‘The Influence of Paul Gauguin’, translator not provided, in John Russell (ed.), 74). The relevant sections of Hegel’s The Science of Logic (1812) have broadened my thinking about ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and George di Giovanni (ed.), The Science of Logic, tr. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). During much of Bonnard’s lifetime, Henri Bergson was the most famous philosopher globally and it is likely that he the artist read his work. Timothy Hyman suggests that he was regularly discussed by the Nabis at their meetings (Hyman, 36). Moreover, numerous critics have drawn parallels between Bergson and Bonnard.

54Although by the late nineteenth century, Kierkegaard’s work had already had an impact on the artistic circles within Scandinavia, it was hardly known about in France until the 1920s. However, the most famous of these artists that Kierkegaard influenced, the playwrights Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg and the painter Edvard Munch, all have links with Bonnard. Bonnard personally knew the latter two through shared acquaintances and their involvement in the Symbolist journal La Revue blanche, and was familiar with the work of Ibsen through the theatre director Lugné-Poe, with whom he shared an apartment in the early 1890 at the same time the director was premiering dramas by Ibsen (and Strindberg) in Paris. For the influence Kierkegaard had on Scandinavian culture in the nineteenth century, see, for instance, Geoffrey Hill, ‘Introduction’, in Henrik Ibsen, Peer Gynt and Brand, tr. Geoffrey Hill (London: Penguin Random House, 2016) x-xiv. For a detailed examination of Kierkegaard’s reception in France, see Jon Stewart, ‘France: Kierkegaard as a Forerunner of Existentialism and Poststructuralism’ in Jon Stewart (ed.), Kierkegaard’s International Reception I: Northern and Western Europe (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 421-74. Given Bachelard’s writings first appeared well within Bonnard’s lifetime, it is not inconceivable that the painter would have read his books, although there is no evidence he ever did. The issue is of little consequence anyway, as many of the paintings that I discuss in Bachelardian terms pre-date the author’s work on the instant.
Although it has been observed before now that Bonnard appears to present an image as if it is frozen in time, this aspect of his work has never had the attention that I believe it deserves.55

Alongside the material discussed above, my argument is also reliant upon an extensive reading of the Symbolist literature produced when Bonnard was developing his aesthetic in the 1890s. As well using contemporaneous sources from the likes of Symbolist manifestos and journals to develop my argument, I have also found the writings of other artists to be especially helpful in situating Bonnard’s work within the context of its time, particularly those by Denis. Although I have detected many points of crossover in regards to Symbolist theory and what I claim to be Bonnard’s objectives, there are also areas in which he deviates in a significant way from the aesthetic terms set out by the likes of Denis. This is nowhere more noticeable, for instance, in what I argue above was Bonnard’s own response to the crisis that beset many of his Nabis friends in the 1890s, in which he appears to engage with the Symbolist notion of the Idea only to produce his own alternative through the notion of ‘beauty’. The use of contemporary sources not only allows me to ground many of the arguments made during the thesis in terms that Bonnard himself would have understood, but it also allows for a more nuanced approach in the discussion of the aesthetic issues at stake. This is usually not the case in the existing literature, where Bonnard is often portrayed as hostile to the aesthetic debates taking place around him.56

Even when more credit has been given to Bonnard’s aesthetic concerns, this has somewhat conversely resulted in his objectives being seen as identical with those of Denis and Sérusier. An example of this is in Katherine M. Kuenzli’s recent study of the Nabis, primarily an analysis of the work of Bonnard, Vuillard and Denis, in which it is claimed that the group as a whole saw

55The 2006 exhibition held at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris took its title “Pierre Bonnard: L’œuvre d’art, un arrêt du temps” from the statement made by Bonnard that is quoted at the beginning of this introduction; it was translated as “Bonnard: The Work of Art Suspended in Time” in the English version of the catalogue. However, the issue of what the artist might have implied by this statement is not dealt with in the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition.
56Bell, 11.
painting as a means to “intimate a hidden world underlying natural appearances”, a view which goes against my own argument that Bonnard was very much interested in depicting the data available to the senses. As far as I am aware, it is with this thesis that Bonnard’s aesthetic is presented for the first time as having being formed through a direct critical engagement with Symbolist theory.

Another invaluable source that has helped form the present analysis of Bonnard’s output has been the private observations he wrote to himself in his notebooks from the 1920s onwards. Not only do they provide an insight into the inner workings of the artist’s mind as he probes issues relating to painting and other matters seemingly unconnected to his profession, but a careful reading of them also highlights my belief that Bonnard was an artist who took theoretical considerations as seriously as any of his peers. Nevertheless, before now it has been common practice to make use of these piecemeal observations only occasionally, reflecting what I perceive to be a general view that the ambiguous language deployed lacks the unequivocal substance upon which to form a proper understanding of the artist’s work. In fact it is the elusive quality of the notes which I have found to be so useful, allowing for an interpretative reading of the ways in which Bonnard relates theory to his own artistic practice. Given that Bonnard also discusses both beauty and the instant in the notebooks, the key issues in this thesis, I have been able to unravel the remarks he makes on these topics in order to further support my arguments. In meticulously deciphering these writings, a more theoretically preoccupied artist was revealed to me, a side of Bonnard I wish to convey in the following thesis.

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58 For instance, Evelyn Benesch has recently written: “The technical notes provide some scant information about Bonnard’s assessments of painting, colour, harmonies and ways of seeing things, but include not hints at all to his preferences.” Evelyn Benesch, ‘Bonnard Through the Mirror’ in Gale (ed.), 28.
59 Given Bonnard’s reported love of the work of Blaise Pascal, it is unsurprising that he often uses the aphorism as a form in which to frame his discussions of art, joining a long tradition of French writers who have chosen to express themselves in this way.
A more difficult challenge has been how to access Bonnard’s work in regards to social issues associated with gender. By focussing so much in this thesis on ‘beauty’, it has been paramount that I take into consideration the ways in which the figuration of this quality through an image of the naked female body is often done in a way which normalises an ideology of patriarchy. This is a particularly pertinent topic, as it will be argued that Bonnard uses the female nude as a signifier of classical beauty. It is undoubtedly the case that Bonnard, as with many heterosexual male artists of his era, is guilty of presenting the female body in a way that is marketed towards the tastes of male voyeurism. However, it is not my intention to retrospectively condemn Bonnard for the misogyny he sometimes displays; instead I wish to focus on a large corpus of work in which he portrays women in a far more nuanced manner. Through an engagement with feminist scholarship, I will explore the ways in which Bonnard often problematises the act of looking at the naked female body from the perspective of a man, presenting the viewer with an atypical variation of the male gaze. In doing so, my work is indebted in particular to the penetrating feminist analysis of Bonnard’s depictions of the nude by Sarah Wallace, who argues against a crude interpretation of these paintings as naturalising misogynistic ideology, seeing in them instead what she describes as an alternative to the “typical binary dichotomy between the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’”.

As well as the primary and secondary literature, it is the artworks themselves which have been the instigators in forming many of my arguments. I think it is fair to say that Bonnard, even more so than many other artists, is not served well by the reproductions of his work, so a first-hand examination of paintings has been vital to me. I have been fortunate enough in this regard that

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two major exhibitions on Bonnard have taken place during the writing of this thesis, the mentioned surveys of his work that took place at the Musée d’Orsay and Tate Modern. I am particularly indebted to the staff at the Musée d’Orsay for allowing me to visit their exhibition during a period when it was closed to the public, allowing me to spend time alone with some of the work. Being able to view *Dining Room in the Country* (1913) [fig. 3] in this environment – a painting discussed at quite some length in Chapter Three – prompted many of the ideas that I use in my analysis of it. Similarly, I was able to handle a collection of lithographs called *Quelques aspects de la vie de Paris* (c.1895) before it was sold at auction at Christie’s in London, an experience which emboldened my belief argued in Chapter Four that, in exaggerating the very materiality of some of his depictions of Paris produced in the 1890s, Bonnard makes an anti-establishment statement about the inauthenticity of urban existence. As few of these the Parisian scenes were included in either of the two major exhibitions, being able to view up-close paintings portraying this particular subject matter in a private collection in Oxfordshire and at Mottisfont House in Hampshire was also hugely beneficial, especially in helping me develop the claim made in Chapter Four that these works reveal a more politically-motivated Bonnard than has previously been detected.

**Synopsis**

In Part One of the thesis, containing the first two chapters, I look solely at the pictures Bonnard produced up until 1900. In focussing on these works, it is not my purpose to distinguish them from his subsequent output, but instead, to demonstrate the ways in which Bonnard began to respond to certain theories then being promoted in Symbolist circles. It will become clear as the thesis progresses that many of the ideas Bonnard was grappling with in this early period of his career would continue to consume him throughout the twentieth century.
Chapter Three, which takes up the whole of the second part of the thesis, moves forwards in time by about ten years, as I examine the ways in which Bonnard uses the dining rooms of various houses as a setting in which to depict what I have termed the “poetic instant”. I shall argue that this domestic space presented Bonnard with the perfect arena in which to use his imagination to transform ordinary events into something momentous.

Chapter Four, the first of two chapter looking at the ways in which Bonnard portrays the relationship between the individual and other people, will see the focus return once again to the world of fin-de-siècle Paris. The chapter largely concentrates on Bonnard’s depictions of the crowds of people and the infrastructure that make up the urban city, with an emphasis on demonstrating their satirical content. However, by the end of the chapter, the focal point of the discussion will have turned to the paintings of Paris that depict a fleeting image of beauty in the form of a passing woman. This leads on to an analysis in Chapter Five of Bonnard’s paintings of women carrying out their ablutions in a bathroom, a voluminous body of work through which it is possible to chart the various developments in the way the artist presents an image of beauty through a depiction of the female body.
Part One
Chapter One: The Idea and the Impression

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways in which Bonnard developed a distinct form of expression during the 1890s that both conforms to and deviates from the theories then being promoted within Symbolist circles. In placing the work within the context of these aesthetic debates, it is hoped that this analysis will contribute towards a fresh understanding of Bonnard’s overall output, demonstrating how such ideas continued to be of relevance to him throughout his career. In particular, it will be seen how both the techniques of his Impressionist predecessors and the ideas promulgated by Mallarmé contributed towards Bonnard navigating his way through these aesthetic considerations. I shall also argue that, in response to a crisis facing Symbolist painters during the period, Bonnard devised a pictorial strategy that I have labelled the ‘instant’ – essentially a presentation of an image that is frozen in time – in order to satisfy a desire to transform the contingent data of reality into something permanent and meaningful.

To begin with, I shall look at how several artists and critics associated with Gauguin in the late 1880s attempted to apply to the visual arts a set of aesthetic principles which had already been advanced in terms of literature by various poets involved in the Symbolist movement. In relation to such attempts, it will be seen that the development of a painterly technique called synthetism, which eschews naturalist description in favour of an exaggeration of line, colour and form, became a means through which Nabis painters such as Denis and Sérusier hoped to convey in the image the inner-landscape of the mind rather than the outward appearance of objects. The application of this technique will be judged to have been inspired in many, but not all, cases by a desire to reveal a realm of ideas – often referred to as the ‘Idea’ – which could be intuited to exist beyond the world available to the senses. Crucially, I shall argue that Bonnard never
adhered to this way of thinking that privileged the Idea over the depiction of nature, an area of contention which led to him eventually abandoning the synthetist technique. In comparing *Twilight*, Bonnard’s most ambitious synthetist work, with paintings by Gauguin and Denis that also use this technique, I shall demonstrate the ways in which his objectives already differed at this early stage of his career from those of the two other artists. In drawing attention to how the instant is used in this particular painting – portrayed in the way that the light from the setting sun is used to produce an image in which a group of dancing girls are momentarily transformed into angelic figures – I shall argue that, rather than wanting to convey the abstract Idea in his work, Bonnard instead wishes to present what he himself referred to as ‘beauty’, an image that presents the fulfilment of a mind actively looking for meaning in the world rather than beyond it.

Once it has been determined how Bonnard differs in this respect to some of his Symbolist peers, I will examine why this might have led to the appearance of a more loose brushstroke in his work in the mid-1890s, similar to the one used by the Impressionists. With particular reference to the scholarship of Richard Shiff, it will be seen how this technique of the ‘impression’ represents a sort of imprint on the canvas, indicating a contact between the internal temperament of the artist and the external world that is in front of them. Rather than continuing to persevere with the somewhat impersonal technique of synthetism, it will be argued that Bonnard “discovered” in the Impressionists’ form of mark-making a means in which to express the collaborative relationship between the mind and the visible world in the formation of an image of beauty. However, far from marking a break with Symbolism, it is my contention that Bonnard continued to be ruled by many of its principles, the most important of which being the notion that the image is a distinct and unique entity separate from nature; a distinction that, as we shall see, he did not believe the Impressionists themselves adhered to. In order to negotiate between these different theories and artistic practices, I shall claim that the ideas of Mallarmé
provided Bonnard with an example of an aesthetic that attempts to produce symbolic meaning from the contingent date of reality. I shall end the chapter by suggesting that Mallarmé might also have had a direct influence on Bonnard’s development of the instant as a pictorial strategy.

“A universe without man”

When Bonnard began to mix in Symbolist circles in Paris at the end of the 1880s, he found himself immersed in a milieu that was strongly opposed to the legacy still felt by Realism. Earlier in the century, Realist artists had made popular the belief that truth could be expressed through a supposedly dispassionate description of the visible world. Those associated with the Realist school claimed that artistic authenticity could be achieved only through a depiction of the material or visible world as it would objectively seem to appear to the senses; in other words, their concern was primarily with the world of phenomena. Nevertheless, while an adherence to ‘realism’ as a concept was arguably the dominant aesthetic in Western art during the nineteenth century, the positivist philosophy underpinning it – a belief that the visible world is objectively knowable – was beginning to be challenged in certain quarters. Nowhere was this scepticism towards such pretensions more vehemently evident than in the writings of the Danish philosopher and theologian Kierkegaard, who declared that an insistence that it is possible to know something objectively is equivalent to claiming to be able to see the world through the eyes of God; for Kierkegaard, truth can only ever be interpreted subjectively. By the 1880s, a disdain for Positivism – a French school of positivist thought made popular by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) – had become prominent in the country’s intellectual circles, influenced by

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61Not limited to, but including, the Realist artistic movement that is associated with painters such as Gustave Courbet and writers such as Gustave Flaubert.
62In his essay ‘The Dehumanisation of Art’, the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset argues that, on the whole, the art of the nineteenth century had a realist outlook: “Artists during the nineteenth century strayed too far from artistic purity, reducing to the minimum the strictly aesthetic elements and making their works consist almost entirely of this fictionalised version of human reality. In this sense it is therefore accurate to say that all the normal art of the past century has been realistic. Beethoven and Wagner were realists; Chateaubriand, like Zola, was a realist. Romanticism and naturalism . . . come closer together and reveal their common root in realism.” José Ortega y Gasset, ‘The Dehumanisation of Art’, tr. Helene Weyl, in The Dehumanisation of Art and Other Essays in Art, Culture and Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 68-9.
critiques proffered by those such as the philosopher Charles Lévêque (1818-1900). One of the earliest and most influential attacks on the positivist outlook was made by the poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), a figurehead for the Symbolists, who dismissed Realist painting as “the universe without man.” By the end of the nineteenth century, a number of poets who would be associated with French Symbolism, such as the Moréas, Khan and Jules Laforgue (1860-87), had been introduced to the ideas of Schopenhauer, an epistemological relativist who, similarly to Kierkegaard, claimed knowledge of the sensible world is always governed through the person perceiving it.

It was in this period in the final decades of the nineteenth century that Bonnard began to attend the meetings of a group of like-minded artists who would eventually become known to the world as the Nabis, most of whom he had met at the Académie Julian at the end of the 1880s. During these pseudo-mystical get-togethers, which were held at the studio of the Nabi Ranson and included sandwiches and beer provided by the host’s wife, the young artists discussed everything from the latest theosophical tracts to the philosophical systems of German idealists such as Hegel. In particular, the aesthetic principles of the French Symbolist poets were rapturously absorbed, while the revelation of Gauguin’s most recent work seemed to offer an exciting new way in which to apply such theories to painting. However, it is clear that even at this early date there were certain tensions among the different members over how these ideas might best be transposed onto the canvas; those with a more secular disposition, like Bonnard and Vuillard, generally steered clear of the religious and mystical themes popular with the majority of the Nabis. They nevertheless all adhered to an anti-naturalist notion put forward by

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64 For Schopenhauer and Lévêque’s influence on Symbolist art criticism, see Shiff, Cézanne and the End of Impressionism, 26. The influence seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German philosophy had on French culture as a whole is discussed at length in Elizabeth Prettejohn, Beauty and Art (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65-109.

65 Most of my information on these early meetings of the Nabis has been taken from Verkade, 58-90.
the Symbolist poets, which maintained that a work of art is an entity distinct from nature; what the critic Fénéon described as étanche or “watertight”, denoting the self-contained logic of the image produced in a poem or painting. Over the course of this thesis, it will be demonstrated that, throughout his career, Bonnard never lost sight of this aesthetic principle in which the ‘watertight’ integrity of the image is demarcated from the world beyond; much later, in 1937, he would describe this distinction between nature and art in his own terms, claiming that, while the former is infinite, the latter is by contrast “finite, legible [and] surrounded by hostile neighbouring objects.”

*Expressing the ‘Idea’*

The Symbolist notion that privileged the artwork as a decorative object, as opposed to merely a vessel in which to depict the subject, made an impact on Gauguin and another, much younger painter called Émile Bernard (1868-1941), resulting in the two of them developing a technique in the late 1880s called synthetism. Both of these artists eschewed naturalistic description, emphasising instead the synthetic quality of the painting with the use of simplified forms and exaggerated, non-local colour in order to express the subjective inner-vision of the artist, an example of which can be seen in Bernard’s *The Buckwheat Harvest* (1888) [fig. 4]. But it was Denis who was among the first to attempt to codify such painterly concerns into a written manifesto, appearing first in the review *Art et Critique* in 1890: “Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.” This statement not only refers to synthetist works; it is also a description of painting in general, articulating the seeming truism that artworks are fundamentally objects, and this is the condition of their being able to represent nature at all.

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66 Le pourquoi de la transposition: la nature est infinie, l’œuvre est finie, limitée, entourée d’hostiles voisinsages.”
Bonnard, *Observations sur la peinture*, 42.
67 For a summary of synthetism developed, as well as the subsequent dispute between the two artists over who had invented it, see Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 3-5.
Nevertheless, there is an implication in the statement that, by manipulating this very plasticity of the art work – emphasising the flatness of the canvas, using expressive colours as well as an overall abstract decorative design – the synthetist painter can produce a self-contained image that is not merely a copy of nature. For instance, in Denis’ *Jacob’s Struggle with the Angel* (1893) [fig. 5] – a portrayal of the story from Genesis – the simplified volumes and heightened colour the artist employs, as well as a lack of attention to linear perspective, produces an image in which decoration and two-dimensionality is favoured over naturalistic description. This is evident in the way that the branches and leaves of the trees become one pattern of bright yellow, while the faces of the two protagonists have barely any features. In fact, as has been suggested by one commentator, the figure of Jacob on the left represents Denis, while his wife Marthe Denis takes the form of the angel on the right.69 The use of pronounced contours in the work of Denis and other Nabis such as Sérusier [fig. 6] signals explicitly that the image rendered is not an attempt to imitate the visible world of appearances, but is a conscious distortion of it; black contours do not exist in nature, of course. Moreover, such decorative strategies emphasise the depiction of an inner-vision, rather than one that is accessible to the senses. Like many of Gauguin’s younger followers, Denis and Sérusier were both interested in philosophical ideas,70 finding in Neo-Platonism in particular a basis for their belief that images should not represent “windows opening on to nature”.71 It was believed that the application of strong colours and flat, simplified forms could appeal directly to the viewer’s emotional response and mental faculties, revealing what Gauguin had described as the “eternal laws of the beautiful”.72 It is therefore clear that this intentional distorting of nature among Gauguin’s followers in the late 1880s and

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69 Fabienne Stahl, catalogue entry for *Jacob’s Struggle with the Angel* in Jean-Paul Bouillon, ed. *Maurice Denis* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 2006), 160. This interpretation is substantiated by a comment Denis made in his journal, which asserts that angels “are women who hold me by the hand”. Quoted in Ibid (own translation).

70 Denis apparently passed his baccalauréat with high marks in philosophy. Verkade, 71.

71 Denis, ‘The Symbolist Era’, 75.

72 Gauguin quoted in Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 39-40. For a discussion on how Symbolists such as Gauguin and Denis used their technique as an expression of ‘universal’ concepts, see Ibid.
early 1890s should not be mistaken as a purely formal strategy in which the artist attempts to makes a self-conscious statement about the artificiality of the subject portrayed in the artwork. Instead, the more spiritually-minded Nabis like Denis and Sérusier associated the technique with their own Neo-Platonist inspired beliefs, seeing it as not only a means to express the subjective “inner idea” of the artist, but also as a way to convey a realm of ideas that exists beyond the world perceivable to the senses. For these artists, the decorative synthetist technique therefore “facilitated this passage from the personal to the universal”, as Shiff has argued. This distinction made between what is merely imagined and a belief held by those such as Denis and Sérusier that it is possible to intuit a realm of ideas that actually exists will become important when I discuss later in this chapter an alternative Symbolist aesthetic which was propounded by Mallarmé.

As discussed in the Introduction, the poet and critic Aurier also attempted to associated Gauguin’s techniques with Neo-Platonism in a number of articles he wrote for the Mercure de France in the early 1890s. Aurier claimed that the distortions in Gauguin's paintings were not expressive of the artist’s “temperament”, a word associated with the subjectivity of Impressionism, but signified the abstract ‘Idea’ formed in the artist’s imagination. In fact, for Aurier, that which could be conceived in the imagination was superior to anything that presents itself to the senses, a conviction that places matter in a subservient role as “an alphabet to

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73 However, the theories of Plato and Neo-Platonists were first made popular in the writings of Anne-Louise-Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël-Holstein (better known as Madame de Staël), who combined Kantian aesthetics with Plato’s so called ‘theory of forms’ in her popular book De l’Allemagne (1810). The influence Plato’s philosophical works had on French thought and artistic theories were further enhanced from the 1820s onwards, when the philosopher Victor Cousin began translating the ancient Greek’s dialogues into French. This information is taken from Prettejohn, 68-74.

74 “[Gauguin] wanted above all to convey character, to express the ‘inner idea’ even in what was ugly.” Denis, ‘The Influence of Paul Gauguin’, 73.

75 Shiff, Cézanne and the End of Impressionism, 40.

76 Ibid., 35.

77 The idea that nature could be ‘distorted’ to express the subjective, emotional state of the artist will become important when I discuss the impact Impressionism had on Bonnard later in the chapter.
express the Ideas in which [the artist] has insight.  

In an essay on Gauguin published in 1891, Aurier describes the painter and his followers as “Alexandrians”, a reference to the Alexandra school of Neo-Platonist philosophers such as Plotinus, who believed that the material world is a by-product of a divine, intangible and all-encompassing first principle he called interchangeably the One or the Good. Aurier uses this epithet in order to denote a tendency he perceives in these painters to exploit the decorative in order to represent a realm of first principles, or the Idea, rather than attempting to describe the temporal world of appearances using naturalistic means. The article indeed celebrates decorative art of all eras and civilisations, which Aurier refers to as “true painting”, contrasting it with what he deems to be an inherent insincerity in other forms of painting such as Impressionism, which he criticises as an attempt to portray objects the way they appear to sensory perception:

_Aurier, 93. Also see Denis’ statement expressing a similar belief: “[Any] object in nature is an idea made manifest.” Denis, ‘The Symbolist Era’, 78._

_Aurier, 91. For a discussion of Plotinus’ notion of the One, see Eyjólfur K. Emilsson, _Plotinus_ (London and New York: Routledge: 2017), 71-3._

_Aurier, 91-2._
This article, along with one written on Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) the year before, gave wider public recognition to a group of painters who had been gathered around Gauguin since the end of the 1880s. Although often much younger than Gauguin – for instance, Bernard was only 18 when they met in 1886 – like the older artist, many of these painters had initially been drawn to the innovative ways that the Impressionists had captured modernity. However, as Denis was later to recount, the discovery of Gauguin’s paintings felt like a liberation for those looking to escape what was perceived to be the naturalist inclinations of the Impressionists. Aurier thus articulated in his articles why painters such as the Nabis had so enthusiastically stripped form their work the last vestiges of a legacy that the Impressionists had inherited from the Realists, namely an attention to naturalistic description. Nevertheless, another important implication of Aurier’s claims made on behalf of these painters was his insistence that the artist’s depiction of phenomena is primarily a means to an end, an illustrative symbol of the Idea’s materialisation in the context of the artwork. This designation of the object as a symbol, secondary to the abstract Idea it represents, became an important point of debate among Symbolist artists over the course of the 1890s. As a theorist, Aurier could afford to be more severe in his attitude towards the world of appearances than painters such as Denis, who as a visual artist was conditioned to rely on the appearance of things to provide the necessary imagery for his work. Although Denis sympathised with Aurier’s conviction that subject matter itself was secondary to that of the Idea, he nevertheless viewed the natural world as a fundamental starting point in the formulation of an image. As will become more apparent over the course of this chapter, it was this question mark over of the relevancy of nature to the artist or poet that is crucial in any understanding of Bonnard’s own aesthetic.

81 Aurier thus articulated in his articles why painters such as the Nabis had so enthusiastically stripped form their work the last vestiges of a legacy that the Impressionists had inherited from the Realists, namely an attention to naturalistic description. Nevertheless, another important implication of Aurier’s claims made on behalf of these painters was his insistence that the artist’s depiction of phenomena is primarily a means to an end, an illustrative symbol of the Idea’s materialisation in the context of the artwork. This designation of the object as a symbol, secondary to the abstract Idea it represents, became an important point of debate among Symbolist artists over the course of the 1890s. As a theorist, Aurier could afford to be more severe in his attitude towards the world of appearances than painters such as Denis, who as a visual artist was conditioned to rely on the appearance of things to provide the necessary imagery for his work. Although Denis sympathised with Aurier’s conviction that subject matter itself was secondary to that of the Idea, he nevertheless viewed the natural world as a fundamental starting point in the formulation of an image. As will become more apparent over the course of this chapter, it was this question mark over of the relevancy of nature to the artist or poet that is crucial in any understanding of Bonnard’s own aesthetic.

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83 Ibid, 205.
Contrasting ‘visions’

Although Bonnard’s use of the synthetist technique early on in his career would suggest he shared with other Nabis like Denis the conviction that the expression of the abstract inner-vision of the artist took primacy over the concrete subject matter in the painting, the following section of this chapter will demonstrate why this assumption is not entirely accurate.

It is indeed the case that the pictures Bonnard produced in the first few years of the 1890s are rendered using the synthetist technique advocated by the other Nabis, an example of which is Two Dogs (1891) [fig. 7] with its strong contours and non-naturalistic bright green background. Paintings such as this one suggest that Bonnard was particularly inspired for a brief time by the arabesque shapes used to depict objects in the work of his friend Ranson,\(^4\) a form of expression that the latter would maintain throughout the 1890s [fig. 8]. What might be described as a playful use of line and colour in Two Dogs is an example of what appears to have been a fascination Bonnard's had during this period to find ways of expression which would suit the picture's particular subject matter. Another example of this is the regimented geometric design the artist uses in The Exercise (1890) [fig. 9] – a slightly earlier example from Bonnard's synthetist phase produced before the influence of Ranson took hold – to reflect its depiction of a military drill.

The Exercise can also be seen as a fruition of the ideas he had absorbed through Denis and Sérusier over the past two years. For instance, although the soldiers portrayed in the picture take up the three basic spatial levels of the image – foreground, background and middle – the ground occupied by the second and third row of men is tilted upwards, pressing it to the surface of the canvas, diminishing the sense of depth that would have been expected in a painting of the

This intentional distortion of perspectival space, as well as a lack of any explicit anecdote depicted in the scene, places more emphasis on the formal elements of the picture, thus complying with the synthetist aesthetic. Also noticeable is the resemblance of the figure at the front of the picture to the two figures in the right hand foreground of Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon* (1888) [fig. 10]. Gauguin’s idiosyncratic, yet highly decorative way of representing figures from the back had obviously made an impact on Bonnard, who would have seen the other artist’s painting on display at the Goupil gallery in Paris at around the same time he was working on *The Exercise*. In fact, the overall design used in both paintings is similar, with Bonnard’s soldiers mimicking Gauguin’s pious Breton women in the way they wind around the space of the canvas, taking up three separate positions on the brightly rendered two-dimensional surface, a compositional strategy that allows both artists to distort perspective while at the same time emphasising the flatness of the surface.

Two years later, Bonnard produced another work using the synthetist technique that was his most ambitious to date. Larger than anything he had painted before, *Twilight* has been seen as an early mission statement and was duly submitted to be displayed at that year’s Salon des Indépendants, an important showcase for both young and established artists who generally avoided displaying their work at the official Salon of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. With its distinct flat forms that erode perspectival space, the painting once again suggests the influence

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85 However, although Bonnard covers the flat surface in large areas of homogenous bright colours, showing little concern for depicting any sort of naturalistic detail, a closer examination of the brushstrokes displays that they have actually been dabbed onto the canvas to form large dots – evidence that Bonnard was also interested in Neo-Impressionism at this time. Bonnard, Denis and Vuillard all experimented with the Neo-Impressionist technique in the early 1890s, but would quickly abandon it. Some of Vuillard’s earliest paintings using this technique are so extravagant in their use of non-local colour, that they would not have looked out of place alongside the first Fauve paintings that were exhibited fifteen years later.

86 Although *Twilight* was Bonnard’s first major composition, it is interesting to note that the artist never sold it and it therefore remained relatively unknown during his lifetime. After being exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants in 1892, it was only shown in public on two more occasions before Bonnard’s death in 1947; once as part of an exhibition of Impressionist paintings in Paris in 1899 and again at the Salon des Indépendants in 1926. Since the Musée d’Orsay acquired it in 1985, it has become one of Bonnard’s most recognised works. For the painting’s exhibition history, see Pierre Bonnard: *Crépuscule*, Musée d’Orsay, viewed 10 July 2019, <www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/notice.html?no_cache=1&nnumid=008021&cHash=bd6768cd6c>. 
of Gauguin. Furthermore, by uniting the foreground on the left and middle sections with the background on the right-hand side of the painting, Bonnard produces a single, decorative surface that appears to be a direct response to the structure of The Vision of the Sermon, as has been pointed out by a number of art historians.\(^87\) Moreover, both artists reserve the upper right-hand side of the canvas to create their respective ‘visions’, Bonnard matching Gauguin’s image of Jacob wrestling the angel with his own ring of women dancing beneath the light that shines through the branches of the trees.

Nevertheless, in comparing the different ways that each artist presents the imagery of their respective visions, it begins to become clear why within a couple of years of painting Twilight, Bonnard had moved away from synthetism and had begun to use a looser, more naturalistic technique similar to that of the Impressionists. Looking first at Gauguin’s painting, the ‘vision’ of Jacob and the angel is presented as a supernatural event that ‘exists’ in the collective minds of the spectators depicted in the painting. The artist also provides other visual evidence that indicates that the image presented does not take place within the parameters of the everyday, such as the impossibly small cow depicted in the left corner that appears to float above the ground, and the way that one of the bonnets and the branches of the tree interlock with one another to form eye-like shapes. This latter aspect has led one critic to comment that “the women must close their bodily eyes so that their mind’s eye can open to the vision, and this spiritual awakening is underlined by the eye shapes formed in one of their bonnets and in the tree branches”.\(^88\)

Conversely, the dancing girls in Twilight carry out an activity taking place in the same physical

\(^{87}\) See Hyman, 12; Sarah Whitfield, ‘Fragments of an Identical World’ in Whitfield and Elderfield (eds.), 11-12; and Benesch, 30.

realm represented in the rest of the picture, despite their momentary other-worldly appearance. Instead of producing an apparition in the same mode as the one in Gauguin’s picture, which seemingly is conjured up out of thin air, Bonnard relies on some sort of interaction in the physical world he represents to provide the criteria in which his vision materialises. It is the moment captured – what will later be discussed in terms of an ‘instant’ – when the light from the setting sun fleetingly shines through the trees and anoints the girls with halos, which transforms them into an angelic vision. In fact, it is the reciprocal interaction between the physical, concrete world and the artist’s imagination which unites to convey this transcendental atmosphere of the picture. Unlike Gauguin and Denis, who impose onto the canvas images primarily formed in their imagination, Bonnard uses as his subject matter the data immediately available to the senses. Evidently, although he embraced a technique at this point of his career which had been developed in order to express something hidden beyond the world of appearances, it was, nevertheless, a vision grounded in the actual which Bonnard sought to portray.

This emphasis on depicting the natural world can also be detected in The Exercise in the way Bonnard’s use of heightened colour nevertheless complies naturalistically with the objects represented: the red and blue uniforms of the soldiers, for instance, provide Bonnard with the very material to present the vivid colours of the picture. We can also think back to the green background seen in Two Dogs that, despite being an exaggeration in terms of its brightness, is likely to depict the colour of the grass that the animals are playing on. This demonstrates that Bonnard is not concerned with inventing a seemingly arbitrary reality of his own in the way that Gauguin does with the red ground in the Vision, or Denis similarly does with the bright yellow tree tops in Jacob’s Struggle with the Angel. In diverging from the emphasis that other Symbolist’s placed on the Idea by grounding the image he produces in reality, we are provided with a vital insight into why Bonnard would soon abandon the synthetist technique after
completing *Twilight*, a point that I shall pursue in the next section of this chapter. Before doing so however, it is worth pointing out a further implication of the reciprocal relationship between nature and the imagination that Bonnard captures in the vision depicted in *Twilight*, one which I believe provided a solution to a problem that Symbolist painters were increasingly becoming aware of as the decade progressed; namely how to give representational form to abstract concepts.

In the immediate years that followed Aurier’s articles for the *Mercure de France*, many Symbolist artists began to come to a realisation that, although it was possible to conceive in theory of the Idea manifesting through an image, in practice it was not so simple. This crisis, already alluded to in the Introduction, appears to have been centred around a problem particular to visual art, namely, how can the depiction of material objects in art be reconciled with an objective that sought to reveal an essentially intangible Idea, or as Stevens puts it, a “conflict between the real and the ideal.” It was a dilemma that was never to be fully resolved and many artists by the end of the decade had already begun to broaden the parameters of how they defined the Idea for themselves, either reconfiguring it with a religious belief that all material objects are touched with the profane or, as was the case with Denis, connecting it to an ‘idealism’ that embraced a form of classicism. It is my contention however, that Bonnard’s response to the problem of how to make the ideal compatible with the real was through a depiction of an ‘instant’ – the presentation on the canvas of a moment suspended in time – allowing him to express as permanent something that in nature is contingent and ephemeral. This pictorial strategy is first seen in Bonnard’s work in *Twilight* in the image of the girls dancing beneath the sunlight, capturing forever the instant when the otherwise contingent world of matter

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90 Ibid.
91 Ibid. 214.
92 Ibid., 208.
momentarily and spontaneously seems infused with inherent meaning.

Whereas other Symbolists gave primacy to the Idea, Bonnard uses the instant to express a relationship between matter and the imagination while still maintaining the integrity of the image as a separate entity from nature. Perhaps this explains why Bonnard himself never used the term ‘Idea’ when discussing his work, preferring instead to describe it as a presentation of ‘beauty’. The word ‘beauty’ is usually used to describe something visible, not entirely abstract like the ‘Idea’, and therefore more accurately articulates the co-dependency between the imagination and the physical world that is key to Bonnard’s aesthetic. The overall scene depicted in Twilight is thus not merely of secondary importance in terms of what the artist wishes to express, but plays a vital role in the manifestation of a moment of beauty. Bonnard would not always produce depictions of the instant that were as epiphanic as the one portrayed in this picture, but at this early stage of his career he had conceived of a way to convey a vision of beauty using the day-to-day subjects that were at his disposal. However, the fact that Bonnard would soon discard of the synthetist technique he uses in Twilight suggests he was ultimately not entirely satisfied with it as a means of expression. The following section of this chapter will examine why this might have been and why he began to develop a technique that appropriates the more naturalist brushstroke of the Impressionists.

The limitations of synthetism

Looking again at the contrasting ‘visions’ presented by Bonnard and Gauguin, the different approach taken by each of these artists – the former’s rooted in reality, the latter’s almost completely imaginary – can be viewed in light of contemporaneous psychological theories then

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93 It should also be noted that in Plato’s Phaedrus, Socrates claims that Beauty is the only universal Form of which traces can be perceived in the material world. As Robin Waterfield explains: “[In] the supra-heavenly world of Forms [Beauty] shines with especial luster, and here in this world it is the only one that can be seen clearly enough by the eyes to trigger recollection.” Robin Waterfield, ‘Introduction’ in Plato, Phaedrus, xlv.
circulating among artists, which divided the senses into the tactile or the optical. Symbolist artists, it has been argued, believed that, whereas paintings which convey the tactile senses of three-dimensionality and weight are indicative of a subject in direct contact with nature, a work of art which emphasises instead the visual or optical senses of colour and light can express the inner, insubstantial realm of the imagination. This would account for artists such as Gauguin, as well as Denis and Sérusier, striving to articulate in their work the optical over the tactile, by removing from their depictions of objects any excessive description or sense of solidity. For Bonnard, however, this posed a problem due to the synthetist technique’s privileging of colour and line, therefore undermining any attempt to convey a sense of both the optical and the tactile, a combination of which was needed in order for beauty to be expressed in the image.

Denis also seems to have been aware of the unsuitability of synthetism as a means of expression for Bonnard during this period. Looking back in 1934 on the earlier work of the Symbolists, Denis is critical of a decision made by one magazine to use paintings by both Bonnard and Vuillard in order to illustrate an essay on Aurier’s aesthetics:

[T]he reproductions of Street Scene by Bonnard and a Woman Mending by Vuillard made it clear that Aurier’s Platonist formulae did not exactly suit artists who were too much in love with painting, too eager for direct sensations, to settle down in the realm of the spiritual and intangible.

Although the painting mentioned in the above quotation is from the period following the completion of Twilight when Bonnard had begun to discard of the synthetist technique, Denis nonetheless highlights that his friend’s attitude towards synthetism had always differed from his own in its scepticism towards an aesthetic that elevated the imagination over an engagement

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95 Ibid. While Olin also associates Impressionist painting with this desire to emphasise the optical senses, it is my contention that this was not entirely the case. Along with Shiff, I interpret the Impressionists’ distinct form of mark-making as an attempt to disclose the tactile, as will become clearer later on in this section.

96 Denis, *The Symbolist Era*, 78.
with “direct sensations”. This is evident even in Bonnard’s synthetist work, in the way the artist always presents the viewer with concrete situations; the subjects Bonnard chooses for his paintings in the early 1890s, such as a military drill in *The Exercise* or a weekend at his family’s estate in *Twilight*, are almost diary-like entries that provides the viewer with an insight into the artist’s own private world. The settings for *The Exercise* and *Twilight* form an integral part of the overall meaning of each picture, presenting to the audience scenes from the artist’s personal world. Later in life, Bonnard claimed that it was important for the image to communicate to the viewer that “the artist was there”, a feature of his work that is evident at this early stage and would result in him being described by critics as an ‘intimist’.

The desire to portray the small space inhabited by the individual is nowhere more explicit in these earlier paintings than in a work that has appropriately been given the title *Intimacy* (1891) [fig. 11]. Whereas *Twilight* portrays a large family gathering in an open, outdoor setting, the compressed composition of this small-scale work, a depiction of the artist’s sister and her husband, creates a more personal atmosphere. The feeling of familiarity is intensified in the way that the flatness of the canvas presses the figure depicted furthest away up to the front of the picture, drawing the viewer closer into the space presented in the painting. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that there is in fact another figure present; a hand holding a pipe becomes discernible, slowly appearing out of the conglomeration of shapes at the bottom of the canvas. Also protruding into the picture is a knee on which the hand holding the pipe rests, helping to produce the illusion that the picture represents the scene from the artist’s perspective. But the way in which Bonnard has cropped the bottom of the picture, so the knee acts as a synecdoche – surging upwards to imply the existence a body outside the confines of the canvas – also

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97 In Chapter 3, I shall discuss how Bonnard’s artistic practice involved making quick sketches in his notepad of anything that particularly grabbed his attention.

suggests to the viewer that they too occupy the exact same place in the room as this fragmented depiction of the artist.

*Intimacy* is one of Bonnard’s earliest attempts at using pictorial strategies such as cropping to draw the viewer into the picture in order to produce the impression that they are sharing the same space as the artist. With this in mind, if we once again turn our attention to *Twilight*, although it was completed a year after *Intimacy*, it could be argued that in terms of its ability to present an intimate space, it represents a step backwards. The two groups of people seem to be far away and absorbed in their activities, while the synthetist technique the artist employs, which had worked so well in *Intimacy* in assimilating the viewer into the scene by drawing the figures closer; only exacerbates the sense of disconnection between the audience and its subject in *Twilight*; it is the trees and the bushes surrounding the group on the left that are brought to the front, creating a barricade that engulfs the croquet players in their own world. It is therefore apparent that in certain genres such as interiors, an artist of Bonnard’s ability was able to manipulate the synthetist technique so that it could be used to express the collision between the subjective point of view of the artist and the exterior world. However, when presented with larger, more expansive subjects, such as the one in *Twilight*, the abstracting tendency of this technique with its decorative, simplified forms, removes the relationship between the viewer and the world depicted, thus undermining any attempt at producing a sense of intimacy. Bonnard does in fact try to draw the viewer into the scene by hiding the vision from the group of people nearby so it appears to only exist for the person stood in front of the picture, but it must have been apparent to Bonnard that the personal atmosphere that he was striving to express – his “direct sensations” to use Denis’ terminology – could not be appropriately represented using a technique that privileged the inner-vision of the artist.

Given the different attitude Bonnard had to the physical world and his more commonplace
choice of subject matter in comparison to other members of the Nabis like Denis and Sérusier, it would be natural to assume that he was always destined to develop a more Impressionist-inspired technique; like this older generation of painters, he had always produced scenes depicting the modern world which are grounded in reality. However, although it is true that a painting like *Twilight* with its portrayal of an out-of-doors bourgeois activity is thematically very similar to the types of paintings the Impressionists produced, this is no reason to suppose that it would be any more successful as an artwork if Bonnard had rendered it using the technique of his immediate predecessors. It would seem therefore, that the answer as to why Bonnard would eventually abandon synthetism should not be viewed simply as a matter of him acquiring the appropriate technique that would suit the themes that he was producing, but has more to do with *why* he was depicting this particular subject matter in the first place. As I have demonstrated, while other Symbolist painters gathered around Gauguin were concerned primarily with projecting an inner world on to the canvas which is expressive of the Idea, Bonnard believed that the outer world, or nature, had a fundamental role to play in order for the image to communicate a depiction of beauty; the imagination relies on nature for inspiration, and nature in return is given a sense of meaning that it would otherwise lack. The synthetist technique was ultimately an unsuitable means of expression for Bonnard because he had different set of objectives to Gauguin and Denis, not because the subjects he tackled were in contrast to theirs. While those such as Gauguin and Denis never denied the importance of nature altogether, but rather, as Dario Gamboni has argued, wished to emulate for themselves its inventiveness by imposing their own reality onto the canvas, Bonnard instead immersed himself within the material world in order to inspire his imagination. Even in his earliest synthetist paintings, Bonnard betrays a desire to capture the visions which are produced when

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99 Gamboni uses the Spinozian distinction of *natura naturata* (nature natured) and *natura naturans* (nature naturing) in his discussion of the relevance of nature in Gauguin’s work. In imitating nature, Gauguin emulates the notion of *natura naturans*, according to Gamboni. Dario Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 293-5.
the imagination is in direct contact with its immediate surroundings, yet it would not be until the mid-1890s that he would discover a more suitable technique to express this, namely the ‘impression’.

It is my assertion that it was Bonnard’s “discovery” in the mid-1890s of the Impressionist technique, with its ‘tactile’ mark-making, that provided the artist with a means to express this contact between the individual and the natural world. Like Bonnard, the Impressionists had not only wanted to depict modern life, but also express what Belinda Thomson has described as “the nuanced sensations of the private individual.” This accounts for why the use of the ‘impression’ as a technique had been so radical in the late 1860s; while other artists of the same period were portraying similar themes and subjects, it was the way the Impressionists expressed modernity that sets them apart from their contemporaries. In the words of the novelist and critic Émile Zola (1840-1902), the Impressionists had created “a new form for a new subject”. As Shiff has argued, it was not only in their preference for portraying modern life that distinguishes the Impressionists from many Symbolist painters of the same period, but also their contrasting attitude they had towards nature and the means they developed to express this. Unlike many Symbolist artists, who used generalised, anti-naturalistic forms to evoke an Idea, the Impressionists wanted to depict the outside world as seen through a unique temperament or personality, through the ‘impression’. The loose brush stroke of the ‘impression’ acts as a sort of imprint to express this contact between the painter’s temperament and the scene in front of them, allowing the artist to present a subjective interpretation of the objective world; as Shiff claims, it in effect “bridges the gap between the external and the internal”.

Bonnard was thus drawn to the Impressionist technique because of its suitability in expressing

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101 Ibid., 86.
102 Ibid., 87.
103 Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 15.
on the canvas this contact with nature. When asked late in life about the impact of Impressionism on his work, Bonnard answered, rather revealingly, that he had “discovered” it after he was already familiar with the Symbolist paintings of Gauguin:

I remember very well that at the time [of the Nabis period] I did not know about Impressionism at all; and Gauguin’s work was exciting for itself ... When we discovered Impressionism a little later, it became a new enthusiasm, a sense of discovery and liberation, because Gauguin is classical, almost a traditionalist, and Impressionism brought us freedom.¹⁰⁴

Bonnard’s insistence that he only discovered Impressionism at this late stage is curious, because it is very likely that he was already aware of the work of artists such as Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Pierre-August Renoir (1841-1919) before being introduced to the synthetist aesthetic developed by Gauguin and Bernard.¹⁰⁵ However, this somewhat strange recollection of events can perhaps be resolved if we understand Bonnard’s remarks to mean that it was only following his initial appreciation of the work of Gauguin that he discovered something about Impressionism which would help facilitate him in his own work.

First ‘impressions’

Seemingly enthused by this discovery, Bonnard spent the years around 1893 and 1894 trying his hand at different subjects that were popular with the Impressionists. Although he had already depicted scenes portraying contemporary life, he now began to include fashionable events such as the horse racing meetings at Longchamps in the Bois de Boulogne [fig. 12] in his repertoire. Furthermore, while staying at his father’s estate called Le Clos (‘The Orchard’) in Le


¹⁰⁵William Rothenstein, an English painter who attended the Académie Julian at the same time as Bonnard, claims that Impressionist painting was a topic of discussion among the students. William Rothenstein, Men and Memories: Recollections of William Rothenstein, 1871-1900 (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1931), 41-4.
Grands-Lemps, Dauphiné, in the summer of 1894, Bonnard made his first mature attempt at tackling landscape painting, a format typically associated with Impressionism. When comparing these dozen or so pictures Bonnard painted of this area with *Twilight*, a painting set in the same region of France, a greater attention to naturalistic detail is now discernible, as well as a new found concern with portraying the variability of nature. Even more noticeable is the intense brush work that gives these paintings a vitality that is missing in some of his synthetist compositions, especially those like *Twilight* which are set out of doors. In *Le Clos* (1894) [fig. 13] for instance, although an element of the earlier synthetist work lingers in the arabesque tapestry produced by an interplay between the leaves and branches of the tree against an almost matt blue sky, it is the bottom half of the painting, rendered in chaotic, seemingly random brush strokes, that now declares not only the presence of nature, but also the presence of the temperament that has captured it. Not only has Bonnard decided to incorporate a more pronounced form of mark-making into paintings such as *Le Clos*, but he has also discarded with the rigorous compositional uniformity of synthetism; from now on, the individual temperament would be expressed both through the imprint of the brush stroke and a more fluid and idiosyncratic arrangement of varying techniques within the same piece of work. In this sense, Bonnard had not rejected the decorative ambitions of Symbolist composition, but instead had begun to devise ways in which to balance it with a form of expression that acknowledges the equal importance of the subject matter depicted. Bonnard would continue in this vein throughout his career, using a diversity of different brushstrokes to produce dynamic images that eschew uniformity, an aspect of his work that impressed the novelist André Gide (1869-1951) when reviewing the Salon d’Automne in 1905:

> How should one explain, to those who have no feeling for them, the interest of M. Bonnard’s pictures? In their composition, wit and even mischief play a greater part than reason: each canvas for this reason has a feeling of novelty and bizarre excitement.106

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However, although Bonnard had discarded with synthetism by the mid-1890s, replacing the simplified and orderly forms of this technique with a more naturalistic and nuanced form of mark making, this did not herald the beginning of a gradual move away from the principles of Symbolism, as critics have sometimes argued.\textsuperscript{107} The basic Symbolist principle that regarded the work of art to be an object comprising of a self-contained image, as opposed to being an imitation of nature, continued to be the fundamental belief underlying the work that Bonnard produced over the remainder of his career. Articulating this desire for plasticity above everything else, he wrote in his notebook in 1935: “The primary subject is the surface [of the painting], which has its colour and its laws, beyond those of the objects.”\textsuperscript{108}

It is certainly the case that Bonnard greatly admired artists such as Monet and Renoir, but at the same time, he believed the Impressionist aesthetic was too derivative in the way it presented the visible world; although, in their defense, he claimed this was an unconscious predilection. Writing to the critic George Besson in 1938, Bonnard claimed that the work of Paul Signac (1863-1935) was in one sense “a reaction against the low realism and also the subconscious realism of the impressionists.”\textsuperscript{109} This suggests that Bonnard felt that the older generation of Impressionist artists were still too much in thrall to the visual world to the detriment of their imaginations. As Gauguin had insisted, the Impressionists placed too much emphasis on what they saw with their eyes, rather than “the mysterious centre of thought,”\textsuperscript{110} a sentiment that Bonnard would have at least partly agreed with. “Art is not nature,” Bonnard told an interviewer.

\textsuperscript{107} For instance, Giambruni claims nobody would call Bonnard a Symbolist after about 1900 as he had “moved too far in new directions”. Giambruni, ‘Domestic Scenes’, 92.

\textsuperscript{108} “Le principal sujet, c’est la surface qui a sa couleur, ses lois, par-dessus les objets.” Bonnard, Observations sur la peinture, 40.


\textsuperscript{110} Quoted in Gamboni, Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought, 7.
in the 1930s, when asked about the legacy Impressionism had on his generation. He continued: “We were stricter in composition.”111

From about 1893, Bonnard began to develop an aesthetic that accentuated his individual sensations in its use of the ‘impression’, while at the same time maintaining a sense of decoration so as not to undermine the artwork’s self-contained plasticity. Although he would develop different ways of doing so throughout his career, this fundamental vision combining decoration with a subjective form of expression – what he himself labeled as an “intimate approach” – always remained the same. In another letter to Besson, Bonnard said: “I fluctuate between an intimate and decorative approach. You can’t change how you are.”112 Bonnard had thus appropriated an Impressionist technique that made more explicit the intimacy expressed in the image, while still continuing to treat the picture as a decorative surface.

Mallarmé’s ‘solar drama’

By the middle of the 1890s, Bonnard had developed a technique that incorporated both the intimate and decorative approaches that he sought to express. Although the work he had begun to produce in this period marked a diversion from the synthetism of Gauguin and Denis, replacing the simplified forms of his earlier paintings with a more naturalistic attention to the vagaries of nature, this did not signal a complete break with Symbolism. Indeed, it is the contention of this thesis that Bonnard never lost sight of the Symbolist notion that an artwork is an entity that is separate from nature. In the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate how Bonnard’s engagement with a Symbolist aesthetic promulgated by Mallarmé, an alternative to the one promoted by Denis and Aurier, aided him in his desire to express a vision of beauty that is produced when the inner, imaginative mind of the artist comes into contact

111Quoted in Hyman, 65. Letter reprinted in Duverget, 168.
112Letter reprinted in full in Duverget, 168.
with the physical world.

Coming from an older generation than many others associated with Symbolism, Mallarmé had been a witness to the trials and ultimate successes of the Impressionist movement and counted Monet, Renoir, Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917) among his closest friends. He was therefore incredibly sympathetic towards the Impressionist’s deeply personal rendering of the natural world. An aspect of his friends’ work that must have appealed to Mallarmé was their portrayal of nature as something ephemeral, a rejection of the assuredness in Realist representation. In fact, the idea of depicting one’s immediate surroundings subjectively through an individual temperament would have chimed with Mallarmé’s own anti-positive aesthetic.

Mallarmé’s sceptical attitude had been the result of an ontological crises he experienced in the 1860s, when he became convinced that there exists no inherent meaning to existence. However, instead of allowing this to lead him towards a path of complete nihilism, Mallarmé turned it on its head, using it as the basis to celebrate the imaginative faculty of the mind throughout history. For instance, he was full of praise for the propensity of previous civilisations to produce meaning for themselves out of this ‘nothingness’. In particular, he became enraptured by the ‘solar drama’ enacted out every day by the sun rising and setting, a cyclical process visible in nature which had provided countless cultures with an event of symbolic import. Consequently, unlike some of his Symbolist peers, Mallarmé was under no illusion that there existed a perfect realm of ideas hidden beyond appearances, but rather, that it was through manmade language that the world received a form of meaning. Of particular interest to

113 For a further insight into how Mallarmé viewed Impressionism, see Pearson, 101-3.
114 For an argument against the often held assumption that the Impressionists were influenced by positivist theory, see Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 23.
115 Pearson, 40-1.
Mallarmé in this regards was poetic language, which since early civilisation had been one of the ways humankind had inserted into the otherwise contingent data of reality a sense of significance; poetry, he liked to point out, originated from the ancient Greek verb meaning ‘to fabricate’. Conversely, much of the literature being produced in France during Mallarmé’s youth had swerved away from this course, with the schools of Realism and naturalism focusing on describing reality rather than imposing a meaning on it. In order to correct this, Mallarmé believed the modern poet was obliged to disrobe words of their utilitarian functionality, using linguistic patterns and suggestive imagery instead to provide a glimpse of the potential symbolic magnitude of existence – what Mallarmé initially described as ‘Beauty’ and would later refer to as the ‘Idea’.

In this way, the poet would have presented Bonnard with an example of how to navigate his way between Symbolism’s privileging of ideas and humankind’s unique relationship with nature depicted in the work of the Impressionists. It appears that both Bonnard and his Nabi colleague and close friend Vuillard, who had also begun to produce a more naturalistic technique, were both drawn towards Mallarmé due to his engagement with the physical world, rather than the theorising of Denis. Mallarmé’s insistence that the poet should use suggestion rather than explicit imagery found a sympathetic audience with both Vuillard and Bonnard when they were developing their own strategies to provide the everyday subjects of their work with both an ethereal presence and an other-worldly majesty. Speaking in an interview in 1891, Mallarmé had made the observation that “to name an object is to lose three-quarters of the pleasure of the poem, which is made of the happiness of guessing little by little; to suggest it,

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116 Ibid., 11.
117 Ibid.
118 In an interview with Bonnard in the 1933, Raymond Cogniat proposes to Bonnard that his work is a synthesis of Symbolism and Impressionism, a point of view the artist does not dispute. Cogniat, 8.
119 Denis’ journal during this period is full of the references to his aesthetic disputes, always cordial, with Vuillard. Maurice Denis, Journal: Tome I (1884-1904) (Paris: La Colombe, 1957).
there is the dream ... There must be enigma in poetry and that is the end of literature – there are no others – to evoke objects".120 In a letter he sent to Vuillard in 1895, Bonnard echoes these sentiments when he congratulates his friend for one his drawings that “resembles Mallarmé for its initial obscurity and the purity of the workmanship that stands out afterwards.”121 Such an appraisal can be appreciated by looking at a lithograph Vuillard produced at around this time [fig. 14], depicting a group of women in the picture gallery belonging to the critic Roger Marx (1859-1913). The artist’s use of suggestive rather than descriptive imagery ensures that the scene is not immediately discernible but only gradually begins to present itself, enticing the viewer into the overall opaque atmosphere of the picture.

Both artists came to know Mallarmé during the 1890s, with whom they shared many mutual friends and acquaintances such as the owner of the journal La Revue blanche Thadée Natanson, whose country retreat was situated nearby to the poet’s own holiday residence in Valvins. Despite the short time the artists would have known Mallarmé, who died suddenly in 1897 – a photograph taken outside the Natanson house the day after the funeral depicts Bonnard, as well as Renoir, among the people gathered for the wake [fig. 15] – it would be a relationship that continued to inspire them throughout their careers. Natanson relates that, towards the end of Bonnard’s life, the artist did little else other than paint and read Mallarmé.122

Turning our attention once again to Le Clos, the painting can be seen as Bonnard’s own attempt to use the initial obscurity of an image in order to suggest rather than describe, a strategy that ultimately produces a scene shrouded in a mysterious atmosphere. Although the artist uses of

122 Thadée Natanson, Le Bonnard que je propose (Genève: Editions Pierre Cailler, 1951), 91.
an expressive brushstroke that, as we have already seen, injects a vitality into the imagery of the work, the image overall is similar to Vuillard’s lithograph in the way it appears to grow in significance the more closely it is examined. One of the strategies that Bonnard uses to achieve this is the inclusion of the overbearing tree in the foreground, which unites with the surrounding foliage to invade most of the pictorial space, thus ensuring that the viewer’s attention does not get distracted by the more stable referent of the building but remains absorbed in the strikingly bewildering depiction of the natural world. With his father’s ancestral home being situated in the part of France depicted in *Le Clos*, the region had already provided the subject for previous landscapes produced early in Bonnard’s career which, as *Château de Virieu* (1888) [fig. 16] demonstrates, were painted from a perspective more in keeping with tradition. Given the disparity in the presentation of each of these landscapes, Bonnard’s decision to depict the scene in *Le Clos* from a more idiosyncratic point of view might have stemmed from a need to defamiliarise *himself* with a terrain that he had previously known so well. Consequently, the viewer also becomes embroiled in this renegotiation of a once familiar space, encouraged by the artist to consider the world anew. These innovations in *Le Clos* highlight that, while Nabis colleagues like Denis and Sérusier continued to use various adaptations of the synthetist technique well into the twentieth century, from a very early stage, Bonnard had embarked on developing an aesthetic rooted in reality that nevertheless ensures that the image remains a separate entity from nature.

*An origin for the instant?*

Much literature already exists on the impact Mallarmé’s notion of poetic suggestion had on both Bonnard and Vuillard, especially in regards to the work they produced in the 1890s. However, it is my proposal in the following section of this chapter that there is another feature of

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For Bonnard, see in particular Rémi Labrusse, ‘A Desire for Dispossession: Portrait of the Artist as a Reader of Mallarmé’ in Dita Amory (ed.). For Vuillard, see Chastel.
Mallarmé’s poetry that might have appealed to Bonnard in particular, but which has so far gone unnoticed; one that might provide a further context in understanding the artist’s use of the instant. Various critics have drawn attention to the way that Mallarmé often uses language to provide the mental image of a poem with a feeling of permanence that places it in contrast to the contingent data of sensory experience, a purposefully artificial conceit that nevertheless aims to impart to the reader an authentic sense of timelessness. Roger Pearson for instance has claimed that Mallarmé’s renunciation of there being any inherent meaning to existence means that he places a responsibility on to the poet to “create linguistic patterns that may just convince us, just for a nanosecond, that we have seen beyond the here and now.”

But it is in a striking analysis of the poet’s work by Bachelard in his essay on the “poetic instant” where the timelessness of Mallarmé’s imagery receives its most in-depth attention. Bachelard notices that by inverting syntax, Mallarmé is able to produce images in his poems which stifle any illusion to a continuous narrative – what he calls “an attack on horizontal time” – in order to bring to our attention the ecstatic significance of a unique instant severed from a before or an after. Such a brief moment uninhibited by the past or the future springs up vertically, conferring on the poem through this instantaneous mental image a dimension of hitherto unforeseen emotional depth. In providing these glimpses of timelessness in his poems, Bachelard claims that Mallarmé enables the reader to “experience, belatedly, these instants which should have been lived.”

Whether Bonnard was alert to this aspect of Mallarmé’s work when he produced his own variation of the instant in *Twilight* is unclear. Nevertheless, Bonnard’s decision to convey a

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124 Pearson, 10.  
125 Bachelard, ‘Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant’, 60.  
126 Ibid., 61.  
127 Ibid., 60.
vision of timelessness in the painting through the depiction of the solar drama, an event full of symbolic significance for Mallarmé it will be remembered, could be seen as a direct reference to the work of the poet. However, although the imagery of the sun shining through the trees in the painting displays a remarkable similarity to the theme of timelessness in Mallarmé’s work, any claim Bonnard was directly indebted to the poet in this regard is merely conjecture. Although Bonnard is likely to have conversed with Mallarmé on a number of occasions by the time he painted *Twilight*, with little information existing concerning their relationship, the extent to which the young painter would have been able to garner ideas straight from the poet remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, there is evidence from another source, namely in the novels of Gide, that the notion of using poetic language to rupture the mundane experience of prosaic, continuous time was a topic of debate among those close to Mallarmé. In a scene in *The Counterfeiters* (1925), the chief protagonist Édouard is interrogated by one of the other characters on the subject of his latest novel, to which he replies: “Let’s say, if you prefer it, it hasn’t got one subject … ‘a slice of life,’ the naturalist school said. The great defect of that school is that it always cuts its slice in the same direction; in time, lengthwise. Why not in breadth? or in depth?”\(^{128}\) Although written in the 1920s, Stevens has argued that this particular scene as a whole contains a summary of many of the issues that had been discussed in Symbolist circles towards the end of the nineteenth century when Gide was a member of Mallarmé’s inner circle.\(^{129}\) These words spoken by Édouard are therefore of particular interest in terms of our attempt to locate a genesis for Bonnard’s use of the instant in his work, especially as it appears that both writer and painter were attempting to express in their respective output in 1890s an aesthetic that was rooted in reality, while continuing to adhere to the Symbolist principle of the self-contained artwork. For

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instance, in Gide's 1897 novel *Fruits of the Earth*, the narrator claims that “it is not enough for me to *read* that the sand on the seashore is soft. My bare feet must feel it. I have no use for knowledge that has not been preceded by a sensation.”\textsuperscript{130} Later in the novel, the same narrator claims however that he wants to escape from a “maddening” reality experienced through the dimension of linear time; but instead of turning his back on reality, he proposes an alternative way of conceptualising it, through the framework of the instant: “I realized with horror how restricted were the passing hours and that time has only one dimension – a line, I thought – whereas I wanted it deep and wide … ‘The poet’s gift,’ I cried, ‘is the gift of perceptual discovery,’ and I welcomed whatever came.”\textsuperscript{131}

What these examples demonstrate is that, similarly to Bonnard, Gide grounds the images he produces in nature, but in in such a way as to reveal something new or revelatory about the world. It appears to have become apparent to both writer and painter alike, possibly through their understanding of the work of Mallarmé, that a particular form of poetic expression in their respective mediums enabled them to capture momentarily something timeless and essential regarding our experience of reality, something that is largely unavailable to the senses but can be communicated through art.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the theories which emanated from Symbolist circles in fin-de-siècle Paris contributed to the ideas and objectives that underpin Bonnard's own aesthetic. This analysis of Bonnard's output from the 1890s in regards to the aesthetic debates then taking place will also prepare the way for the discussion in Part Two, which looks at the work he went on to produce in the following century. Although the paintings from around 1900 onwards are often seen as a rejection to some extent of his early Symbolist objectives, I shall


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 55-7.
argue, to the contrary, that many of the same issues discussed in this chapter remained at the forefront of his artistic practice.

Before embarking on this discussion, Chapter Two will investigate other ways in which Bonnard responded to the aesthetic concerns of those around him in the final decade of the nineteenth century, expanding on the points of debate raised in the present chapter to include more wide-reaching topics such as politics, social affairs and gender identity.
Chapter Two: A Divided World

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Bonnard was able to negotiate between the different theories and artistic practices offered to him by both Symbolism and Impressionism. This chapter will chart how Bonnard’s aesthetic ideas continued to develop within this close-knit avant-garde community in Paris, while also paying more attention to the social and political issues at stake during the fin-de-siècle period that also had an impact on his work.

Using the artist's seminal painting *Man and Woman* as the main point of reference throughout the chapter, I shall demonstrate how Bonnard’s work can be seen to reflect the social issues of the day, such as changes in gender relationships and the role of the family unit in society, as well as how his own painterly practice was in part a response to both his own political opinions and those of other artists and theorists at the time. I shall also consider to what extent the views about women held by a patriarchal society, such as the one that existed in France at the time, manifest themselves in Bonnard’s depictions of the female nude. In analysing a painting like *Man and Woman* through the interpretive framework of the ‘male gaze’, it will be argued that Bonnard both conforms to and subverts certain expectations concerning how women were supposed to be portrayed in art. It will be seen that, to a certain extent, Bonnard continues a tradition catered to a male clientele, in which women are depicted in private, intimate moments in order to present them as unaware they are on display, their bodies available to be consumed by the viewer at his leisure. However, it will be argued that Bonnard often uses such imagery not merely to present the woman as a passive object to be stared at, but in a way that often problematises this very act of looking unhindered at the female body.

Fittingly for an artwork produced at the turn of the century, *Man and Woman* is a painting that
looks both to the past and to the future. In alluding through its imagery to the story of Adam and Eve, the first people God created according to the Hebrew Bible, Bonnard depicts an ancient myth that purports to explain the origins of humanity; however, by re-staging the myth so that the Garden of Eden is moved to the confines of a bedroom in fin-de-siècle Paris, the artist also presents us with a modern portrayal of humankind, anxiously facing an uncertain future. It will be argued that, through its subtle and enigmatic use of symbolic imagery and allegory, *Man and Woman* is a painting that also touches on many of the aesthetic and political issues that had divided the Nabis by this period. During the first half of the 1890s, the relationship between the Nabis had been one of camaraderie, with the group collaborating on a number of ventures such as set design and puppet show theatres, as well as inspiring and encouraging one another in their individual pursuits. However, by the time Bonnard painted *Man and Woman*, the group had split into separate smaller cliques, signalling not only disagreements concerning aesthetics, but also political issues. As seen in the previous chapter, Bonnard discarded with the synthetist technique promoted by Denis and Sérusier quite early in his career, developing instead a way of painting that was partly inspired by the Impressionists. The enigmatic mixture of references in the painting to both the past and the present, ancient myth and modern life, can thus be understood in terms of Bonnard’s own evolution as an artist up until this moment, from his early, innovative association with the Symbolist movement to his more independently-minded experiments with Impressionist technique.

In keeping with the overarching theme of this thesis, we shall also see that it is through the portrayal of an instant in *Man and Woman* that Bonnard is able to fuse together in one image these themes of both a sacred and profane nature. The viewer is presented with the precise moment when the man holds a towel about to cover his modesty and suddenly becomes aware in his own reflection that he has transformed into Adam, disclosing through this pictorial strategy a metaphorical meaning to the image. In this sense, *Man and Woman* is a further
example of how Bonnard was able to produce symbolic meaning from the material of everyday occurrences.

**Separate spheres**

*Man and Woman* is a double portrait depicting the artist and his then lover Marthe de Méligny, who he would marry many years later. Given that both protagonists can be identified, the painting can be seen on one level to portray an intimate relationship between two concrete people. Yet the inclusion of the screen in the middle of the painting encourages a broader interpretation in which they are seen to inhabit two separate spheres of influence, one feminine and the other masculine. As we shall see over the course of the chapter, this is just one example of how Bonnard incorporates into a setting of the everyday themes of a more symbolic magnitude.

On first inspection, *Man and Woman* might appear to be a fairly typical take on a subject associated with naturalist painters towards the end of the nineteenth century, which professed to portray women behaving as they would in the a bedroom or washing area. While an artist such as Jean-Louis Forain might use sexualised imagery in order to excite a male clientele [fig. 17], Bonnard would also have been familiar with Degas’ variation on the naturalist nude in which the female body is presented from a more disinterested point of view that treats the woman as an ‘other’ to be inspected rather than enjoyed [fig. 18]. Both of these precedents seem to be features of *Man and Woman*, I shall argue.

The dimly lit room and ruffled sheets, indications that the couple have just had sex, provides the

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132 Her real name was Maria Boursin, a fact Bonnard would not learn until their marriage in 1925.


scene with the necessary naturalistic context for the sensuously rendered female body to be interrogated as an object of male desire. The artist appears to encourage the viewer into this act of voyeurism with his depiction of the woman idly playing with some cats, thus using her unthreatening and self-absorbed status to emphasise to us she is unaware that she is on display. This situates the imagery of the painting within a tradition going back much further than the examples mentioned above to the Rococo period, when women were often depicted in paintings engaged in an activity, usually at their toilette, oblivious to the gaze fixated on them. The eighteenth-century painter François Boucher (1703-70) in particular had exploited this behind-closed-doors atmosphere in his work to tremendous effect, often placing the unwitting ‘object’ of male desire in the centre of an oval shaped canvas to imply that the scene is being viewed surreptitiously through a keyhole.\textsuperscript{135} In paintings such as \textit{A Young Woman Taking a Footbath} (c.1760) [fig. 19], Boucher increases the presumed male viewer’s thrill of being an unsolicited witness to a private moment by using the depiction of the drapery to imply that something has been revealed which is usually hidden from sight. Bonnard produces a similar feeling in his painting that the woman is spied on from a distance by placing her further back so she is at a safe enough distance to be observed discreetly. He also includes a dark strip that runs down the left-hand side of the canvas, indicating that a curtain has been opened onto the scene. If the painting is to be read in this manner, it might be argued that the audience’s complicity in observing the woman is enhanced by the inclusion of the male figure who, pushed to the foreground and rendered in darkness, leaves the female body lit up to be examined and admired.

However, it is my contention that, conversely, the insertion of the male figure into the scene also acts to disturb any straightforward sense of voyeuristic desire on the part of the viewer. Although partially obscured in shadow, it is hard not to identify with this strikingly honest

\textsuperscript{135}Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen and Georges Vigarello, \textit{The Invention of Privacy} (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2015) 114.
depiction of humanity in the form of a man facing us as he looks at himself in a mirror.\textsuperscript{136}

Provided with this referent, the viewer is compelled into perceiving the image of the female body in relation to the man, establishing a dialogue between the two figures in which the woman is regarded as a representation of the ‘other’. In designating the woman as the ‘other’, Bonnard conforms to certain patriarchal preconceptions of women as intrinsically different to men. However, arranging the image in this way can also be seen as a means for the artist to subvert attitudes which objectify women; the accessibility of her body as an uninterrupted source of visual pleasure for the observer is curtailed, a pictorial strategy that draws attention to the act of voyeurism itself. Bonnard thus uses a form of visual language that has been identified by feminist critics as a means upon which the male gaze is undermined when it comes into conflict with a representation of itself, calling into question the processes at play between the observer and the subject being observed.\textsuperscript{137}

In presenting each figure so they take up two distinct sections of the canvas, the painting also reflects the convention in French society since the Enlightenment to separate men and women into different spheres. Accordingly, while men were viewed as rational, orderly and masters of their own lives, women were seen to be more spiritual and driven by their emotions.\textsuperscript{138} The scene depicted in \textit{Man and Woman} adheres at least in part to these gendered categories, particularly the depiction of Marthe with her brightly lit body and self-absorbed disposition that suggests to the viewer she occupies a state of mind that is removed from the world of the here and now. However, Bonnard also uses the imagery in the painting to distort these established stereotypes; far from representing man as rational, orderly and a master of his own domain, the self-portrait in the picture portrays masculinity as both physically and

\textsuperscript{136}It was Hyman who first made this perceptive suggestion that the man is looking straight into a mirror, seeing his own reflection. Hyman, 56.


psychologically vulnerable. In associating the male body with frailty as opposed to strength, *Man and Woman* can on one level be seen as a response to what has been seen as a crisis in masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century, as men felt increasingly threatened by women's sexual and economic liberation. But as the historian Michelle Perrot has claimed, this could also be a positive experience for men once forced to re-evaluate their role in society, bringing about an “awakening consciousness regarding their own physical and moral specificity”.

The self-portrait in *Man and Woman* can therefore be seen as a representation of the need for men to self-reflect as they faced an uncertain future. Furthermore, by dividing the pair into separate spheres, it is the woman and not the man who is seen to be a master of the domain that she inhabits, representing a reversal of how gender roles had been traditionally assigned.

This challenge to the way society views both genders would be repeated in a painting Bonnard produced a couple of years later that is similar to *Man and Woman* both thematically and in its structure. In *Misia Godebska and Thadée Natanson* (1902) [fig. 20], which depicts the owner of *Man and Woman* and his then wife, the roles seen in the earlier painting have now been reversed. It is the man who sits absorbed in his own world as he plays with a dog, while his wife Misia stares out at the viewer. Rather than depicting any vulnerability in this image of self-awareness, as was seen in the self-portrait in *Man and Woman*, the female figure looks out at us with an air of confidence. The picture is also divided into separate gendered spheres – although not as dramatically as in *Man and Woman* – and given that the earlier painting was owned at the time by Natanson, Bonnard surely must have had it in mind when devising this other double portrait.

140 Ibid.
It is clear therefore that, while Bonnard uses the same visual language as artists like Forain and Degas, he subverts this inherited tradition in *Man and Woman* as well as in other paintings at the time, not so much in order to pass criticism on the way art had been used as a vehicle to subjugate women, but instead to probe the very tenants of a male-dominated society that still treated women as objects to be possessed unconditionally and unreservedly.

**Before and after the Fall**

As well as providing a framework in which to view the sexes through separate spheres, each displaying contrasting characteristics, the structure of *Man and Woman* also encourages the painting to be interpreted as a depiction of the Adam and Eve creation myth. The screen that divides the painting into two distinct sections produces an image in direct dialogue with the canonical depictions of Adam and Eve going back to at least the third century [fig. 21], in which the tree of knowledge of good and evil separates the couple. The familiarity Bonnard’s audience would have had with the famous depictions of the first couple by Lucas Cranach [fig. 22] or Albrecht Dürer [fig. 23] would have ensured that Bonnard’s use of imagery in this regard would not have gone unnoticed. However, if the painting is interpreted in this way, the separate spheres of influence incorporated into Bonnard’s picture only act to complicate the ways in which the ‘first couple’ have traditionally been viewed. While the sensuously rendered ‘Eve’ basks in the warmth underneath the lamp, ‘Adam’ has retreated to the darkened corner of the bedroom, where only a glimmer of light reaches his feet and part of one of his legs. The rest of his coarsely rendered body, including his face, is hidden in the shadows, indicating a sense of shame at what has just occurred between the pair. The disparity between the lovers, the woman consumed in her own world while the man faces the consequences of his expulsion from the ‘Paradise’ they once shared, is emphasised by the screen dividing the canvas into two sections. Bonnard uses it as a device contrasting the prelapsarian ‘Paradise’ on the left with a ‘Paradise’ lost on the other side, producing two separate domains within the same space of the room. The
The man represented in the painting is now alienated from ‘Paradise’, his dark, corporeal form turned away from the brightly lit idyllic scene behind him.

The experience of shame is, nevertheless, an integral part of the original story as it is told in the Book of Genesis, which describes how, after eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve become aware of their own and each other’s nakedness, leading them to cover themselves: “And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.”141 It is this aspect of the story which forms the basis of Bonnard’s contemporary retelling of the myth in Man and Woman, with the sexual act that has taken place replacing the original transgression of eating the fruit. Although the story as told in Genesis makes no mention of a sexual union between the couple, theologians such as Saint Augustine (354-430) claimed that it is nevertheless implicit in the text,142 and it is this primarily Christian interpretation that artists throughout the centuries have exploited in the iconography they have used to portray the myth. It is interesting in this regard that it is only the man in Bonnard’s reinterpretation of the story who is represented as having been punished for this transgression. Depicted at the exact moment that he tries to cover himself with a towel, the man is suddenly aware of his nakedness in front of the other person and is thus transformed into an object to be judged and scrutinised. While the majority of images of Adam and Eve portray the couple either in their prelapsarian nakedness or, more commonly, concealing their newfound shame, Bonnard captures the transition between these two states, emphasising the emergence into this everyday scene of a theme of universal significance – humankind’s trajectory from innocence to experience. Furthermore, it is in this moment, as the man is about to cover himself, that the rest of the scene is instantaneously imparted with symbolic

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142 See for instance the chapter in Augustine’s The City of God Against the Pagans called: ‘What was the first punishment that the first human beings suffered for their offence?’ in Saint Augustine of Hippo, The City of God Against the Pagans, tr. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 555.
significance. As was also the case in *Twilight*, the portrayal of an instant is the catalyst in which the contingent becomes something of universal import. It is also worth highlighting the similar way that Bonnard conveys the instant in both paintings. Just as the croquet players in *Twilight* continue with their game, unaware that the girls dancing behind them have been transformed into an angelic vision, the depiction in the later painting of the woman self-absorbed suggests she is unaffected by the transformation that has begun to take shape in the man.

Bonnard’s use of imagery alluding to the Adam and Eve myth in *Man and Woman* is done in such a way that the painting can be read just as equally as a naturalist portrayal of the aftermath of a sexual encounter. It seems likely that Bonnard was drawn to the idea of producing a scene that subtly alludes to this myth in reaction to previous examples by Denis and Gauguin who, while also depicting Biblical stories that take place in a contemporary setting, both use far more explicit religious imagery in their own work. Of the Nabis, Denis in particular had throughout the 1890s portrayed many stories from the Bible that are re-situated in his own epoch. *Pilgrims at Emmaus* (1895) [fig. 24] for instance, depicts a story that from the Gospel of Luke in which the resurrected Jesus reveals His true identity to two men who have invited Him to have supper with them, initially believing Him to be a mere stranger. However, while the scenery outside suggests that the painting is set in contemporary times, Denis depicts the two witnesses to this proof of the resurrection wearing medieval clothes. In *Man and Woman* conversely, the integrity of the modern world is kept intact, allowing Bonnard to fashion something symbolic from the material of everyday life. The seemingly ordinary scene represented in *Man and Woman* is therefore not a mere foil in which to create a religious theme, but instead explores the symbolic significance of the scene itself; the natural world becomes the primary instigator of the mysterious. Instead of privileging the inner mind of the artist, Bonnard developed a strategy in

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143 Indeed, with a revelatory ‘instant’ of recognition being such a fundamental part of the story, it is interesting to wonder how Bonnard would have treated the subject.
his work that allowed him to express the material world in an imaginative way so as to reveal something new about it.

It is the moment the male figure is about to cover himself with a towel that the scene depicted in *Man and Woman* receives its symbolic significance as a portrayal of the story of Adam and Eve now relocated to the confines of a Parisian bedroom at the end of the nineteenth century. So, while in a painting such as Gauguin’s *The Vision of the Sermon*, religious apparitions are seemingly produced *ex nihilo*, the man and woman in Bonnard’s painting *become* Adam and Eve through the process of the ‘instant’. The moment the man lifts the towel to cover his modesty, he *becomes* Adam and the woman *becomes* Eve, a transition that in turn allows the viewer to make symbolic associations in regards to what is presented in the picture; the screen is reconfigured so that it resembles the tree of knowledge separating the couple, the cats represent the animals that inhabited the Garden, and, most strikingly, what is ostensibly a private sexual communion between the pair is presented as an act of universal import, typifying the dogma of Original Sin.

Presenting us with the post-coital lovers in this way, Bonnard also draws the audience into the composition, making the viewer complicit in the transgression that has occurred. Thus the artist appropriates naturalist convention in order to invest something more symbolically significant into the image. Although Bonnard portrays the woman as isolated and unaware, allowing the viewer to brazenly examine her body, in the context of the myth it becomes a means to accentuate the psychological gulf which now separates the couple.

*Daughters of Eve*

Despite *Man and Woman* being in one sense a response to the work of other artists whom Bonnard was associated with, it is, nevertheless, still difficult to determine what it was that gave
him the idea to produce a depiction of Adam and Eve using his private life as a template. As we have seen, Bonnard had been one of the Nabis who tended to avoid the use of religious imagery in his work.

In around 1898, Bonnard appears to have become interested in the idea of producing a naturalistic depiction of a man and woman side-by-side in the immediate aftermath of a sexual encounter. His first attempt at the motif, the smaller and more roughly executed *Man and Woman in an Interior* (1898) [fig. 25], portrays a similar scene as the one seen in the later painting, but without a screen dividing the couple. Although it has been described as a study for the 1900 painting, the fact that Bonnard rarely carried out studies using oil suggests that it should be treated as a separate work in its own right. Either way, he was ultimately happy to sell it as a ‘finished’ work to Natanson.

Another painting, even more similar to the one completed in 1900, was worked on by Bonnard at some point between 1899 and 1900 [fig. 26]. Again, this painting has also been demoted by some to the status of a study for the 1900 version, but it would certainly have been a precedent for Bonnard to produce a work of this size with that in mind and it is more likely to have been a first attempt at completing a larger picture using this subject matter. It is also evident that, by the time he painted this second version of the scene, he had definitely begun to think about using the Biblical story in Genesis as the basis for a painting, as can be seen in the Adam-like pose of the figure in *Standing Male Nude* (c. 1899) [fig. 27]. But regardless of whether or not Bonnard intended the second painting to allude to Adam and Eve, his decision to introduce a screen dividing the lovers in the final version increases the symbolic intensity of the

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144 Catalogue entry for *Man and Woman in an Interior* in Whitfield and Elderfield, 75.
145 Ibid.
146 Catalogue entry for *Man and Woman* (1900) in Ibid., 84.
later work.

While there might not be any explicit allusions to the Biblical story in either of the earlier paintings, there are mythological associations of a pagan variety that are preserved in *Man and Woman*. In the first version, the figure of the woman putting on one her stockings resembles a famous pose used in classical sculpture [fig. 28], which had been appropriated by artists such as Boucher for depictions of the goddesses Venus or Diana, as can be seen in a painting Bonnard would have known from his visits to the Louvre [fig. 29]. More intriguingly, Cranach had also used variations of this pose in his various portrayals of Diana, paintings in which the goddess and her brother Apollo are likened iconographically to Adam and Eve [fig. 30 and fig. 31]. It is not implausible that Bonnard would have been aware of these paintings by Cranach and the way in which he conflates a pagan goddess with Eve, given that it is a resemblance discussed in the writings of the Symbolist poet and critic Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916).[^147] However, despite such allusion to the goddess in the earliest of the paintings depicting a couple in a bedroom, the scene by-and-large conforms to naturalist representations of women in a state of dishabille. It is in the second version of the painting that the woman’s amaranthine qualities are more prominently on display; her sensuously pronounced body, now completely naked, has acquired the overtly classical posture of a sculpture from antiquity.

Consolidating into the depiction of one body a variety of mythical sources was a recurring motif in Symbolist representations of the female nude when Bonnard painted *Man and Woman* and he would certainly have been aware of the numerous examples in Gauguin’s work in which women appear to allude to multiple female deities, all of whom can trace their lineage back to

Eve. But while it is likely Bonnard was influenced by Gauguin in this regard, a comparison of the respective ways that each artist presents this subject matter once again demonstrates a very different set of objectives. When Gauguin depicts a ‘goddess’, the otherness implied in her divine status is often used to articulate the artist’s desire for a ‘primitive’ form of existence that is in direct contrast to the way of life offered by modernity. However, in appropriating the female body to express a vision of nature that is untainted by Western civilisation, Erika Schneider has argued that the artist incorporates into such depictions an assortment of imagery associated with pseudo-scientific beliefs such as phrenology and the medieval concept of the humours that portrays womanhood as physically weak and irrational. For instance, Gauguin’s painting In the Waves (1889) [fig. 32] references both the story of the birth of Venus and the mythology centering on the water nymph Ondine in its depiction of a woman battling the elements of the sea in order to escape the modern world and return to the water, producing a metaphor for the artist’s own ambitions to turn his back on modern civilisation. But as Schneider demonstrates, by engulfing the woman in her ‘natural’ element, Gauguin draws on his interest in medieval medicine which associated the female sex with the wet, phlegmatic humour that was a sign of inherent biological deficiencies. Moreover, the woman’s face with its stub nose belies a phrenological point of view, displaying the woman as intellectually and morally inferior. As we have already seen, Bonnard conversely presents the female form in Man and Woman in a


149 Laurence Madeleine says: “Gauguin needed a paradise because he felt he was living in hell and he wanted to make Eve’s journey in reverse, and leave hell in order to live in paradise.” Laurence Madeleine, ‘Fall or Rebirth: Eve in the Work of Gauguin’ in Véronique Serrano (ed.), The Nude from Gauguin to Bonnard (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2013), 60.


151 Ibid., 276-7. Nevertheless, Belinda Thomson has argued that, although Gauguin saw femininity as closer to nature and thus representative of the so-called ‘primitive’, as the grandson of the pioneering feminist Flora Tristan, he was also well aware of the unfair way that society treated women. Belinda Thomson, ‘Fictions of Femininity’ in Belinda Thomson (ed.), Gauguin: Maker of Myth (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 152. For a balanced account of Gauguin as both a misogynist and a feminist, see Norma Broude, ‘Flora Tristan’s Grandson: Reconsidering the Feminist Critique of Paul Gauguin’ in Norma Broude (ed.), Gauguin’s Challenge: New Perspectives after Postmodernism (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018).

152 Schneider, 277.
way that reflects her moral superiority, a virtue that had been placed on women since the
Enlightenment and was still regarded as being true in the nineteenth century by scientists and
progressive thinkers. So whereas Gauguin relies on archaic ideas that stress the inferiority of
women', Bonnard uses more recent conceptualisations of the ‘feminine’ as the basis for his
imagery. Consequently, while the female figure in Man and Woman is seen as a goddess-like
vision who is unaffected by the concerns of humankind, it is her counterpart who shows signs
of biological and social deficiencies.

This contrast between the two figures in Man and Woman is further implied in the mythological
imagery that Bonnard uses in the painting. As Diana the goddess of chastity, the woman is
portrayed as the innocent, prelapsarian Eve as she was before the Fall of humankind; in
dogmatic terms, Paradise has yet to be tainted by Original Sin. However, there is also a more
sinister implication in this reference to Diana, one that is suggestive of suffering and ultimately
death: the curtain is drawn, revealing that we have inadvertently stumbled upon the goddess of
chastity in her sacred and secluded haven, a realm men are forbidden from seeing or entering.
In this context, the figure of the man can also be associated with the hunter Actaeon who,
according to Ancient Greek and Roman legend, pays with his life for trespassing on Diana in the
act of bathing. While it has been claimed elsewhere that the man resembles a faun – the bottom
shadowed half of his body used to suggest the fur of a goat’s hind –¹⁵³ this could equally be seen
to represent the gradual metamorphosis of the man into a stag, a visual reference to the
transformation that Actaeon undergoes in the myth, which leads to him being ripped to pieces
by his own hunting dogs. In this interpretation of the painting, the towel held by the man is no
longer being used to conceal his own nakedness, but has become a means in which Diana’s
prohibited enclave is revealed to us, mirroring the dark strip on the left. Together they create a

theatrical atmosphere of curtains having been opened onto a theatre set, meaning the viewer now faces the same fate as Actaeon. Currently poised between the edge of the canvas and the man’s body, the towel both reveals the prohibited scene, but also prepares to hide his, as well as the audience’s, imminent shame from having looked. The viewer relates to the doomed figure of Adam or Actaeon, while the seemingly innocent Diana-like Eve represents the ‘other’, the perpetrator of man’s downfall that will result in his death. The imagery of the painting can thus be seen to have been influenced by Titian’s portrayal of the same myth in which the artist represents Actaeon lifting up a curtain to be presented with the naked body of Diana [fig. 33], a reproduction of which Bonnard had on his studio wall at around the same time he painted *Man and Woman* [fig. 34].

This double-edged representation of a woman as both a goddess and a temptress who lures men to their doom places the painting in dialogue with other Symbolist artworks from this period. Bonnard would have been aware of Edvard Munch’s work that depicts the fraught relations between men and women which had been exhibited in Paris in the mid-1890s, and *Man and Woman* certainly shares certain similarities with paintings such as *Ashes* (1894) [fig. 35] and *Jealousy* (1895) [fig. 36]. However, the imagery in Bonnard’s painting is more ambiguous than the misogynistic portrayal of women as the ‘daughters of Eve’ – seen as carrying the burden of responsibility for the fall of humankind – that is seen in Munch’s output from this period. Any potential culpability on the part of ‘Eve’ in *Man and Woman* remain uncertain. Her position in the centre of the composition creates an impression that the room flows out from her illuminated body, making her the centre of reference around which everything else orbits. Lost in her own thoughts, the woman breaks free from her immediate surroundings, her mind transcending the narrow boundaries of the room; as Bachelard has

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154 Chapter Four will discuss in more detail how Bonnard often uses theatrical imagery in his work during this period.
claimed, the daydreamer escapes the concrete present and is transported to another world bearing “the mark of infinity”. Yet this ‘Eve’ not only eludes the confines of the room, but also the body she inhabits, which is “passed by in silence” in her absorbed state of mind. In ‘Eve’, Bonnard has created an embodiment of the spirit, eternal and boundless, resembling the ‘Paradise’ she resides in. Meanwhile, cast out from this idyll, ‘Adam’ is pushed up to the front of the canvas and is imprisoned in the claustrophobic space between the edge of the room and the screen; he is now trapped as a relation among other things, an object among other objects in the temporal-spatial world.

“A Bourgeois Afternoon”

At the same time that Bonnard was working on Man and Woman, he was also taking his cue from the Impressionists by using one of their favourite themes in a series of pictures depicting bourgeois family life, both indoors in dimly lit dining rooms, and outside in verdurous open spaces. For instance, A Bourgeois Afternoon [fig. 37], the other major painting Bonnard completed in 1900, is in many ways the inverse of Man and Woman in its playful and ironic depiction of middle-class family life. Moreover, while both are large-scale paintings, their respective formats, one a landscape, the other a portrait, make them perfect opposites; the former expansive, the latter confined. The sombre, serious tone of Man and Woman seems far removed from the scene depicted in A Bourgeois Afternoon, with its depiction of the artist’s brother-in-law, the composer Claude Terrasse (1867-1923), reclining on a garden bench, languidly observing the activities being carried out by the rest of his family, his sense of ease is echoed in the posture of the dog by his feet. Bonnard continues this use of caricature to gently poke fun at his family with the figure of the young woman kissing a child, unaware she will one

day become the fat old woman behind her who is engaged in the same activity. All the while, a cat stares out with a sardonic expression on its face, perhaps representing the artist as the only one who is in on the joke with the viewer.

Nevertheless, despite the differences in the subject matter of each of these paintings, they are linked through the imagery used in both pictures to convey the artist’s political sympathies. Although Bonnard’s work is rarely associated with any overtly political motivation, during the period in which he painted both pictures, he was involved in anarchist circles and was also collaborating with the writer Jarry on a series of almanacs published between 1898 and 1901 that were subversive in the critical stance they take towards the Third Republic. The political satire that Bonnard uses in his illustrations for both almanacs is also evident in the portrayal of his family in *A Bourgeois Afternoon*. While the painting is on the whole warm-hearted, it is tinged with a sense of irony in its use of caricature to poke fun at fellow anarchist sympathisers like his brother-in-law, another collaborator of Jarry’s, who is pictured enjoying the middle-class comforts of his countryside retreat.

During the period in which *Man and Woman* was painted, other members of the Nabis also began to produce paintings that were often symptomatic of their political opinions. In particular, Denis began to advance aesthetic theories that were interwoven with his reactionary and traditionalist politics – views that were in conflict with those that were held by Bonnard. In the following sections, it will be demonstrated that the divide between Adam and Eve portrayed in *Man and Woman* presents its audience with a stark representation of the conflict between the expressive and the harmonious, two conflicting aspects of art which Denis had proposed could resolved through a return to Classicism. In many ways then, *Man and Woman* is Bonnard’s

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157This collaboration will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four.
response to the aesthetic and political issues of the fin-de-siècle period, but one that revels in the paradoxes on display rather than attempting to reconcile them.

A return to order

Bonnard was not the only artist associated with the Nabis to produce a large-scale painting in 1900 that can be viewed as a sort of mission statement. Like Man and Woman, Denis’ monumental Homage to Cézanne [fig. 38], more than twice the size of Bonnard’s picture, announces the fruition of several year’s planning and experimentation. Denis had originally envisaged it as a painting that would pay homage to the Symbolist artist Odilon Redon (1840-1916), but by 1900, he had altered the focus so it would instead be a celebration of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). He produced countless sketches and preparatory portraits of the various participants depicted in the painting, which were subsequently transferred into the eventual picture, a technique more associated with the methods of academic painting that demonstrates the artist’s growing interest in Classicism. As mentioned in the previous chapter, faced with the issue of how to express the abstract Idea using representational means, Symbolist painters like Denis began to incorporate the idealism of Classical art into their work in order to evoke the sense of permanence that they sought. Given this emphasis, Homage to Cézanne is a painting that is by-and-large nostalgic, a theme that, as will be discussed below, is in keeping with the conservative sentiments of both the image and the artist.

Set at some point in the mid-1890s during the peak of the Nabis’ shared group activities, a number of them including Bonnard have gathered in the display room of the Parisian gallery belonging to the art dealer Ambroise Vollard (1836-1939), in order to appreciate a still-life by

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159 Ibid.
Cézanne. On the walls of the gallery can also be seen paintings by Gauguin and Renoir, references to two of the artists who had made a decisive impact on Denis’ work during his early career, in terms of synthetism and Classicism respectively.\textsuperscript{161} It is in this setting that the Nabis have convened and now listen to Sérusier discuss the Cézanne still-life with Redon, who had by this point been demoted from the cause for celebration to merely one of those gathered. Vollard himself, along with the art critic André Mellerio (1862-1943), also listen in on the discussion, while Denis’ wife, Marthe Denis, looks directly at the viewer; her knowing smile perhaps indicating the viewer’s privileged position in witnessing these two artists speak.\textsuperscript{162}

Katherine Marie Kuenzli has argued that the discussion taking place most likely represents an amicable disagreement between Redon and Sérusier, with the latter attempting to convince the more sceptical older painter of Cézanne’s importance as an artist;\textsuperscript{163} Denis captures Redon politely cleaning his glasses in a gesture that suggests he is more than happy to humour the younger painter, if not agree with him. But according to Kuenzli, the disagreement between the two artists that Denis portrays is more than merely a difference in personal taste; the discussion also represents Denis’ personal feelings regarding the schism that had divided the Nabis into different camps by 1900, not only on aesthetic grounds, but in regards to wider political topics. For it was the political scandal caused by the Dreyfus Affair that Denis believed had been the catalyst that caused the eventual split in the shared group identity of the Nabis.\textsuperscript{164} The fallout from the Affair seemingly affected every family in the Republic, and the friends who made up the Nabis were not immune to this.\textsuperscript{165} In fact, of all the late nineteenth-century avant-garde

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{161}For Renoir’s use of more classical themes in the 1880s, see Barbara Ehrlich White, ‘The Bathers of 1887 and Renoir’s Anti-Impressionism’ in \textit{The Art Bulletin}, Vol. 55, No. 1, (March 1973), 106-26.
\textsuperscript{162}Her knowing glance at the viewer is similar to the one made by the cat in \textit{A Bourgeois Afternoon}.
\textsuperscript{164}Ibid., 684.
\textsuperscript{165}As Ruth Harris writes: “Everybody in France and abroad, it appeared, had a passionately held opinion. Families divided; old friendships broke apart; politics, religion, literature, the arts and science were all affected.” Ruth Harris, \textit{The Man on Devil’s Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France} (London: Penguin Random House, 2011), 3.
\end{footnotes}
groups, they had been the most polarised by the scandal; the Neo-Impressionists were uniformly anarchist and therefore pro-Dreyfus, while the older Impressionists, who included both Dreyfusards such as Monet and Pissarro, as well as staunchly anti-Dreyfusards in Degas and Renoir, had not been part of any distinct group since the early 1880s. Although the Nabis had initially maintained a unity despite the heterogeneous makeup of the group, as the Affair continued to force more and more people to take sides, those who were conservative and spiritually motivated in their work like Denis and Sérusier fell in line with the anti-Dreyfusards, whereas anarchists like Bonnard, Vuillard, and Vallotton all believed the captain had been set up by a corrupt political establishment. However, it was not always predictable which side an individual would support, as was the case with Ranson, who came out against Dreyfus despite his subversive anti-clerical beliefs. Nevertheless, the divisions that the Affair had brought out between the different members of the Nabis became ever more conspicuous as the century drew to a close; while Denis began to be influenced by the right-wing poet and theoretician Adrien Mithouard (1864-1919), Bonnard became a prominent collaborator for the pro-Dreyfus anarchist journal La Revue blanche, which was edited by his friend Natanson. Denis’ attempt to portray a sense of group cohesiveness in Homage can therefore be seen as partly nostalgia for a lost sense of comradeship between the members, but also an attempt to exert his own stamp of authority as to what the Nabis had stood for and claim ownership of the group’s legacy. However, the desire to portray group unity had even deeper meanings for Denis, linked to aesthetic and political views which had been influenced by Mithouard.

In a journal entry from 1898, Denis recounts conversations with Mithouard and Mellerio, in which parallels had been drawn between the anarchist sympathies of certain artists and their

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167 As Harris has observed, whether a person supported Dreyfus or not was in no way predetermined and many were hesitant before making up their minds. Harris, 7.
support for Dreyfus. Denis continues this theme in another entry written the following year, in which he makes a link between the political convictions of the different members of the Nabis with certain characteristics in their work. Artists including Bonnard, Vuillard and Vallotton, all of whom were pro-Dreyfus, are categorised as having a “Jewish taste” that is in opposition to the "Latin taste" evident in the work of other Nabis such as himself and Sérusier. Dreyfusard painters were also deemed by Denis to display a tendency towards Impressionism, as well as a “predilection for nervousness and dream”. One of the conclusions that Denis and Mithouard appear have come to was that the aesthetic tastes of these artists were marked with the degeneracy that anti-Semites saw as typical of the Jewish psyche. Consequently such traits were contrasted with the belief they had of themselves to be more balanced of mind due to their faith in the Church and authority.

However, these binary classifications used by Denis to highlight the differing approaches of the Nabis should not be viewed as advocating only the characteristics he associated with his own artistic output. Kuenzli has demonstrated how these journal entries by Denis present a similar aesthetic system to the one presented by Mithouard in his book The Torment of Unity (1901), which prescribes a form of Classicism that is able to forge a synthesis between the harmonious and the expressive, the latter being one of the characteristics of in the art of those such as the Impressionists. According to Mithouard, while the expressive element has its roots in Romanticism and is therefore associated with irrationality, anarchy and even suicide, it is nevertheless necessary in order to provide the artist with inspiration. However, because of the perceived negative aspects involved in the process of creation, Mithouard argues that they must

170 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., 690.
be countered by a harmonious Classical tradition in order to stabilise them. Mithouard held that a healthy mind, one that believed in order and authority, was needed to locate this balance between the expression in the Romantic tradition and the harmony of Classicism. This attitude also reflects a general anxiety that existed concerning both the physical and the mental health of the public in France towards the end of the century. It is the nervousness that Denis detects in Impressionism that makes it, for him, an inappropriate art form aesthetically. Moreover, Impressionism was also politically subversive as it suggested an unbalanced psyche, one that threatened the stability imposed by Church and country. By envisaging the Nabis for one last time as a cohesive group in *Homage to Cézanne*, Denis uses this imagined bringing together of the two separate factions to produce a metaphor promoting his own synthesis of the harmonious and the expressive. The Cézanne still-life that is being discussed among those gathered provides the perfect foil in which to present this unity as it was particularly in this genre that Denis believed that older painter had demonstrated how the sensuous passions needed to inspire art could be perfectly turned into something classical and timeless.\(^{175}\)

* A sense of discord

It will be argued in the current section that the tension between the expressive and the harmonious that forms such an explicit part of the makeup of *Man and Woman* should be viewed as a challenge to the pretensions of those such as Denis, who would seek to produce a synthesis of these two characteristics. In particular, it is the rendering of the striking self-portrait in *Man and Woman* with its expressive brushstrokes that is used by the artist as a counterpoint to the classically posed image of the woman. Divided in two, the image of the painting provides a series of contrast such as male and female, darkness and light, and experience and innocence, which are never resolved.

\(^{174}\)Ibid.

\(^{175}\)Ibid.
This deliberate ploy by Bonnard to emphasise the different tensions that are present in *Man and Woman*, rather than trying to find a balance between them, can be further elaborated upon by comparing the painting with another work depicting a similar theme by Ranson, one of the artists that Denis described as having a Latin taste. In *Eve* (1898) [fig. 39], Ranson’s application of a highly decorative arabesque-type patterning is used in order to present in one united image a number of themes in the painting that would otherwise come into conflict with one another, such as innocence and lust, good and evil and nature and civilisation. The incarnation of Eve that Ranson presents the viewer with is as much a harbinger of the satanic as she is a dweller of Paradise; she is the archetypal Symbolist ‘femme fatale’ and represents many of the destructive forces that worried social conservatives like Denis and Mithouard. Irrationality, sensuousness and sexuality are all in play in the way she is presented and, in this instance, such attributes will result in the destruction of innocence: she encouragingly looks on as a lion and a tiger prepare to pounce on a white dove. The painting can thus be viewed as a portrayal of the suffering in the world, which can be traced back to Eve’s encounter with the snake. According to Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis, the transgression of Adam and Eve brought death not only eventually upon themselves, but also upon the rest of the world, irrevocably altering the everlasting harmoniousness of nature which existed in the Garden of Eden: “So great was the sin of those two that human nature was changed by it for the worse; and so bondage to sin and the necessity of death were transmitted to their posterity.”

In his copper engraving from 1504, Dürer had portrayed Augustine’s dogmatic reading of

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176 Debora Silverman has pointed out that, by the 1890s, there are very few examples of French Symbolist artworks that portray the so-called ‘femme fatale’, even though it continued to be a popular image in the work of their counterparts in Germany and Austria. Debora Silverman, ‘The “New Woman,” Feminism, and the Decorative Arts in Fin-de-Siècle France’ in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 144.

177 Augustine, 581.
Genesis by including a cat at the feet of Eve, about to pounce on a hapless mouse, its tail caught under one of Adam's feet. The death of the mouse, the first instance of mortality in Paradise, will occur once Adam eats the apple that Eve, via the serpent, has revealed to him. Nevertheless, there is an ambiguity in Dürer's picture about who is ultimately to blame for the Fall of Man. The cat in Dürer's engraving appears at Eve's feet, but it is only because Adam imprisons the mouse that it cannot escape its fate. But with whom the culpability lies is far more explicit in Ranson's picture; while Adam is nowhere to be seen, Eve appears to be enjoying the power she holds over life and death, eagerly awaiting the dove's destruction. Ranson's Eve is a 'she-devil', sexually provocative and alluring, casting a spell on the creatures around her; even the serpent seems to be in thrall to her, not the other way around. Yet she is also angelic in her naked, prelapsarian state. The sensuousness and seductiveness of Eve is tempered by the way she remains in harmony with nature. Again, we can see the influence of Mithouard's theory of unity in the way that, for all her sexual and sensuous splendour, Eve blends in effortlessly with her surroundings and the other animals, her hair mimicking the pattern of the snake's body, as well as the plants and the tree. All the different elements of the composition, its form, its colour, its themes, are designed to fit neatly together.

In *Man and Woman* however, Bonnard maintains a sense of discord, explicitly holding it up for our inspection. The artist presents us with each sex, separated onto either side of the canvas by the screen, the use of chiaroscuro ensuring that, while the woman is bathed in light, the shadow engulfing the man alienates him from her and the rest of the bedroom. Rather than trying to unite the two lovers, Bonnard ensures that they are each presented with their own distinct qualities, which also has the effect of accentuating the attributes of the other. Thus, on the left, we have a resplendent image of a woman, innocent and self-absorbed, while on the right, we have her opposite, a man who is acutely aware of himself. Rather than mediating between these two contrasting themes, *Man and Woman* expresses a number of puzzling paradoxes that
remain unanswered, producing an image that, similarly to the Biblical story it portrays, presents human existence as unfathomable.

**Matriarchal role-models**

During the same period in which he painted *Man and Woman*, Bonnard was also producing paintings that can be seen as a direct challenge to the traditional politics underpinning the work of Denis and others who were then propagating an idealised, healthy image of society, such as the one on view in *Maternity, Pouldu* (1899) [fig. 40]. In this painting, Denis presents a vision of unadulterated happiness; light pours into the room through an open window, producing an idyllic, nativity-enthused scene, as a woman and a child look down with delight at a budding new-born baby. The other woman who is holding the baby warmly looks out, inviting the viewer into the peaceful sanctuary on display.

However, Denis’ familial idyll hides a fear, shared by many French Catholics at the end of the nineteenth century. The Dreyfus Affair, with its connotations of treason, was proof for Denis that the established way of life and its long-held traditions were under attack from an enemy within, committed to dismantling long-held traditions that were the very foundations of decent society. Moreover, many on the right feared that the Catholic blood of the French nation had been tainted with that of ‘degenerate’ Jews and Protestants.¹⁷⁸ The baby represented in *Maternity, Pouldu* can thus be seen to represent tradition and race, pure and unblemished, while his adoring family portray the foundations underpinning society, namely tradition and the Church. With its symbolic and religious undercurrents, Denis attempts to transform a moment of tranquillity into something timeless and edifying, instilled with a strong moral message.

¹⁷⁸Harris, 203-9.
The way in which the woman meets the viewers gaze can also be seen as a means for Denis to propagate a traditionalist conviction in which it is a man’s responsibility to provide and care for his family and be honoured and respected in return; although there are no men depicted in the painting, the adoring look on the woman’s face conveys that it is Denis himself, her husband, whom she addresses in this fashion. The joyful scene of feminine domesticity is thus reliant on the presence of a patriarchal figure who, while not portrayed, issues his warm yet possessive scrutiny over the rest of the family. The atmosphere of familial bliss is repeated by Denis in another painting from the same period [fig. 41], where this time it is the baby who happily stares into the protective space where the presumed father figure is present.

At the same time as Denis, Bonnard was also painting scenes which likewise present bourgeois family life as an integral part of society. However, Bonnard proffers a different image of the family than the one seen in Denis’ paintings, one that lays a stress on the influential and pervasive importance of matriarchal role-models. Consequently, whereas Denis displays a conservative, patriarchal attitude that places women and children in the protective care of men, the imagery in Bonnard’s work can be linked to a notion prevalent in progressive circles that saw morality as a feminine virtue to be passed on generationally through strong female figures. In *Grandmother and Child* (1897) [fig. 42] for instance, the image of the woman feeding a baby can be seen to represent the moral nourishment that a matriarchal figure hands down to the younger generation. The same sentiment is also seen in *The Lamp* (1899) [fig. 43] with its depiction of a warm and nurturing environment for the boy, who is protected on either side by his mother and great-grandmother. The domestic space in each scene is thus presented as the preserve of women, unlike in Denis’ paintings depicting the same theme with

179 McMillan, 154-5.  
180 The title of the previous painting, *Grandmother and Child*, is confusing. Madame Caroline Mertzdorff was Bonnard’s grandmother, but the title implies she is the child’s grandmother, when she is, in fact, the child’s great-grandmother.
their suggestion of an authoritative male figure casting his possessive gaze over the family. Indeed, it is questionable whether there exists any role for men at all in Bonnard’s depictions, other than to passively observe. This might lead us to wonder whether Bonnard had an audience of women rather than men in mind when he painted these scenes eliciting female agency, as Francesca Berry has suggested in regards to Vuillard's paintings of domesticity.¹⁸¹ For Berry, Vuillard’s concern to depict the daily activities of the important women in his life is carried out with a regard to them as “collaborators” in his artistic practice – providing him with the subject matter and financial support to paint – and a desire to relate to them emotionally.¹⁸² Like his friend, Bonnard also had a strong female support network and it seems he sought to recognise this positive influence in these paintings; two of these important women were his sister Andrée Terrasse and Madame Mertzdorff, the two figures portrayed in The Lamp. It had been Madame Mertzdorff who had encouraged the young Bonnard to paint when his father had insisted that he carry on with his examinations to become a lawyer.¹⁸³

In this sense, paintings such as The Lamp provide a contrast to the artist’s other work from the same period like Man and Woman with their sexualised vision of womanhood, produced very much with a male audience in mind. These two strikingly different ways of portraying women in fact reflect the situation of Bonnard’s life at the time, The Lamp representing the artist’s conventional family life, and Man and Woman disclosing his more secretive, sexual existence with his lover Marthe. While Bonnard’s family knew that he lived out of wedlock with Marthe, middle-class respectability ensured these two worlds were kept somewhat apart from one another.¹⁸⁴ The fate of each painting bears this out; while the familial scene was put straight on the market, the depiction of a sexual encounter was only sold privately to Natanson, one of

¹⁸¹ Francesca Berry, ‘Curating Madame Vuillard’ in Midland Art Papers (2018/19), 4.
¹⁸² Ibid.
¹⁸⁴ Whitfield, 27.
Bonnard’s confidants.

*Life, death and rebirth*

Despite the difference in the way women are portrayed in Bonnard’s family scenes compared to works like *Man and Woman*, one thing that these paintings all have in common is the way that the everyday subject matter in these scenes is used to present the viewer with existential themes of universal relevance. This can be seen in *Grandmother and Child*, where Bonnard captures an ordinary moment in the lives of those close to him and transforms it into an image that conveys the immutable passage of time which affects all of humanity. On the left, rendered almost completely in black, Madame Mertzdorff disappears into the dark background, her face only partially revealed from the light of the lamp above the table. In complete contrast to this shadowy presence, the body of the child glows under the lamp, producing a dialogue with the figure of the woman, recording the trajectory from birth to death and from innocence to experience.

This is also the dominant theme in *The Lamp* where the figures depicting Bonnard’s sister Andrée Terrasse and her son Charles on the left, and Madame Mertzdorff on the right, combine to produce an allegory depicting the cycle of life. The chiaroscuro effect deployed by the artist renders the family matriarch in almost complete darkness, with only her hands receiving any light from the lamp depicted in the foreground. However, presented with the image of the lamp, the viewer is encouraged to examine it closely, unveiling the final revelation of the painting: the family are reflected in its globe, reversed and suspended in time. Contrary to the scene depicted in *Grandmother and Child*, the suggestion of death is ultimately conquered with the reflection of the scene that is trapped in the lamp, which presents an image of life renewed; the elderly woman is now brightly lit on the left-hand side, mimicking the mother and child. This alternative representation of the scene that the artist places within the composition announces
that time has been brought to a stop, rectifying the contingency of the everyday with a vision of permanence.

Rather than attempting to salvage a set of ideals from the past, like Denis, in focusing on the contingent nature of transitory existence, Bonnard accepts the uncertainty of the future, facing it head on. Even in a more ebullient painting like *A Bourgeois Afternoon*, produced during this same period, Bonnard betrays a fascination with the process of ageing, as evidenced in the comparison between the young lady and the old women both kissing children. For Bonnard therefore, youth does not represent an ideal that can be held on to and cherished, but is merely a phase that will end in old age and eventually death, a fate that awaits everything; as God tells Adam: “[For] dust you are, and to dust shall you return.”185 Within their lifetimes, Bonnard and Denis would be witness to both the decline in influence of the Catholic Church in France and the even more cataclysmic event of the destruction of the Third Republic.

Nonetheless, there is a more hopeful message in the symbolic content of these paintings. Although nothing stands still, as some might have wished, the cycle of life does allow for what has passed to be renewed and for what has died to be born again; as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus famously said of the phenomenal world: “Everything gives way and nothing is stable.” In *Grandmother and Child*, the notion of a continuous, yet renewable flux is provided in the depiction of the child who will inherit the values of Madame Mertzdorff. The suggestion of everything being born again is even more powerful in *The Lamp*, with the grandmother and child swapping sides in the reflection of themselves contained in the lamp’s globe, both of whom are now brightly lit within the ignited paraffin.

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185 *Genesis*, 50.
As with *The Lamp*, in *Man and Woman* as well, the everyday becomes allegory as Bonnard fashions his characters so that they represent fundamental aspects of existence. However, the contrasting relationships between the different figures is significant in interpreting both paintings; Madame Mertzdorff and the man can be seen to represent experience and physical decline or death, while the children and the other women represent innocence and health. These polarities are further enhanced in both pictures by the use of a commonplace household item, a lamp and a screen respectively, pushed to the foreground in each work, dividing them into two distinct halves that encourages the viewer into making comparisons between the figures on either side. While the lamp in the earlier painting is used as a device to throw its gaze onto the child and his mother, leaving the grandmother in almost complete darkness, the screen plays a similar role in *Man and Woman*, this time almost totally cutting off the light from reaching the figure of ‘Adam’, leaving him in shadow and accentuating ‘Eve’s’ radiance. By distributing and concealing light, the lamp and the screen transform the pictures from depictions of daily life into allegories. In fact, if the prosaic title for *The Lamp* was renamed *Life and Death*, then *Man and Woman* could equally be given the title *The Screen*.

In *Man and Woman*, Bonnard also charts humanity’s transformation from innocence to experience and finally to death, using the screen as an emblem that delineates this passage of time. As with THE other ordinary items of furniture, like the lamp and curtains, Bonnard seems to have been drawn to the symbolic potential of the folding screen, with its capacity to reveal, as well as to conceal; its function as a means of providing a level of discretion in the bedroom makes it a perfect device to transform the depiction of the post-coital scene into the Garden of Eden. Accordingly, the screen not only enables Bonnard to contrast the different attributes of the two lovers, but its separation of the room into distinct sections reveals that there are two separate worlds within the same space: before and after the Fall. For Augustine, the Creation myth’s portrayal of this transition, from blissful ignorance to shameful self-awareness and
expulsion from the Garden, is a metaphor for the three fundamental experiences in life: childhood, sexual awakening in adulthood and finally death.\footnote{Elaine Pagels, \textit{Adam, Eve, and the Serpent} (London: Penguin Random House, 1990), 139-40.}

Starting on the left with the depiction of the woman playing with the cats, Bonnard conveys in her a sense of abandon, capturing in this one figure an image of how both Adam and Eve are represented in the scriptures before the Fall. However, by the time we reach the figure of the man on the right-hand side, the postlapsarian transformation of humankind has occurred, the towel he holds betraying the shame he feels because of his nakedness and because of the lust he feels for the woman. According to Augustine, this sexual awakening, or “stirring of the flesh”, was a direct result of humanity’s transgression, indicating how far the race had removed itself from the grace of God, who in turn punishes mankind with death.\footnote{Augustine, 555.} Indeed, Bonnard’s painting exudes an atmosphere that suggests this link between death and sex. The almost skeletal rendering of Adam’s body is also arresting – perhaps a comment that, according to Genesis, Eve was created by God from one of Adam’s bones. But as well as this, it signifies the contingent nature of existence and the inescapability of death. Augustine is generally credited with popularising the concept of Original Sin, the belief that humanity’s sinful nature is passed on from generation to generation. As Adam and Eve eventually die as a direct result of their transgression, so the rest of mankind will suffer the “necessity of death... transmitted to their posterity”.\footnote{Ibid., 560.} Read from left to right, with the screen acting as an arbiter, Bonnard presents the viewer of \textit{Man and Woman} with an allegory narrating humankind’s journey from childhood to adulthood, or from a state of ignorance to one of self-awareness. However, this does not mean the painting is simplistic in its representation of the Creation story; there is a deep ambivalence in Bonnard’s presentation of both Adam and Eve, just as there is in his presentation of the
separate sexes. Whether it is the man or the woman that is really trapped is left unresolved. It is this tension captured in the relationship between the painting’s two protagonists that provides *Man and Woman* with its complex and mysterious atmosphere.

There is one final surprise to this enigmatic painting, which has not been picked up on before: although the screen divides the couple for us, it remains shut in the room, meaning that the lovers are in complete view of one another; they have not been separated after all. By dividing the painting in half, Bonnard presents the viewer with two contrasting images representing the symbiotic relationship not only between man and woman as social creatures, but also of the mind and the body. Adam and Eve are shown to be an “outward expression to something that is inward”, as Kierkegaard aptly describes the myth. Nevertheless, despite Bonnard’s use of an everyday occurrence to present us with this timeless theme, in capturing this fleeting moment of transition from the particular to the universal, the artist also comments on the passing of time itself; once the man puts the towel down, the spell will be broken, returning everything to its original, prosaic state. It is in the instant then that the different levels of the painting, both its naturalist setting and its symbolic themes, are held together in one cohesive image.

*Conclusion*

In this concluding chapter of Part One, I have focussed on the ways in which the work Bonnard produced towards the end of the 1890s deals with the social and political issues of the period. In particular, I have dealt with the ways in which the artist portrays women in his work; both his depiction of the female body seen in the context of a gradually empowered female population, and his celebration of the family as a centre of feminine virtue. But I have also examined the ways in which Bonnard’s aesthetic ideas can be seen in opposition to those

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expounded by political traditionalists such as Denis and Mithouard.

Nevertheless, while such factors are important in understanding paintings such as *Man and Woman*, I have continued to argue that the material of the everyday contemporary world that makes up these scenes is used by Bonnard in his project to present themes that he understood as of a more universal and timeless nature. Not only does Bonnard make reference to ancient and Biblical myths in such paintings, but he also uses the imagery to examine the very nature of existence and what it means to be human.

In Part Two of this thesis, the individual’s relationship with an objective world beyond their own body will be examined in greater depth, demonstrating that this integral theme in *Man and Woman* continued to fascinate Bonnard. Once again, it will be within the setting of an intimate space that the paintings explored in the next chapter exhibit this relationship, using an arena of cohabitation and direct contact to express something universal. It is in this sense that the Symbolist enterprise Bonnard developed in his work over the period the first part of this thesis has covered continued to be the primary motivating factor in his subsequent oeuvre. The tensions that are evident in *Man and Woman* would persist to some extent; many of the paintings analysed in Part Three re-examine humankind’s relationship with nature through the guise of the female nude, images that once again pit the individual against the ‘other’. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, *Man and Woman* both looks backwards and forwards, and this is also true in respect to what it can tell us about Bonnard’s career: it is a painting that can be seen as a manifesto, portraying in one image many of the themes that had stimulated the artist over previous ten years, as well as paving the way for the work that was yet to come.
Part Two
Chapter Three: A Vast Intimacy

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall turn my attention away from the work Bonnard produced in the first decade of his career, and instead focus on a number of paintings produced over the course of the first half of the twentieth century depicting the dining rooms of various different houses. In analysing this body of work covering a relatively long period of time, around forty years or so, I hope to reinforce a contention of this thesis that Bonnard continued to be motivated by the same aesthetic concerns that he had acquired as a young man when he was involved in Symbolist circles. This chapter will nevertheless demonstrate that Bonnard also strived to develop new strategies in which to convey his objectives as an artist.

The chapter begins by looking at how Bonnard was especially interested in painting dining rooms with a view out onto nature, allowing him to present a space where the indoors and the outdoors meet. Rather than demarcating indoors and outdoors however, Bonnard fuses them together, the light pouring in from outside providing the room with an atmosphere as every bit as mesmerising as the natural world beyond. While on the surface, these paintings might appear to represent the ordinariness of day-to-day life, it will be demonstrated that it is precisely within the context of the domestic interior that Bonnard is able to transform the material of the everyday into a vision of beauty.

In order to appreciate how Bonnard achieves this, I shall analyse his artistic practice leading up to the conception of a painting, a process that is revealing, as it demonstrates how an engagement with the world around him was vital for him to perceive the moments of beauty he wished to preserve in his work. It will be seen that drawing became particularly important for Bonnard sometime during the 1910s, as a means in which to quickly get down on paper
something he had seen that formed the “initial idea” of what he would eventually paint. Particular regard will also be paid to Bonnard’s insistence that he “dreams” while thinking about what it is he will paint. I argue that such a claim should be understood in terms of the Symbolist notion of “dreaming”, a creative process between lucidity and sleep in which the artist partially relinquishes a sense of control of their mental faculties so that their imagination can be free to conceive of new ideas and images.

In emphasising the importance of this notion of the dream, it is my contention that, when looking at a painting by Bonnard, we are faced with an image formed primarily in the imagination that is not an attempt to describe something material that exists or has existed in the visible world. The analysis provided in the current chapter is therefore in at odds with other recent discussions of Bonnard’s work that claim his paintings are depictions of memory. Although I view the process of memory as an important aspect of Bonnard’s artistic practice, it is my contention that the image the viewer is presented with is both unique and new.

Following on from this analysis of Bonnard’s artistic practice and the ontology of the image, I shall argue that the often idiosyncratic way in which the artist presents the contents of these pictures is best understood if they are seen to depict a “poetic instant”, a form of expression that Bachelard has demonstrated is typically used by Symbolists. In suspending time in this fashion, we shall see that Bonnard is able to use these representations of seemingly everyday occurrences in order to bring to attention to something new and unexpected about them.

The chapter will conclude by looking at how Bonnard continued to develop new strategies in the 1930s in order to convey the same themes discussed above. While some critics have seen Bonnard’s work as moving towards a form of abstraction in this period, I shall argue that a depiction of an individual’s engagement with the physical world remained very much at the
A room with a view

Depictions of domestic interiors first began to appear in Bonnard’s work in the 1890s [fig. 44] and the subject continued to absorb the artist over the course of his life, dominating his output after the first decade of the twentieth century as his interest in depicting modern urban life began to gradually subside. Bonnard was particularly interested in seemingly everyday, unremarkable situations that take place in the environs of communal living spaces, especially those that are situated around a dining table. Following the purchase in 1912 of a countryside retreat christened ‘Ma Roulotte’ (‘my caravan’), Bonnard was able to use the design of the house’s dining room, with its door and large window opening out onto the Normandy countryside, as the focal point for a series of paintings he would produce over the next fifteen years or so. He appears to have been particularly struck by both the pictorial and symbolic potential in depicting the corner of this room, the layout of which both shelters the viewer but also allows the light from outside to radiate indoors. For instance, in a number of paintings that Bonnard produced in the 1920s specifically focussing on this section of the room [fig. 45 and fig. 46], the artist captures how the light coming in through the door permeates the interior space, filling it with colours which ignite the room with the same intensity as the natural scene outside. Depicting both the indoors and outdoors together in this way became, as we shall see, the perfect pictorial foil for Bonnard to introduce more universal themes into the these everyday scenes of daily existence.

Bonnard’s fascination with spaces where the world outside filters indoors is evident in a study [fig. 47] that he prepared when working on the large-scale painting completed in 1913 called Dining Room in the Country. Drawn to the corner of the room, Bonnard discovered an enclosure in which the individual is protected within the structure of the house, allowing the mind to
dream in the warm light that bursts in from the world outside. The imagery in paintings such as *Dining Room in the Country*, where the indoors is juxtaposed with the outdoors, is therefore analogous with Bonnard’s depiction of the internalised mind of the individual existing harmoniously within a vast and expansive universe. This desire to produce a scene from everyday life that manifests on the canvas as a synthesis of reality and dream or, as the artist himself put it, “attains to the universal”, also bespeaks Bonnard’s continued adherence to Symbolist objectives. So, while the subject matter of *Dining Room in the Country* might appear at first to be nothing out of the ordinary, it is precisely within this everyday context that Bonnard signifies the ability of the imagination to transform the contingent data of everyday appearances into something pertaining to what Bonnard often referred to as ‘beauty’.

For instance, in *Dining Room in the Country*, Bonnard presents the intimate corner of the room as an expansive, decorative space, covering the entire canvas from the wall on the left to the chair below the open window on the right. Instead of depicting a contrast between interior and exterior, the flat, continuous background produces a harmonious combination of both worlds; while the room shares in the atmosphere of the light from outside, the natural world is reimagined within the structural setting of the intimate domestic space. An integral component of this fusion of interior and exterior is the depiction of the table in the bottom left, the arch of its edge prompting the rest of the picture to bend around it, producing the effect that both the room and the scenery outside envelops around an imagined body outside the confines of the picture. Therefore, rather than depicting the corner of the room realistically with an incisive, geometric angle, Bonnard softens its contours, transforming it into a curve that is suggestive of a space that shelters and protects the individual. This qualitative distortion of the space depicted in *Dining Room in the Country* indicates that the image is an imaginative rather than a

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190 “By the seduction, the initial conception, the painter attains to the universal.” Quoted in Hyman, 98.
The ‘initial idea’

The numerous preparatory sketches that Bonnard made ahead of painting Dining Room in the Country indicates that it was a picture he was particularly invested in at the time, no doubt at least partly due to his decision to produce something that he could exhibit at the 1913 Salon. The emphasis the artist places on concentrating on a different area of the room in each drawing reveals how several sketches could be used to spark ideas that would be brought together in the eventual painting. Moreover, the inclusion of new visual elements that do not appear in the preparatory drawings, as well as the exclusion of objects that do, highlights that it was not a simple case of transcribing the sketch onto the canvas. In one of these drawings [fig. 48], only the basic structure of what would eventually appear in Dining Room in the Country is included, while the apparently hastily applied pencil marks are testament to the artist’s practice of taking down as quickly as possible an image that he found appealing. These sketches encompass what, as we shall see below, the artist refers to as the “initial idea”, depicting not only what he observes in the world around him, but also articulating through their expressiveness the emotional pull that he first felt when confronted with something which caught his attention. In an interview with the journalist Ingrid Rydbeck in 1937, Bonnard explained: “I make these sketches outside, as soon as I find a light effect, a landscape, or an atmosphere that seizes me ... It is a question of noting down as soon as possible what struck you”.

191 Discussing the difference between a critical response and an imaginative response to the corner of a room, Bachelard writes: “Why is it worse for us to say that an angle is cold and a curve warm? That the curve welcomes us and the over-sharp angle rejects us ... [The] beloved curve has nest-like powers; it incites us to possession, it is a curved ‘corner’, inhabited geometry.” Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, 165.


193 “Je fais ces esquisses dehors, dès que je trouve un effet de lumière, un paysage ou une atmosphère qui me saisit ... Il s’agit de noter aussitôt que possible ce qui vous a frappé.” Quoted in Ingrid Rydbeck, ‘Chez Bonnard à Deuville’, Konstrevy, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1937). Reprinted in Bonnard, Les Exigences de l’émotion, 50. Own translation.
Following a crisis concerning his work in around 1913, Bonnard claimed that it had been drawing in particular that had enabled him to improve on a sense of structure in his paintings. Drawing had always been an important part of Bonnard’s artistic practice, a means to quickly capture in his notebook anything out of the ordinary that caught his attention, from seemingly innocuous and fleeting moments such as a chance grouping of colours or an interesting effect of light, to more momentous ‘epiphanies’ like the sudden recognition of a familiar person or place. From 1913 onwards, Bonnard began to rely on this aspect of his artistic practice more heavily. What appears to have changed is that he now placed more trust in his ability to record his ‘sensations’ in front of the motif, allowing him to depend less on using colour to carry the emotional charge of the painting; colour would instead be used to provide a structure, part of the decorative design, that is intentionally ignored by the artist in his initial sketch. Reversing the traditional roles of drawing and colour, Bonnard insisted, for himself at least, that: “Colour is more reasoned than drawing.”194 Using colour in order to “reason” became a means to privilege the overall decorative design, so that the patterns and arrangements in the image, which do not exist in nature itself, now come to the fore; in other words, the painting depicts a world that has had its structure imposed onto it by the artist.

This renewed concern to organise the composition of the picture in order to express a sense of coherence became a pivotal process in Bonnard’s overall artistic practice, incorporating into the picture a structure that could communicate something more significant than the sum of its parts. As discussed in the first chapter, from early on in his career in paintings such as Twilight, Bonnard had used the representation of the instant in his work as a way to create meaning out of the seemingly contingent. However, in paintings such as Twilight, the imagery producing these ‘epiphanies’ is more often than not represented in a specific area of the picture, giving the

194 “Le coeur se raisonne plus que le dessin.” Bonnard, Observations sur la peinture, 57.
appearance that it is self-contained and does not disturb the rest of the image. But once Bonnard began to concentrate more fully on the pictorial structure of the work, the instant became ingrained into every aspect of the image; put simply, the painting as a whole became an expression of a moment removed from the continuity of time.

It therefore became crucial for Bonnard to transcribe onto a piece of paper the ‘initial idea’ the moment he was seized by it, while its memory was still fresh in his mind. What is also clear is that Bonnard, who described such instants as a “shock to consciousness”, did not actively seek out these moments, but was always prepared in case he encountered something that would spur his creative imagination. This might be a chance meeting in the street or a sudden and intuitively felt connection to nature due to a memory associated with a specific place. Explaining this to the art critic Angèle Lamotte in 1943, Bonnard said:

> Often, I will see interesting things around me, but for me to want to paint them, they must have a particular seduction [for me] - beauty - what we can call beauty. I paint them trying not to lose sight of the initial idea; I am weak and if I let myself go … after a while, I will have lost the initial vision ...

In describing these fleeting moments in terms of “beauty”, Bonnard connects the seemingly accidental with something more remarkable and enduring. When encountered, they momentarily remove the individual from the here and now, briefly producing a feeling that there exists a correspondence between the immensity of a vast and otherwise inconceivable universe and the inner world of the observer.

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195. “The most important thing is to remember what most impressed you, and to note it down as quickly as possible.” Bonnard quoted in Hyman, 100.


It is therefore apparent that the initial idea sketched from nature represented for Bonnard a culmination of what he describes as an “intelligent” way of looking at one’s environment, a transcription of something momentary, but which nevertheless contains within it a promise of the “universal”. It is in this respect that Bonnard would claim that nature could reveal to the observer a glimpse of beauty, but only through a prolonged and patient engagement with it, a process he described as “the fulfilment of vision.” Hyman has rightly drawn parallels between this feature of Bonnard’s artistic practice with the Impressionists’ aspiration to record their ‘sensations’. According to Hyman, in isolating this particular procedure, Bonnard was able to respond in the painting to the initial idea without being “enslaved by naturalism”. In the interview with Lamotte, Bonnard claims to have tried to paint from life, but been so absorbed in the details of the objects before him that he had lost the thread of the original concept.

While the sketches Bonnard produced en plein air demonstrate the influence Impressionism had on him, his fear that the physical facticity of the motif or object that first attracted his attention could overpower the initial idea emphasises his continued determination to distinguish the artwork from nature by relying primarily on his imagination. In the following sections, I shall interrogate what this imaginative process entails in terms of Bonnard’s artistic practice, particularly at how memory and dream play a role in the conception of an image. This will eventually lead to a critique of the widely held view that the image itself is a depiction of a memory, an interpretation, it will be argued, which fails to take into account the more inventive process of dreaming.

199 Bonnard, Observations sur la peintre, 30.
200 Hyman, 98.
201 Hyman, 100.
202 Lamotte, 77.
Painting from memory

In contrast to the preliminary sketch, which was executed “as quickly as possible”, the subsequent act of painting for Bonnard was a far more meditative and gradual process, producing a picture that was not impulsive but reasoned, therefore adhering to what he termed as the “laws of the surface of the canvas”. Adamant that art should not be merely a copy of nature, Bonnard removed himself from the motif so that the final articulation of the idea emerged not from life but from his imagination. This self-imposed removal away from the motif made it necessary for Bonnard to use his memory so he could recall what it was about the initial idea that had first struck him, re-experiencing it in his mind before transposing it onto the canvas. Had he remained in the presence of subject he was painting, the eventual picture risked becoming a copy from nature, substituting what was supposed to represent an emotional response to the motif with descriptive reportage. Speaking to his nephew Charles Terrasse in the 1920s, Bonnard admitted to feeling weak when in direct contact with the subjects he painted. He said:

*It is the seduction which determines the choice of motif, and corresponds exactly to the final painting. If this seduction, this initial conception vanishes, all that remains is the motif, the object, which invades and dominates the painter. With some artists, Titian for example, this seduction is so strong that it never forsakes them, even if they remain in contact with the motif for long periods. But I am very weak, and it is difficult for me to keep control in the presence of the object…*  

The sketches for *Dining Room in the Country* were therefore used as aids to stir a memory or feeling, allowing Bonnard to revisit in his mind the emotional space that he wished to present in the picture. He would then begin the process of infusing into the image the harmonies and

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204 Bonnard made many statements purporting to this belief. For instance, he wrote in his notebook on January 22, 1934: “La fausseté c’est de découper un morceau de nature et le copier.” *Ibid.*, 33.

205 Quoted in Hyman, 98-100.

206 Given that few of Bonnard’s sketches were either exhibited or sold in his lifetime (Hyman, p. 102), it is unclear whether Bonnard considered them as artworks in their own right or merely as aids to help him capture the initial idea.
patterns that impose onto the represented scene an intervention from the intellect, replacing the dissonance of the original sketch made from nature with an imagined sonorous value. For instance, the bright reds and oranges in the composition are made to seem even more intense in the way that they contrast with the blues and violets, producing a heightened atmosphere that conveys the emotional “shock” experienced in the instant. Moreover, using the interaction between the interior and the exterior in particular, the image refuses to conform to the facticity of the original setting, instead existing in a ‘watertight’ rationale of its own. It is in this manner that the door and the table have been rendered with the same pale blues and greens as the sky outside, while the red and orange that dominates the room escapes through the window in the form of the dress worn by the a woman leaning on the frame. In the interiors Bonnard would produce in the following decade, discussed towards the end of this chapter, this self-contained logic inherent in the picture would be taken to even further extremes.

The inclusion of the figure of the woman, absent in the preparatory sketches, is a further testament to the way in which Bonnard uses his imagination to integrate new elements into the eventual composition, a means of expression that emboldens the decorative appeal of the image. This elaboration from the initial idea contained in the sketches is also evident in the addition to the scene of a number of objects on the table, which had been depicted as bare in the preparatory drawings; in particular, the fruit at the far end of the table mirrors in its texture and array of colours the vegetation of the countryside beyond the window, a pictorial device that reinforces the allegiance between indoors and outdoors. Even the flowers in the vase at the back of the room, prominently captured in one of the preparatory drawings [fig. 49] but now barely visible as they melt into heat of the wall, are represented in a way so that they conform to the inner harmony of the painting, their stems and petals appearing to reflect the thin trunk and leaves of the tree in the garden opposite. Such embellishment and manipulation of form, a process Bonnard would later describe as a way of surrendering to the self-contained logic of the
picture, ultimately produces an image that is a product of the imagination instead of being a faithful representation of the room. Thus, in preventing nature from dictating the way the image is presented, Bonnard is able to concentrate on devising ways to communicate the emotional appeal of the instant that had sparked the idea for the painting in the first place.

One of the consequences of this is that, whereas the shock that had provoked the initial idea is only a fleeting sensation, the painted representation of the instant as a decorative image covering every area of the canvas is slowed down, allowing the viewer to absorb it through a process of intense observation. As Yve-Alain Bois has noted, although Bonnard’s all-over composition has the effect of hitting its audience “full in the face”, the enigmatic use of imagery that the painter uses has the ability to entrap the viewer, coercing them to spend longer examining the picture. For instance, in The Dining Room, Vernonnet (1916) [fig. 50], a slightly later painting portraying the same interior in ‘Ma Roulette’ as Dining Room in the Country, a small sliver on the far right of the picture provides the viewer with just enough space to make out the landscape outside, but no opportunity through this narrow gap to escape from the image in front of them; in fact, as in the earlier painting, the flatness of the surface of the canvas is exploited in order to invert inwards the depiction of the outside so that the image folds around the viewer like a screen. Once captivated by the image in this way, the viewer is placed inside the imaginative space Bonnard has depicted and allowed free reign to slowly take in the represented instant that is suspended on the canvas.

A sense of the artist’s intoxication is similarly portrayed in Dining Room in the Country in the way the shimmering atmosphere engulfs every area of the picture, capturing the light entering

208 Various critics have discussed how the images in Bonnard’s paintings appear to be slowed down. The most succinct is the discussion by Yve-Alain Bois in his essay ‘Bonnard’s “Passivity”’ in Pagé (ed.), 53.
209 Ibid., 54.
through the open door and cascading around the room. When reaching the tablecloth, the stream of light materialises in effervescent patches of colour that seem almost as substantial as the depicted objects that they surround. But it is particularly the way in which the walls appear to glow in certain sections as the light bounces off of them that demonstrates how Bonnard is able to use such visual description to enrich the structure of the image; starting with the sliver of garden on the right of the picture and ending on the left with a combination of colourful rectangles visible beyond the shoulder of the standing figure, they form a succession of vertical bands of colour running along the horizontal plane of the picture that enhances the screen-like depiction of space. Further contributing to the overall decorative character of the painting are two sequences of brightly coloured dots running along the rim of the shelf at the back and the edge of the outer part of the door, depicting respectively the patterns on a tablecloth and the exterior brickwork of the house.

However, while in the earlier painting, a symbolic synthesis between the interior and exterior is produced in the way the luminosity of the room mirrors the depiction of the natural world outside, this possibility is curtailed in *Dining Room, Vernonnet* in the way Bonnard only allows a small portion of the garden to be seen through a narrow gap. Perhaps in this instance, Bonnard did not want the vegetation of the garden to detract from his vivid depiction of the flowers on the shelf at the back of the room, the animated colours of which provides the scene with its most striking suggestion of a mysteriousness transcending the everyday.

Because Bonnard used the familiar setting of his surroundings as the basis for the images he produced in his work, it has been surmised by one commentator that all of his paintings might have their genesis in a specific drawing made in front of the subject or motif.\footnote{Sargy Mann, ‘Pierre Bonnard: Painter of the World Seen’ in Sargy Mann and Belinda Thomson (eds.), *Bonnard at Le Bosquet* (Hayward: White Dove Press, 1994), 34.} While this
hypothesis is not strictly accurate, it is certainly true that Bonnard’s practice of capturing in pencil direct moments from his own life ensures that the image of the painting refers at least nominally to something experienced by the artist in reality;\textsuperscript{211} as he claimed himself, his subject matter was always “to hand”.\textsuperscript{212} Bonnard’s persistence in repeatedly depicting scenes taken from his private life has led to a general consensus among critics that the eventual image on the canvas is a representation of a memory.\textsuperscript{213} It is an interpretation that is often substantiated by the fact that Bonnard disliked painting in front of the subject he was portraying, as well as the often long periods between his recording of an initial idea and it being used as the basis for one of his works;\textsuperscript{214} in some instances, years would elapse before he decided to revisit the idea captured in the initial sketch. As Bois points out, although painting from memory was hardly Bonnard’s invention, he was perhaps the first artist for whom it became a decisive factor in the production of the artwork.\textsuperscript{215} However, the assumption that this aspect of Bonnard’s artistic practice is expressed in the eventual image, resulting in an interpretation that associates the picture with a visualisation of memory, is essentially reductive, as it mistakes the means or method that the artist employs for the content itself. Memory undoubtedly played a crucial role in the realisation of the eventual painting, providing an impetus for the artist to remember the moment or instant that he wished to reconfigure onto the canvas. But treating the subsequent painting as depiction that has been filtered through memory undermines its status as a new and imaginatively formed image in its own right.\textsuperscript{216}

\textsuperscript{211}According to Mann, Bonnard wore a loose fitting jacket that enabled him to always carry around on his person sheets of paper and a pencil. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212}Pierre Bonnard’, 7 Jours, No. 62 (Janvier 11, 1942), 16.
\textsuperscript{213}Examples are provided in the Introduction.
\textsuperscript{214}For instance, Bois writes: “We have plenty of Bonnard’s statements on the subject of memory. They generally begin with a comment on the reluctance – sometimes even disgust – he felt in the presence of the object to be painted … and end with the priority he accorded to the first impressions and his fear of forgetting them …”. Bois, 61.
\textsuperscript{215}Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{216}For instance, even Bois, who has made some of the most salient observations regarding Bonnard’s work, nevertheless falls into the same trap as others by interpreting the paintings as depictions of memory, writing: “[Bonnard] took an interest in visual hiccups because they seemed to him to be the best approximations of images as the memory stores and restores them: fragmentary, discontinuous, with ill-defined edges, of irregular clarity.” Ibid., 60.
As discussed in the previous chapter, like other artists who reached maturity in the French Symbolist milieu at the end of the nineteenth century, Bonnard regarded the image produced by the artist as autonomous from nature, not a copy of it. He would continue to maintain this point of view, writing in his notebook late in life: “It isn’t about painting life, it’s about making the painting alive.” It follows from this distinction between art and nature that the content of the picture represents a unique image formed in the artist’s imagination and not merely the recreation of a memory; the image Bonnard has transcribed onto the canvas is thus a completely new entity and should be treated as such.

**Dreaming images**

While Bonnard himself acknowledged the importance of memory in the realisation of an image, claiming that once he began painting he would “reflect”, most commentators have failed to appreciate that, in the same breath, the artist also asserted that he “dreams”. To understand exactly what Bonnard means when describing this creative process as a ‘dream’, it is vital that the word is placed within the context of how it had been used by French Symbolists. In a review of a Redon exhibition written in 1894, Bonnard’s sometime benefactor and lifelong friend Natanson provides us with an interesting insight into how Symbolist artists and writers might have regarded the notion of dreaming. Praising Redon’s work for its ability to convey “the dream”, Natanson goes on to consider what this imaginative process which takes place in the

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217 “Il ne s’agit pas de peindre la vie, il s’agit de rendre vivante la peinture.” Bonnard, *Observations sur la peinture*, 53. Own translation.

218 In forming this argument that distinguishes Bonnard’s paintings from representations of memory, I am largely indebted to Bachelard’s various writings on the imagination and the image. As Edward S. Kaplan has written of Bachelard’s belief that the image produced by the imagination has an autonomous integrity of its own: “The degree of creativity of imagination (as opposed to simple perception or memory) is often determined by the extent of the free elaboration of images … From Bachelard’s point of view, then, the images produced by imagination must be different from perceptual reality. The autonomy of the imagination is thus a view of imagination as other than, ontologically opposed to perception, though carrying its own ontological validity.” Edward S. Kaplan, ‘Gaston Bachelard’s Philosophy of Imagination’ in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 33. No. 1 (Sep., 1972), 4.

mind might actually entail. In doing so, he contrasts it with the “enjoyment that is the memory”, claiming that dreaming is something deeper, which allows thought to “[bath] in an imprecise atmosphere where fantasy is played out freely”.\textsuperscript{220} Given the close relationship between Bonnard and Natanson, this distinction that the latter makes between dreaming and memory might have been a topic of discussion between them. In the present section, it will be seen that the notion of dreaming as something that is “played out freely” in the mind, unconstrained by the past, has an implication in how Bonnard’s work should be viewed. It follows that the act of reflecting back on something when painting merges with the creative movement forwards – a letting go of the mental faculties in order for the imagination to dream.

Bonnard’s elocution of what takes place in his imagination when conceiving an image is similar to a claim Gauguin makes in a letter to a critic, when he says that he paints and “dreams” simultaneously.\textsuperscript{221} In doing so, Gauguin positions his own creative mind as occupying a space somewhere in between lucidity and sleep, as if he is in a state of daydreaming. As Gamboni has argued:

\begin{quote}
Gauguin’s creative ‘vagabondage’ was always accompanied by critical reflection and his mixture of control and abandon is closer to daydreaming or what Hervey de Saint-Denys called ‘lucid dreaming’: dreaming that is accompanied by an awareness that one is dreaming and that can be orientated.\textsuperscript{222}
\end{quote}

It is conceivable that this proto-psychoanalytic attempt to articulate the mind’s capacity to activate previously unconscious states of mind through dream is how the Nabis painters might have interpreted some of the imagery in Gauguin’s paintings,\textsuperscript{223} such as the portrayal in Vision

\textsuperscript{220} Plus profondément que dans la jouissance qu’est le souvenir de nos sensations, la pensée se complait encore à baigner dans une atmosphère imprécise où sa fantaisie peut se jouer librement ...” Thadée Natanson, ‘Expositions’, \textit{La Revue blanche}, Tome VI (Premier Semestre 1894), Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1969, 470-1. Own translation.

\textsuperscript{221} “And all this sings with sadness in my soul and in my design while I paint and dream at the same time with no tangible allegory within my reach – due perhaps to a lack of literary education.” Extract of a letter from Paul Gauguin to André Fontainas, March, 1899, reprinted in full in Belinda Thomson (ed.), \textit{Gauguin by Himself} (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000) 262-3. Tr. Belinda Thomson.

\textsuperscript{222} Gamboni, \textit{Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought}, 120.

\textsuperscript{223} In the early twentieth century, the psychoanalyst Carl Jung would posit the theory that dreams are “communications from the unconscious”. Anthony Storr, ‘Introduction’ in Carl Jung, \textit{The Essential Jung: Selected Writings} (London:
of the Sermon of an apparition that appears not only to members of the congregation who are praying, but is also experienced by a woman depicted with her eyes open; in other words, an image that manifests in a space between sleep and lucidity. At the very least, these young artists who initially looked to Gauguin for guidance had been impressed by the oneiric suggestiveness of his imagery, wishing to emulate this with their own work.

While it was the dreamlike paintings of Gauguin that first made an impression on the young Bonnard, it appears that it was Redon who would have a more long-lasting influence on him in this regard, providing a model for how nature could be depicted so as to convey a dreamlike aura. As early as 1890, before Redon had begun to fully embrace the intense colour and decorative technique then associated with Gauguin and his acolytes, Aurier had already named him as one of the principal figures that the younger generation looked up to.224 Whereas Gauguin as the self-appointed figurehead for these younger artists cultivated an image that often came across as austere and aloof even to those he was closest to,225 Redon appears to have cast himself in the role of the benevolent elder statesman, exuding a warmth and approachability that Denis would capture in the depiction of him in Homage à Cézanne. Bonnard was particularly close to Redon during the 1890s, later recalling that, like many others, he “fell for his charm and received his advice”.226

Redon’s work would continue to be associated with dreams, even when he began to produce a more conventional series depicting flowers at the beginning of the twentieth century.227

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225 Solana, 63.
227 One unnamed critic wrote in 1905: “M. Odilon Redon is a painter of flowers as they are seen in dreams.” Quoted in Maryanne Stevens, ‘Redon’s Artistic and Critical Position’ in Douglas W. Druick (ed.), 297.
paintings which appear to have particularly captivated Bonnard who owned one of them. In *Vase of Flowers* (c.1900-10) [fig. 51] for instance, while the rapturous colours Redon employs to depict the petals can be seen to pay homage to the beauty of nature, Symbolist critics at the time also interpreted imagery such as this as an allusion to something more mysterious, lurking beyond the representation of the material substance. For many decades, Redon had on the whole tended to avoid both the depiction of nature and the use of colour in his work, as he forged a reputation with numerous black and white lithographs that portray religious or esoteric themes. Although in the 1890s he drastically broadened his palette and began a series of portraits that incorporated depictions of flowers, it was not until the following decade that still-life painting and landscapes became regular fixtures in his work, a development that led some critics to question whether he had embraced a naturalist aesthetic. But although Redon was praised in some quarters for having apparently abandoned the obscure themes of his previous work, Symbolist critics such as Gabriel Mourey (1865-1943), knowing that he had used colour to present the inner world of the sitters depicted in his 1890s portraits for instance, recognised the non-literal significance embedded within the prosaic subject matter of these paintings. In fact, the complex relationship between the real and the fantastical portrayed in Redon’s still-life paintings, an ambiguity that eluded many of his contemporaries, was precisely what Bonnard found so appealing in them, an admiration he expressed in 1912, when he wrote that the older artist’s work “combines two almost opposite qualities: very pure physical matter and very mysterious expression.”

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229 For instance, writing in 1903, Bernard claimed: “[Whatever] reality he proposes to copy scrupulously he transforms … in order to signify even more than he himself could have foreseen”. Quoted in Stevens, ‘The Transformation of the Symbolist Aesthetic’, 204.
230 Redon never completely abandoned colour following his formative years, but his works in black and white overwhelmingly outweighed in quantity these other pictures until the 1890s. Stevens, ‘Redon’s Artistic and Critical Position’, 282.
231 Ibid., 295.
232 Ibid.
233 Ibid., 297.
234 “Ce qui me frappe le plus dans son œuvre, c’est la réunion de deux qualities presque opposées: la matière plastique très pure et l’expression très mystérieuse.” Bonnard quoted in Bonnard, ‘Hommage à Odilon Redon’, 32. Own
of the colourful and exotic flower petals evoking equally the beauty of nature and a dreamlike apparition, Bonnard achieves the same synthesis that he had praised in Redon’s work. In regards to his flower paintings especially, Redon echoed Gauguin in declaring he had achieved a balance between the conscious mind and the unconscious,\(^{235}\) thus linking the conception of such paintings with the reveries or daydreams activated in the imagination.\(^{236}\) It is in this way that Bonnard shared with Redon a fascination with the material world as a means to stimulate their imagination and unleash the infinite poetic possibilities of reality. For Symbolist artists such as Bonnard, the term dream therefore encapsulated an activity that takes place in the imagination when conceiving of an image that would capture something hidden beyond the world of appearances, as well as the subsequent articulation of this onto the canvas.

‘Repetition’

As I have argued above, describing a painting as a depiction of a memory implies that its content merely echoes a moment that has since passed, weakening its status an individual entity in its own right. In fact, paintings such as *Dining Room in the Country* that depict the artist’s immediate surroundings rely on both memory and the imaginative process of dreaming so that a moment experienced is reconfigured as an image that, being distinct from the preliminary drawing, represents something new. This means that, although the image might relate to a past event that was captured in the sketch, it nevertheless maintains its integrity as something autonomous and unique. The process of dreaming that took place in Bonnard’s imagination when formulating an image thus denotes an *action*, a movement forwards, away from what has

\(^{235}\) Stevens, ‘Redon’s Artistic and Critical Position’, 287.

\(^{236}\) This was how the use of dream in Redon’s work was understood by Charles Morice, when he wrote in a 1885 review of the artist’s lithographs: “Monsieur Redon’s dream … Let us be clear! The meaning to be attributed to the word *Dream* is not the vulgar or prose meaning (the fatal visions of sleep), nor the rarer meaning of poetry (voluntary visions in the waking state); it is both this and that, waking and sleeping, it is strictly speaking the dream of a dream: the willful ordering of fatal visions.” Quoted in Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought*, 121.
been to what is now present. It would be more accurate, I believe, to describe the image of the picture as a ‘repetition’, a term that captures more fully the way in which, as a materialisation of something new but based on a recollection, its presentation on the canvas moves in the opposite direction to that of memory. Kierkegaard captures the nuance in describing something as a repetition, when he writes: “The dialectic of repetition is easy, because that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, that is has been, makes repetition something new.” It is this dynamic characteristic of the image that makes it an expression of ‘time regained’, furnishing an ostensibly ordinary scene with a renewed intensity. In this way, the image can be seen in the terms set out by Bachelard, in which “as soon as art has become autonomous, it makes a fresh start.”

Bonnard’s use of his imagination to produce a fresh image can be seen by comparing The Table (1925) [fig. 52], another of his interior scenes, with a drawing [fig. 53] that is believed to be the primary source for the painting. While the drawing is relatively conventional in terms of its treatment of perspective, Bonnard sketch appears to have been directed in particular at recording the intensity of the light shining onto the contents of the table, presenting these commonplace objects in a mysterious atmosphere, a motif that we might presume provided him with the “initial idea”. In the subsequent painting, Bonnard ensures that this particular theme which first “seduced” him is made more explicit by adjusting the point of view so the depiction of the table, now tilted upwards, is in a central position and closer to the surface of the canvas, thus exaggerating what was only subtly conveyed in the original drawing. The light coming from

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238 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 16. It is also worth repeating a statement made by the artist Charles Lapicque [1898-1988] that Bachelard quotes in *The Poetics of Space*, given its similarities to the argument I am making about the aims of Bonnard’s artistic practice. Lapicque says: “Not for a second can there be any question of reproducing exactly a spectacle that is already in the past. But I have to re-live it entirely, in a manner that is new and, this time, from the standpoint of painting. By doing this, I create for myself the possibility of a fresh impact.” Quoted in Ibid., 17.
the lamp at the top of the picture is also made to shine directly onto the contents of the table below, providing them with a presence that they otherwise lack when treated in real time as mere incidental objects. Portrayed in this new context, the objects on the table are brought to the attention of the viewer, who can now appreciate them in a way that would not be possible in everyday experience. The fleeting moment that originally peaked Bonnard’s interest is thus resurrected, or repeated, in the form of what I describe in the following section as a “poetic instant”. Now permanently fixed within the parameters of the canvas, Bonnard can convey to the viewer the same sense of exhilaration, or even bewilderment, that he had experienced in the first instance, repeating the emotional shock that provided him with the initial idea.

**The “poetic instant”**

Turning our attention once again to *Dining Room, Vernonnet*, one of the most interesting aspects of the painting, I believe, is Bonnard’s representation of the two figures in the room; although the figure standing appears to be placing an object on the table in front of the woman who is sitting down – suggesting a level of interaction – the stone-like countenance they both exhibit simultaneously produces the impression that they are unaware of each other’s presence. In this section of the chapter, I shall analyse the idiosyncratic use of imagery in Bonnard’s work such as this one, arguing that they are better understood if they are recognised as representations of what Bachelard has described as the “poetic instant”, the portrayal – in this instance on the canvas – of a single moment encapsulating a “harmonic relationship between opposites”.  

Bachelard observes that in the work of Symbolist poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé, instead of allowing time to unfold through a narrative, it is a description of an instant that forms the basis of the imagery that is relayed to the reader. According to Bachelard, the poetic

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240 Bachelard says of Baudelaire, for example: “For poets who realise the instant with such ease, the poem does not
instant is an articulation of ‘vertical time’, which surges up, cutting through the duration of horizontal time,\textsuperscript{241} vanquishing both plot and narrative.\textsuperscript{242} The world when seen through an image that depicts vertical time is thus an unfamiliar one, as it lacks a sense of coherency that is usually resolved through the very causality that it has brought to a halt. This means that, instead of producing a conventional representation that can be easily understood, the poetic instant is distinguished by the ambiguities and seeming contradictions it unites within one image.\textsuperscript{243}

In recognising the scene presented in \textit{The Dining Room, Vernonnet} as a poetic instant, it becomes clearer that Bonnard’s use of imagery, such as the stunted dialogue between the two figures, is intended to suppress any suggestion of a narrative that would disturb the picture’s overall encapsulation of a moment in time. Therefore, while the woman depicted standing up would appear to be in the process of placing something onto the table in front of her counterpart, the lack of a reaction portrayed through the stone-like countenance of this other figure prevents the viewer from grasping a sense that time is unfolding within the image; instead, the scene is frozen at a point that betrays the ambiguities inherent in the instant. Once this has been appreciated, one of Bonnard’s statements about wishing to convey in his paintings what one sees when on enters a room “all of a sudden”\textsuperscript{244} – sometimes construed by critics as a reference to the gradual process of recognition during perception –\textsuperscript{245} can in fact be interpreted as

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\item\textsuperscript{241} Originally postulated as a critique of Bergsonian ‘duration’, Bachelard’s concept of the instant as formulated in \textit{Intuition of the Instant} (1932) is described as a disruption to continuous time that is experienced on an individual level as a form of shock to the system. This has obvious similarities with Bonnard’s pursuit of the “initial idea” discussed earlier in this chapter. For more on Bachelard’s theory of time, see Edward S. Casey, ‘The Difference an Instant Makes: Bachelard’s Brilliant Breakthrough’, \textit{Philosophy Today} 47 (2003), 118-23.
\item\textsuperscript{242} “Every true poem can reveal the elements of suspended time, meterless time – a time we shall call \textit{vertical} in order to distinguish it from everyday time, which sweeps along horizontally with the streaming waters and the blowing winds.” Bachelard, ‘Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant’, 58.
\item\textsuperscript{243} “Confronted by successive antitheses of ordinary time, the poet refuses to comply; she resists the tyranny of chronological sequencing by transmuting antithesis into ‘ambivalence’.” Richard Kearney, ‘Bachelard and the Epiphanic Instant’ in \textit{Philosophy Today} 52 (2008), 38.
\item\textsuperscript{244} Arland and Leymarie, 21.
\item\textsuperscript{245} For instance, Jean Clair makes the assertion that Bonnard grappled with “[how] to paint the feeling of ‘visual entirety’ that one experiences on entering a room, before one has recognised, distinguished, brought into focus and
\end{itemize}
alluding to the poetic instant; in emphasising that the room is entered “all of a sudden”, Bonnard produces an analogy that conveys the immediacy of the instant.

The comparison of the instant with what it feels like to enter a room is evoked with particular effect in *The White Tablecloth* (1925) [fig. 54], especially with the depiction of the figure on the left, who, having become aware of a third person in the room, looks up towards a space beyond the confines of the canvas where this new presence is presumably situated. Capturing this moment in which the gaze of the observer infiltrates the space depicted in the painting, the artist ensures that the information contained in the image appears all at once, producing a giddiness that amounts to the shock experienced in the instant, not the gradual cognitive realisation involved in perception. According to Bachelard, the disruption of continuity that is expressed in the poetic instant affords its author the opportunity to reveal correspondences and patterns between ostensibly dispirit entities, which would otherwise have remained concealed within the durational cycle of time. So, while the instant encountered in reality disintegrates almost immediately, its transformation into an enduring image on the canvas allows the viewer of the painting to appreciate it in its entirety. Having expelled from the imagery the causality that is implicit within narrative, Bonnard can give full expression in *The White Tablecloth* to the instant. The scene represented is thus simultaneously an image of something that is both familiar and foreign, the everyday restated in a new and unexpected way.

As the philosopher Edward S. Casey has said of such moments: “[What] but an instant can

identified the various details, which together make this room a specific place?” Jean Clair, ““The adventures of the optic nerve”’ in Newman (ed.), 32-3. Elderfield, who claims that “[it] is unquestionable … that a quiet vision of the actual … is the base of Bonnard’s art”, also examines what this statement might mean in terms of representing perception. Elderfield, 34. Bois has also noted that Sylvester’s metaphor that Bonnard’s images appear in the same way that the world materialises after waking from sleep (Sylvester, 108-9) is a transposition of Bonnard’s remark about entering a room. Bois, 60.

246 To examine a tiny fragment of vertical time let us take, for example, Baudelaire’s poetic instant of *smiling regret* – at the very moment when night subsides and darkness stabilises, when the hours barely breathe and, already, solitude is remorse! The ambivalent poles of *smiling regret* almost touch. The slightest oscillation prompts them to exchange places. The *smiling regret* is thus one of the most sensitive ambivalences of a sensitive heart. Yet it develops more clearly within vertical time, for neither of its moments – smile or regret – precedes the other.” Bachelard, ‘Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant’, 61.
render us susceptible to the newly presented, to the unfamiliar that is drawn into the orbit of the habitual?"^{247}

**Contrasting spaces**

The scene depicted *The White Tablecloth* takes place in a different room from the one depicted in *Dining Room in the Country*, but one which was also situated in 'Ma Roulette', demonstrating how Bonnard could exploit the structure and characteristics of a space in order to express in contrasting ways the intimacy of the domestic setting. For instance, a room could be presented as luminous and expansive like a landscape, with the image enveloping the viewer, or it could be depicted as secluded and windowless, producing a more restricted and enclosed scene that has the direct and focussed characteristics of a still-life. Comparing two paintings produced within the same year can further highlight these contrasting approaches.

Returning out attention to *The Table*, the upright format of the canvas limits the view of the interior to the immediate space in front of the observer, a pictorial device that draws attention to the prominent image of the table and the objects on top of it. Using the flatness of the canvas to raise into a position almost parallel with its surface the top of the table and illuminating its contents with the depiction of the light from the lamp, Bonnard produces in this central area of the picture what has been described by Dita Amory as an image that is analogous to a separate painting, the whiteness of the cloth creating a support that frames the objects so that they appear as if in a still-life.^{248} Meanwhile, although the glow from the lamp reaches as far as the white blouse of the woman sitting at the table, the rest of the room retains a more sombre atmosphere, juxtaposing with the central light to produce the intimate mood. This contemplative character penetrating Bonnard's representation of the room is reminiscent of the

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^{247}Casey, 122.

^{248}Dita Amory, catalogue entry for *The Table* in Amory (ed.), 98.
artist’s various paintings of family scenes from the 1890s, in which the viewer is transported into a space withdrawn from the world outside.

Whereas the enclosed setting of *The Table* provides the painting with its overriding character, the same intimate environment depicted in *The Dining Room, Vernon* (1925) [fig. 55] is used by Bonnard more as a catalyst to produce an image far wider in scope. Projecting into the world outside the sense of security that the intimacy of the room provides, the artist is able to use the depiction in the latter painting to express a momentary union between the inner mind and the expansive universe. This contrast in range between the spaces depicted in *The Table* and *The Dining Room, Vernon* indicates Bonnard’s imaginative capacity to use the setting of his country retreat as a foundation in which to express two different relationships with the world around him, one that is primarily direct and hermetic and another that transcends the immediate environment portrayed.

Depictions of the different rooms in ‘Ma Roulette’, as well as views from outside portraying the terrace [fig. 56], continued to appear in Bonnard’s work until the end of the 1930s when the property was eventually sold. Nevertheless, during the final two decades of his life, Bonnard continued to depict the same themes highlighted in the previous section in interior paintings representing the various rooms of other properties such as ‘Le Bosquet’, a villa he bought in Le Cannet, a town near Cannes, in 1926. While the interiors from the early 1930s exhibit many of the same pictorial strategies that Bonnard had used previously, as the decade progressed, he began to devise new ways to convey universal themes within the context of an intimate setting, which I shall analyse in the remainder of the chapter.

*Self-reflections*

In *White Interior* (1932) [fig. 57], which depicts the first floor sitting room in ‘Le Bosquet’,
Bonnard exploits the structure of the room so that once again the space folds around an observer outside of the framework of the picture. However, despite structural similarities in this way with paintings like *The Dining Room, Vernon*, the way the space is represented in *White Interior* is more complex. For instance, almost all the features depicted at the far reaches of the room, from the fireplace on the left side to the French windows on the right, are rendered in such a way as to emphasise their geometric shape, producing a series of rectangular surfaces that connect to form the screen-like structure running along a diagonal across the canvas. Objects such as the table and the back of the chair depicted directly in front of the viewer take up most of the remaining pictorial space, leaving visible only a tiny portion of the red coloured floor connecting the foreground with the background. In fact, the way that the two triangular shapes encroach into the area at the bottom of the picture provides the painting with its most puzzling visual element: while the aperture between them creates a space allowing a view of the woman feeding a pet, it is impossible to ascertain exactly what the shape on the left is supposed to represent.

Equally as complex as *White Interior* in terms of their structure are two paintings Bonnard produced that depict the same sitting room [fig. 58 and fig. 59], in which a mirror in the right corner provides an opportunity for the artist to incorporate an image of his own face into the picture. In *Morning in Le Cannet* (1932), the depiction of this face and the back of a head can be just made out above the woman represented in the foreground, imposing into the makeup of the picture the impression that Bonnard occupies a space directly opposite her outside of the picture. While Bonnard would often use reflections in his depictions of interiors to increase the sense of depth within the space represented, *Morning in Le Cannet* provides an example of how the artist would also deploy mirrors to accentuate the flatness of the overall image. As the mirror primarily picks the flat yellow surface of the wall opposite, it is only once the depiction of the face in the background is deciphered that it becomes clear that this section of the painting
represents a reflection. Meanwhile, any depth that the view beyond the room might have provided is likewise prevented in the way the glass panes of the French windows press to the surface of the canvas the scenery outside; it is only the depiction of the woman in the foreground and the reflection of the back of her chair that are rendered in relief, introducing a sense of space into the otherwise uniform flatness of the image.

In The Breakfast Table (1936), another painting depicting the same sitting room in 'Le Bosquet', the artist again portrays the scene from the perspective of an observer whose face is reflected in the mirror on the right of the picture. But although the scene represented is similar to the one in Morning in Le Cannet, the illusion of space is produced this time in the way that the image is built up from the bottom, so that the contents of the room appear to congeal together. Gone is the geometric structure of earlier paintings, replaced with a depiction of space that instead spreads out as one homogenous mass. One of the consequences of representing the image in this uniform way is that the reflection of the artist appears to exist within the same space as the other objects, an impression accentuated by Bonnard painting the glaze of the mirror with horizontal white dabs, pushing forwards rather than absorbing the depiction of the figure it frames. In objectifying his own reflection so that its form solidifies within the makeup of the rest of the room, Bonnard recasts himself as the 'other', now just another mass of physical matter in the world.

"Without any hitches"

While most of the representations of people in the paintings looked at so far have been more or less modelled, by the mid-1930s, Bonnard had begun to portray figures in his interior scenes in low relief, a strategy which produces an more even and unified surface. For instance, in Table in

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It has even been claimed, wrongly in my opinion, that the figure reflected in the mirror does not represent Bonnard, but another woman in the room. Amory, catalogue entry for The Breakfast Table in Ibid., 146.
Front of the Window (1934-5) [fig. 60], the incorporation of a figure into the decorative design of the image is carried out with such subtlety that it is barely visible at first; in this instance, the face and arm of the woman depicted gradually materialises on the left periphery of the picture. Critics have been correct in this regard to point out that Bonnard’s work from this period resembles the decorative interiors produced by Vuillard in the 1890s [fig. 61], in which figures similarly slowly emerge from within the dense pictorial makeup of the picture. The way that these figures are often captured in profile and lack discernible features means a further comparison can be made with the work of Redon, who produced similar depictions of people towards the end of the nineteenth century [fig. 62]. Both artists render the figure so that an expressive colour within a silhouetted outline replaces any semblance of naturalist description, conveying the inner world of the subject rather than their outward appearance. In formal terms however, representing the figure in this way prevents it from dominating the overall composition, so that the viewer’s attention is not immediately drawn towards this particular imagery. Georges Roque argues that one of Bonnard’s objectives is that “people and objects should not acquire too much importance”. However, this observation seems to me too simple. It was only from the mid-1930s onwards that Bonnard attempted to harmonise different elements of imagery in his paintings and was therefore a rather late development in his work. Moreover, it does not prevent both people and objects that are represented in the image from containing their own particular symbolic significance. So while I agree with Roque that this strategy resulted from an increasing aspiration on the artist’s part to produce an all-over effect in the image, making sure no one area dominates the others so the eye can scan the picture smoothly “without any hitches”, it is also the case, I contend, that

250Bois, 53.
251The following chapter will further elaborate on the significance of the silhouette for Symbolists like Bonnard.
252For a discussion of Redon’s use of colour to express the inner world of the figure, see Stevens, ‘Redon’s Artistic and Critical Position’, 284-6.
people and objects are allowed to gradually gain in significance as the viewer spends more time interrogating the image.

In *Dining Room on the Garden* (1934-5) [fig. 63], a painting that appears to depict the same interior as *Table in Front of the Window*, Bonnard again prevents attention being diverted out towards the view of the sea by using the two dimensionality of the glass panes to bring the depicted scene outside into line with the walls of the room, producing a singular plane running along the background of the picture. In fact, while both pictures appear to depict the same interior, the different views represented in the window – one a landscape, the other a sea scene – demonstrate how Bonnard privileges the imagination over a depiction of what has been seen in reality.

Such imaginative invention is also visible in *Dining Room on the Garden* in the way that Bonnard depicts the chair and the window so that they appear to resemble an easel, producing an analogy between the flatness of the represented seascape and the canvas of a painting, a visual trick that the artist also deploys in *Table in Front of a Window*. Whereas in previous interiors that depict an outside scene Bonnard allows the curved edge of a table to dictate the structure of the rest of the picture, so that the semi-circular surface becomes a central point around which the rest of the room envelops, in *Dining Room on the Garden* this is reversed; the artist now forces the representation of the table into conforming to the linear format of the painting, its curved edge almost disappearing into the blue of the floor to allow the rectangular cloth to take prominence. Furthermore, Bonnard exaggerates the length of the objects on the table to create the impression that they rise up towards the summit of the canvas, a distortion that further enhances the vertical design of the picture. Instead of depicting the space to incorporate a suggestion that an observer is looking onto the scene, the flat, vertical structure of the image almost overwhels any sense of authorial presence.
On the right side of the picture, also rising upwards, yet barely visible compared to the objects on the table, is a softly rendered image of a woman, her skin blending in with the colour of the texture of the wall. The way that the artist has resisted providing this figure with a sense of volume allows the depiction of her to intertwine with the features of the room that surround her, a pictorial strategy that diminishes the distinction between the body and the space it occupies. Instead of asserting its autonomy, the figure integrates with the room, to such an extent that individual parts of her body are almost indistinguishable from other nearby objects; for instance, the woman’s left hand portrayed as a fist raised to her breast, could easily be mistaken for one of the flowers in the vase depicted directly in front of her.

As well as portraying other people as less distinct so as to consolidate them into the texture of the picture, as already mentioned, the depiction of the observing self is now less obvious. Whereas in The Breakfast Table for instance, Bonnard objectifies his own body, in this later painting, the outward appearance of the self is almost completely concealed. Given the severe horizontal tilt of the table in the foreground, it becomes harder than in previous paintings to determine the position of the observer outside the frame. However, a yellow patch of yellow on the left side wall appears to represent a shadow cast from an object at the opposite end of the room, producing an imprint that denotes the existence of a figure surveying the scene. These two portrayals of the inhabitants of the interior that frame the window, one a silhouetted figure receding into the texture of the room and the other merely a shadow, both complicate the distinction between subject and world, presenting instead an image in which the boundaries between the inner mind and the outer universe begin to break down.

*Blurred distinctions*

With their all-over decorative compositions that fuse together the various elements of the
painting’s surface to subvert three-dimensional space, the work Bonnard began to produce from the 1930s onwards have at times been interpreted as displaying a gradual move towards pictorial abstraction.\textsuperscript{255} Indeed, the formal strategies Bonnard uses in paintings like \textit{Dining Room on the Garden}, in which the artist does not privilege any particular area of the canvas, do seem to anticipate the pictorial concerns of abstract expressionism in particular.\textsuperscript{256} Nevertheless, while Bonnard was able to appreciate the decorative allure of abstract art, he was inflexible in his view that painting should always pertain to the depiction of something concrete, otherwise, he claimed, “all that remains is oneself, and this is not enough.”\textsuperscript{257}

Rather than demonstrating a shift towards pictorial abstraction, the increasing dissolution of space in Bonnard’s work displays a further consolidation of the same Symbolist concerns that had always occupied Bonnard, specifically in this case an aspiration that conceived of the use of decoration as a means to unify the subjective self with the world.\textsuperscript{258} Far from embracing a form of abstraction that, according to the artist’s own definition would result in a solipsistic account of reality, Bonnard instead developed new strategies to continue portraying the self’s relationship with the world, but in such a way that progressively blurs the distinctions between the two of them. The distortion of both imagery and perspective in the highly decorative technique that Bonnard developed in in interiors from the mid-1930s like \textit{Dining Room on the Garden} explicitly distinguishes the painting as a self-contained object that is separate from nature, compelling the viewer to interact with the image on its terms. This privileging of the

\textsuperscript{255}This claim has most recently been made by Gale. Gale, ‘Pierre Bonnard: Suspended in Mid-Air’, 23.
\textsuperscript{256}Roque points out that the all-over technique associated with Jackson Pollock is what led Clement Greenberg to associate Bonnard’s paintings with the work of the other artist. Roque, 82.
\textsuperscript{257}“Si on oublie tout, il ne reste plus que soi, et cela n’est pas suffisant. Il est toujours nécessaire d’avoir un sujet, si minime soit-il, de garder un pied sur terre.” Bonnard, \textit{Observations sur la peinture}, 52. Although Bonnard is referring to abstract art in this observation, Antoine Terrasse takes liberties in associating these words specifically with a visit the artist made to an exhibition of abstract art in 1946 (Antoine Terrasse, \textit{The Colour of Daily Life}, 109-10), a year after he had written the statement in his notebook.
\textsuperscript{258}Kuenzli claims that, for the Nabis in general, art was a means to “enable an experience of psychological intimacy that was characterized by the breakdown of boundaries between self and other.” Kuenzli, \textit{The Nabis and Intimate Modernism}, 1.
image can be traced back to the Symbolist concept of étanče, which Fénéon first used in the 1880s to describe the hermetic world produced by Mallarmé in his poems. A work of art that is watertight eschews the contingencies of the phenomenal world, forming instead a completely self-contained representation of its subject matter, one that crucially conforms only to a logic imposed on it by the poet or painter. According to Fénéon, this enables the artist to produce an image that represents “a higher, sublimated reality.” In choosing the word ‘sublimated’ to describe the actuality produced by the artist, Fénéon implies that the image of the artwork is purer and more refined than what is commonly conceived of as reality in everyday experience.

In this sense, the interiors that Bonnard produced in the mid-1930s do not signal a major change in direction from the objectives that he had pursued previously; after all, the artist had always conceived of the image as existing separately from nature and thus attaining to its own inner logic; what Bonnard refers to as an “enclosed world.” But what is evident during this period is how Bonnard developed compositional strategies that brought the pictorial image ever closer to achieving the sublimated reality conceived of by Fénéon and other Symbolists. So, although it might be harder to discern in these paintings the same themes – such as the instant – that the artist had made more explicit in earlier works, this is not to suggest that Bonnard had discarded with them; they remained very much integral elements in the images he constructs. Not wishing to disrupt the watertight effect of the overall image, Bonnard nevertheless devised ever more subtle ways to incorporate these themes into the painting. In particular, the portrayal of the instant in paintings such as Dining Room on the Garden loses its previously ephiphanic characteristic, producing a moment suspended in time that is meditative rather than climatic.

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259 Halperin, 189.
260 Ibid.
261 Quoted in Ibid.
262 Ibid.
263 Bonnard, ‘La peinture français d’aujourd’hui’, 37.
As will be demonstrated in Chapter Five, Bonnard would use this development in the way he communicates an instant in the image to great affect when he produced paintings of a woman lying in the bath.

Conclusion

This chapter, constituting Part Two of the thesis, has demonstrated how Bonnard’s interiors, specifically those produced from the second decade of the twentieth century onwards, use a subjective portrayal of a particular intimate situation to communicate universal themes. Crucially, it has been argued that this is mainly achieved through a depiction of a poetic instant. Both the process leading up to the conception of these images, as well as their specific ontology, has also been discussed, resulting in a claim that they should be treated as unique and new entities in their own right and not depictions of memory. In this sense, while Bonnard continued to develop different pictorial strategies throughout his career, an objective reaching back to his Symbolist youth, viewing such techniques as a means to communicate beauty, remained the same. Much of the literature on Bonnard has been under-appreciative of this continuation in his ambitions as an artist. Although critics have been correct therefore to identify new approaches in the artist’s work around 1913, this nevertheless does not surmount to a ‘late period’ body of work.

In Part Three of this thesis, the same underpinning aspirations discussed in the thesis so far will be looked at in the context of how the artist represented the individual’s relationship not merely with the world, but with the other people inhabiting it.
Part Three
Chapter Four: Re-Presenting the Urban Environment

Introduction

While Part Two of this thesis concentrated on Bonnard’s use of pictorial space as a means by which to depict an individual’s relationship with the external world, in Part Three, the focus will shift to an analysis of the artist’s portrayal of the ‘other’, both in relation to a shared existence in an urban environment and in the intimate confines of the house, the latter being the subject of the next chapter. In this chapter, I shall focus entirely on Bonnard’s representations of the urban landscape, specifically the pictures he produced of the busy streets of Paris in the 1890s. In doing so, I shall also draw upon the specific ‘otherness’ felt by the individual towards the environment of the city itself, demonstrating how the shift in the landscape of Paris during the nineteenth century led many artists and writers to critique this aspect of modernity in their work. The exploration of the urban landscape of Paris by writers earlier in the mid-nineteenth century, most notably in the work of Charles Baudelaire, resulted in a codification of certain aesthetic means of expression to denote the experience of modernity, ideas that would continue to fascinate French artists like Bonnard over the following fifty years.264

In 1852, following a bloody coup d’état the previous year, the former president of the Second Republic, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (1808-73), established the Second Empire, placing himself at the helm. In order to make his undemocratic seizure of power appear legitimate, the now self-titled Emperor Napoleon III set about presenting himself as a progressive ruler, whose grand plans would strengthen France’s economy in order to compete with other European countries such as Great Britain.265 Most ambitiously, he entrusted Baron Georges-Eugène

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Haussmann (1809-91) to devise a plan that would modernise Paris and turn it into the capital of the world, an urban renewal project that remains to this day the largest the world has seen.\textsuperscript{266} Construction work to implement Baron Haussmann’s plans started in 1853, marking the beginning of its transformation from a cramped medieval city of small, difficult to navigate streets, into an urban space of wide boulevards, bridges and squares. These improvements to Paris in terms of both its viability and visibility created a more open environment, luring crowds onto the streets of the capital in search of entertainment and spectacle. However, on a microcosmic level, the individual could often be left feeling alienated in their own city, forced not only to renegotiate their relationship with the layout, but also come to terms with the assault to self-identity that manifested in the form of the multitudinous and anonymous crowd.\textsuperscript{267}

I shall begin by examining how Baudelaire’s interpretation of the urban landscape became a template for subsequent writers and artists in their attempts to express the experience of modernity, especially his portrayal of the individual’s relationship with the crowd in the guise of the \textit{flâneur}, the incognito recorder of modern urban spaces and its inhabitants, made particularly popular with artists through the work of Baudelaire.\textsuperscript{268} This leads to an analysis of two paintings by the Impressionists Monet and Renoir, works that display an awareness in their

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{268} Robert L. Herbert claims it was Baudelaire who demonstrated to graphic artists via the \textit{flâneur} the possibility of creating “an enduring art work from the transitory bit of modern life.” Robert L. Herbert, \textit{Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society}, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 34. Baudelaire never uses the term ‘flâneur’ in his work, but his description of the “keen observer” and “man of the crowd” in his essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ has often been translated into English as ‘flâneur’ to distinguish this social type from that of the ‘dandy’. This is also a result of Walter Benjamin’s famous study of Baudelaire’s work, which has made any attempt to disentangle the concept of the \textit{flâneur} from Baudelaire’s “man of the crowd” or “keen observer” a difficult task and one that lies outside the remit of this thesis. For the purposes of this chapter, I shall continue to use the word ‘flâneur’ as a description of a specific type of observer Baudelaire writes about, without getting involved in a debate over the appropriateness of the term. For an interesting and critical analysis of Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire and the subsequent impact it has had on academic writing, see Martina Lauster, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Myth of the “Flâneur”’, \textit{The Modern Language Review}, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), 139-56.
\end{footnotes}
portrayal of the city of certain Baudelairean themes, but also exhibit a number of pictorial strategies that Bonnard was to use in his own urban scenes, such as an articulation of embodiment. It will be argued that Bonnard's depictions of the urban city display an appropriation of many of the ideas regarding modernity, from the literature produced from the 1850s onwards, when the Haussmannisation of Paris first began, through to his appreciation of Impressionist painting when much of the development of the city had been completed. Moreover, I shall claim that, while Bonnard incorporates into these pictures pictorial strategies borrowed from his predecessors, he also expands upon them and, in some instances, even subverts them in a way that expresses his anarchist sympathies. Linked to this political analysis is a further purpose of this chapter, which is to demonstrate that, despite the influence of Impressionism, Bonnard's involvement in the Symbolist theatre at this time is possibly more important in our understanding of these paintings. Crucially, it will be claimed that the critique of modernity Bonnard expresses with these works is expressed by transferring some of the ideas and techniques from the theatre into the pictorial framework. This is most evident in the way that the artist portrays the urban environment as if it were a theatre set, drawing a parallel between the manmade nature of them both that alludes to a certain inauthenticity inherent in modern life.

While Bonnard's friendship with many anarchists in the late nineteenth century has rarely been considered as relevant to an understanding of his oeuvre, many of the pictures discussed in this chapter suggest that he was more than sympathetic to the cause. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work he produced during his close artistic relationship with the writer and satirist Jarry. In examining this relationship, as well as the potential subversive impact Jarry had on the artist's use of puppetry and caricature in his artistic representations, a very different Bonnard
materialises from the one who is often portrayed as having been ideologically aloof.\textsuperscript{269} Overall, I argue that a more critical element to these works will emerge, one that has unfortunately been under appreciated.

Crucially, it was also within the portrayal of this environment that Bonnard first established an enduring theme in his work, namely the idealised image of the female figure as a motif that represents a desire on the part of the individual to transcend the confines of their immediate surroundings, an analysis of which constitutes the latter parts of this chapter. In these pictures, the anonymous and impersonal mass of the urban crowd is disrupted by this presence of a woman who appears as a singular, concrete person, offering the observer a potential respite from the unnerving contingency of the modern experience. Given Bonnard’s early interest in portraying women as they make their way through the busy Parisian boulevards, my analysis will once again turn to Baudelaire, whose influential ideas concerning feminine beauty and cosmetics reveal a relevant context in which to view such pictures. Although the representation of women was a popular subject among the Nabis, of the group it was Bonnard who was particularly drawn to the Baudelairean point of view that beauty is best conveyed through the guise of a fashionably dressed contemporary woman.\textsuperscript{270} In a section on cosmetics in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863), Baudelaire writes with typically provocative gusto:

\begin{quote}
Fashion should … be considered as a symptom as a taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-à-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain: as a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation. And so it has been sensibly pointed out … that every fashion is charming, relatively speaking, each one being a new and more or less happy effort in the direction of Beauty, some kind of approximation to an idea for which the restless human mind feels a constant, titillating hunger.\textsuperscript{271}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{269} For instance, Giambruni describes Bonnard as “resolutely apolitical”. Giambruni, \textit{Early Bonnard: 1885-1900}, 132.

\textsuperscript{270} Another possible influence might have been Renoir, who in the 1880s produced a number of painting portraying young women fleetingly glimpsed among the crowd.

It is also primarily in his depictions of the fashionably dressed female ‘passer-by’, observed as she moves through the crowded streets of the urban city, in which Bonnard first captures in his work the symbolic allure of the ‘object of desire’. By the end of the chapter, we shall have begun to see how Bonnard uses the represented female form as a means to embody his vision of beauty, a theme which will be explored in Chapter Five when I analyse the images of women performing their ablutions in the private sanctuary of the bathroom. The urban scenes are important, because their central theme of using a portrayal of a woman to convey a form of ideal beauty would ultimately be transported to paintings that depict the very different setting of the bathroom. I shall also begin to challenge the widely accepted notion that the personal relationship between Bonnard and Marthe had a dominant impact throughout his career on his representations of the female figure and what such an image symbolises, an argument that will be developed further in Chapter Five. Although Marthe is the most likely model in the vast majority of Bonnard’s paintings that include images of women, when he first began to conceptualise the female figure in terms of its symbolic values, he would not have known that she would remain part of his life until her death in 1942. The means in which Bonnard portrays the idealised representation of the female figure changes and evolves in the course of his life, but using this image as an expression of a desire which transcends the visible world remains consistent, irrespective of the artist’s personal relationships.

**The toxic lure of the city**

Even before the Haussmannisation of Paris had begun, the *flâneur* was already a feature of Baudelaire’s poetry, but it was towards the end of the 1850s that it took on a special prominence in the poet’s work as he became interested in ways to articulate the impact the changing

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272 See for instance Hyman’s claim: “Marthe would become, over the following half-century, the defining figure of his life and work.” Hyman, 32.
landscape of Paris was having on the individual. Baudelaire was aware of both the intoxicating lure the renovated city had on the individual and the detrimental affect it often had on the psyche and his poems often express with one voice these contrasting reactions to the urban environment. The protagonist of Baudelaire's poetry is therefore often as excited by the city’s promise of easy gratification as he is repelled by the threat to his sense of self. Nowhere is self-autonomy more in danger than in the presence of the urban crowd, an endless stream of faces on every street, whose transient physicality fascinates and disorientates in equal measure, threatening to sweep the individual up in its wake. For Baudelaire, these fleeting yet inescapable encounters between the individual and the crowd represent more than anything else the ephemeral and fragmented experience he believed lay at the very heart of modernity. For instance, in his poem ‘The Seven Old Men’ in the ‘Parisian Scenes’ section of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (first published in 1857), the “swarming” new Paris is described as a “city of dreams”, but by the end has become the perfect environment for a “parade from Hell”, leaving the narrator’s soul “on a monstrous shoreless sea”. The narrator in these poems often assumes the role of the *flâneur*, a figure who in his hands is both an insider and an outsider; infiltrating the masses in order to experience the same things they do, while maintaining a psychological distance so he can disinterestedly describe what takes place

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273 The image of the *flâneur* that had originally circulated in pamphlets and magazine articles in France in the early 1800s was that of an idler, a wealthy man who could afford to spend his time wandering city streets with no other purpose than to observe the activities of other people. However, with the rise of Realism as the dominant literary form of the first half of the nineteenth century, the status of the *flâneur* broadened to embody an ‘everyman’ character, depicted in many novels of the time, who roves the streets acting as the author’s mouthpiece in his descriptions of the realities of city life. For instance, the narrator of Honoré de Balzac’s short story *Facino Cane* (1836) claims in the opening lines to have “walked the streets to observe the manners and ways of the Faubourg, to study its inhabitants and learn their characters.” Honoré de Balzac, *Selected Short Stories*, tr. Sylvia Raphael (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), 56. For a history of the term, see Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92.


Various poems in the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861)\(^{277}\) and the posthumously published *Paris Spleen* (1869) are voiced from the perspective of the *flâneur*, whose ability to remain a ‘prince of incognito’\(^{278}\) allows him to maintain his autonomy while observing the crowd so as to describe his immediate surroundings; he observes, but is not observed himself. In this sense, the gaze of the crowd is inverted back onto itself so that it now becomes the spectacle for the reader through the eyes of the *flâneur*. As some critics have pointed out, in doing this, Baudelaire recasts Paris as the *flâneur’s* personal theatre, with the streets acting as “the principle stage”.\(^{279}\) Equating the city with a stage will be an important analogy when we turn to Bonnard's depictions of the city. But first, I analyse how Bonnard's predecessors the Impressionists incorporated into their paintings some of Baudelaire’s ideas, painterly devices which would inspire Bonnard when he produced his own urban scenes.

*LLooking in from the inside*

While the *flâneur* was not Baudelaire’s invention, it was his innovative appropriation of the figure in order to articulate the changing environment taking shape around the individual, for better and for worse, which ensured this became a template for both writers and artists to explore in their work the rapidly modernising world. In his essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, Baudelaire had urged artists to follow in the footsteps of the “keen observer” and find their subjects in “the vast picture gallery” of the urban streets,\(^{280}\) a message that was heeded by the group of painters who would come to be known as the Impressionists. Dismissing the

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\(^{276}\) As Parsons points out, while earlier versions of the *flâneur* were merely passive witnesses to events, what was unique about Baudelaire’s incarnation, as opposed to other ‘characters’ who inhabited the modern city such as the dandy, was his ability to both integrate himself within crowd, and yet remain hidden from those around him, allowing him to report from the inside without conditioning his immediate environment; unlike the dandy, the *flâneur* has no wish to become the spectacle. Parsons, 26.

\(^{277}\) Baudelaire added to the second edition a new section entitled *Tableaux* (‘Parisian Scenes’), eighteen poems in which Baudelaire both celebrates and bemoans the urbanisation project.


\(^{279}\) Herbert, 34. This idea of Paris as a theatre will become an important element in my discussion of Bonnard’s own representations of the city.

conventions of the art establishment, which for years had endorsed the portrayal of historical or mythical scenes over the ordinary subject matter of genre painting, the Impressionists were determined to develop an aesthetic that would portray the modern world in a way that explicitly displayed its uniquely modern characteristics. 281 Unfortunately, the swift decline in Baudelaire’s health shortly after the essay was published resulted in his premature death in 1867, meaning he would barely live long enough to see this younger generation begin to depict the urban landscape in a way that seemed to embrace head on his vision of modernity.282

The Impressionists understood that the urban project presented new visual possibilities for the artist wanting to portray modern life, opening up the city not only to the spectacle of the crowd, but also to an abundance of light. The busy Parisian boulevard in particular became an important motif for them during the 1860s and 1870s, with artists such as Monet taking full advantage of the Impressionist technique in order to produce with a series of dabs of paint the fleeting images, or ‘impressions’, of a crowd of people moving at pace. The Impressionists had developed in their sketch-like and loose brushstrokes a means to transcribe onto the canvas their own subjective response to visual stimuli, what they called their ‘sensations’, privileging the expression of an overall effect.283

In Monet’s Boulevard des Capucines (1873) [fig. 64], the suggested movement of the crowd

281 Although Baudelaire appreciated that museums could be helpful to artists, he makes it clear that the conventions on display in pictures by the ‘Masters’ offer nothing to someone wanting to understand “the special nature of present day beauty” (Ibid., p. 13). Baudelaire’s aesthetic distinguishes between two types of beauty; a timeless ‘universal’ beauty, derived from Platonism, and a ‘particular’ form of beauty that was unique to each epoch. As we have seen, Baudelaire described the beauty particular to the modern era as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Ibid., p. 12). While academicism, and the Classicism that was associated with it, sought to capture an idealised beauty by applying accepted methods of convention to painting, Baudelaire believed an ‘authentic’ depiction of beauty could be achieved only if the picture conveyed both ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ beauty. For Baudelaire’s own discussion of this see Ibid., 1-13; for a general discussion, see Jonathan Mayne, ‘Introduction’ in The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays, xii-xiii.

282 Baudelaire’s friend and contemporary, the Realist painter Gustave Courbet, had also chosen to depict the real world, but the poet ultimately had misgivings with Realism, believing it was too mimetic. For an analysis of Baudelaire’s complex relationship with Realist artists and writers, see Philip G. Hadlock, ‘Baudelaire’s “Realismé and the Paralexicon of the Other World”, Romance Notes, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Winter 1999).

283 Herbert, 10.
combines with the dazzling light that sweeps across half of the picture to reproduce the vibrant and intense atmosphere of a busy urban street. It is clear that, despite his decision to present the scene from this high vantage point, Monet is not interested in providing the maximum amount of information to the viewer, but wishes to capture instead a sense of the immense spectacle of modernity. Moreover, the movement of the crowd through the street is emphasised by two men on the right hand side, peering down at the activity below, who between them survey its progress starting in the central area of the picture, towards the foreground.

Nevertheless, while Monet and the other Impressionists were undoubtedly fascinated by the city’s visual properties, this accounts for only one aspect of a more complex response to modernity. Taking their cue from Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, who not only wishes to observe but also immerse himself in the urban environment, many of the pictures that the Impressionists produced of Paris use pictorial strategies to imply the presence of the artist, but situated outside the framework of the picture. As Nancy Forgione has argued, by demonstrating this awareness of the vital function that the body plays in combination with vision in order to situate a person in relation to their surroundings, the Impressionists were able to communicate in their work an embodied, or lived experience, of modernity. For instance, turning our attention once again to *Boulevard des Capucines*, we can see that Monet combines both visual elements and formal strategies to indicate that the scene is orientated around the bodily presence of a perceiver. The man depicted leaning out of a balcony encourages the viewer to

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284 Herbert contrasts the painting with topographical representations of the city to demonstrate how Monet privileges effect over detail. Herbert, 12.
285 Herbert claims that, although only Manet, Degas and Caillebotte can be considered to have been *flâneurs* among the artists associated with Impressionism, “the other impressionists adopted the characteristic features of this modern Parisian.” Herbert, 33.
imagine themselves in a similar position in relation to the crowd, physically looming over it. Meanwhile, the crowd itself, which starts as a nebulous mass in the central plane of the picture and becomes more defined and dissipated as it gets closer to the foreground, works in correlation with its increasingly broadening shape, suggesting a movement around an obstruction beyond the bottom of the canvas and physically below the position of the beholder. In fact, the gaze of the other man further away from the perceiver’s point of view appears to be directed towards this imagined space. In depicting the crowd’s negotiation around this obstruction, Monet portrays how the individual was forced to “change their patterns of association” with the city. But by suggesting that the crowd continues its course underneath the bodily presence of the observer, he also demonstrates that the experience of modernity does not merely constitute passive observation of spectacle, but also highlights the relation between self and world.

A sense of embodiment can also be sensed in Renoir’s Le Pont des Arts (1867) [fig. 65], but this time the perceiver is situated at street level, directly facing the activity taking place on the embankment. As a number of commentators have highlighted, it is the shadow in the foreground that, in Herbert’s words “pulls us ... into the matter-of-fact activity of the present moment”, discreetly placing the viewer between the people up ahead and the people on the bridge up above, whose hovering shadows can just be made out in the foreground of the painting. Renoir’s use of shadow also suggests that the viewer is hidden from sight, enriching the painting with a Baudelairean atmosphere in its portrayal of an observer who is “at the centre of the world, and yet ... hidden from the world”. The contrast between this area and the rest of painting, which is brightly lit, adds a sense of theatricality to the proceedings, an analogy that

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288 Herbert, 28.
289 “For Baudelaire, crucially, modernity was a relation as well as an event: a way of seeing, a project of the senses.” David Trotter, Modernity and Its Discontents: Manet, Flaubert, Cézanne, Zola, Paragraph, Vol. 19, No. 3, Painting and Narrative (November 1996), 251.
290 Herbert, 28.
many artists and writers used at the time as a way of highlighting the exhibitionism that was an integral feature of the urban landscape.\textsuperscript{291}

While critics are undecided as to whether the paintings of Monet and Renoir display an explicit critique of the urban environment,\textsuperscript{292} it is in their portrayal of the distance between the observer and the subject that enables both artists to illustrate a disconnection between individuals and the modern city. Although paintings by other artists associated with Impressionism, such as Manet, Degas and Caillebotte, pursue the idea of the city as an alienating space to a much greater degree, it can be said, at the very least, that Monet and Renoir are able to exploit these tensions in order to portray a new relationship between the individual and their surroundings. It will become apparent that, while Bonnard’s paintings of Paris from the mid-1890s share many of the same concerns with the work of Monet and Renoir in their portrayal of this relationship between the individual and the urban landscape, it is the way in which he either expanded on such strategies or sometimes even subverted them which led to his own very distinct form of representation of the urban landscape.

\textit{The painter-flâneur}

The point of view presented in Bonnard’s urban scenes is often similar to those of the Impressionists, such as the perspective that looms over the crowd in \textit{Views of Paris} (c.1897) [fig. 66]\textsuperscript{293} or a point of view hidden within the shadows as depicted in \textit{The Cab Horse} (c. 1896) [fig. 67]. Both paintings demonstrate how Bonnard introduced into his depictions of the city pre-

\textsuperscript{291} As T.J. Clark has written: “Paris was \textit{parade}, phantasmagoria, dream, dumbshow, mirage, masquerade. Traditional ironies at the expense of metropolis mingled with new metaphors of specifically visual untruth. They were intended to stress the sheer ostentation and flimsiness of the new streets and apartment blocks, and beyond that to indicate the more and more intrusive machinery of illusion built into the city and determining its use.” T.J. Clark, \textit{The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers} (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 66-7.

\textsuperscript{292} For instance, Herbert claims that artists like Monet and Renoir “took a positive view of Haussmann’s alterations.” Herbert, 18.

\textsuperscript{293} The painting is generally dated as c.1896, but I argue later in this chapter for a slightly later date.
existing strategies that allowed him to suggest the embodied presence of the artist. Moreover, his incorporation of an Impressionist technique into the overall design of such paintings also demonstrates a shared fascination with portraying the ephemeral and transient characteristics of modernity that had been codified by Baudelaire. In fact for many years, Bonnard’s pictures of the urban landscape were deemed to represent a break with Symbolism, signalling a rejection of the aesthetic theories of his youth in favour of a form of naturalism inspired by the Impressionists. Yet Bonnard’s earliest pictures depicting the busy urban streets of Paris were produced in 1889, the year he first began to use the anti-naturalist synthetist technique of the Nabis, revealing that his interest in this subject predates the absorption of certain elements of Impressionism. As I have argued throughout this thesis, it is evident that, even as Bonnard began to incorporate a degree of naturalism into his work, he continued to adhere to the fundamental decorative principles of the Symbolist aesthetic that, in stressing the plasticity of the painting as an autonomous object, privileged the picture as a work of the artist’s imagination over anything else.

More recently, the sometimes contrasting influences in paintings such as The Cab Horse have led art historians to view the mid-1890s as a period of transition between Bonnard’s Symbolist work and an eventual ‘late’ period, by which time, it is claimed, the aesthetic considerations of his youth had all but been abandoned. For instance Gloria Groom, who has argued that Bonnard’s urban scenes followed an alleged “epiphany” after discovering Impressionism, believes such paintings represent an attempt by the artist to distance his work from the intimism associated with his Nabis period. The paintings that Bonnard began to produce

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294 For a summary of the numerous writers who claimed this, see Helen Giambruni, Early Bonnard: 1885-1900, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 1983, n.1, 316. Giambruni names John Rewald, René Huyghe, Denys Sutton and Alberto Martini as having this view.

295 In fact, Groom pinpoints the exact date of this epiphany to February 1897, when Bonnard visited the Musée du Luxembourg’s exhibition of Gustave Caillebotte’s bequest of Impressionist works to the French nation. The fact that, by 1897, Bonnard had not only started painting urban scenes, but had also started incorporating Impressionist brushstrokes into his work, highlights not only the problem with looking for ‘transitions’ in his paintings, as I shall
towards the end of the decade, Groom argues, enabled him to eventually “reinvent” a style that would endure for the next four decades.\textsuperscript{296} Even Helen Giambruni, who correctly argues against a ‘realist’ interpretation of these pictures, claims his work from this period marks “the end of an era”, after which point “no one ... would call him a Symbolist”.\textsuperscript{297} The apparent discrepancy in pictorial zones in \textit{The Cab Horse}, between the flat areas of monochrome colours and silhouette in the bottom half of the painting and the colourful depiction of a street, captured with the loose and seemingly rapidly applied brushstrokes in the top half, demonstrates how tempting it is to view the mid-1890s output in this way. Such disparities within the overall structure cannot be ignored, and indeed they were not at the time. In his review of Bonnard’s first one-man exhibition at Durand-Ruel, the critic Gustave Geffroy highlights both Symbolist and naturalist elements in one of Bonnard’s urban paintings, but, significantly, he does so in order to praise its overall unity: “Nobody notes more finely [than Bonnard] the aspects of the street, the silhouettes that pass by, the colourful touches seen ‘through the delicate Parisian mist.”\textsuperscript{298}

However, such application of differing techniques, seen as either harking back to the past or indicating a future direction, is only visible to us in hindsight; analysing the painting as a transition risks undermining the value of the work as an expressive entity in its own right.\textsuperscript{299} Rather than identifying this as simply a manifestation of Bonnard’s gradual development from

\textsuperscript{296} Ibid., 81.


\textsuperscript{298} “Nul le note plus finement l’aspect de la rue, les silhouettes passantes, la tache couleur vue ‘a travers la fine brume Parisienne.’” Gustave Geffroy, ‘L’art d’aujourd’hui’, \textit{Le Journal}, (Wednesday, January 8, 1896), 1. Own translation. Geffroy does not name any particular paintings in the article and there are numerous works that he might be referring to, though the mention of a ‘Parisian mist’ would rule out it being a discussion of \textit{The Cab Horse}.

synthesism towards a greater degree of naturalism, it is more beneficial for an understanding of *The Cab Horse* to explore why Bonnard might have chosen to incorporate different techniques in such representations. Therefore, rather than interpreting Bonnard’s incorporation of Impressionist mark-making as the beginning of an eventual rejection of the Symbolist ideas he had acquired, the technique is exploited to further enhance the Symbolist objectives of his work; a degree of naturalism became a vital component in the artist’s aesthetic considerations. It is important therefore that paintings such as *The Cab Horse* are not seen purely as a reaction to Impressionism, but also reflect a broader engagement with a tradition going back to Baudelaire that viewed the modern city as a place rich in potential symbolic imagery.

For Baudelaire, the use of imagination was the most fundamental component in any artistic work claiming to be authentic, as it produces distortions in appearances, allowing the artist to create analogies that uncover the essence of a reality that would otherwise remain hidden. The figure of the *flâneur*, or to be more precise in this instance, the painter-*flâneur*, becomes vital in realising this end. Baudelaire envisages the painter-*flâneur* as an artist who wanders the streets looking for motifs that will later be recaptured in the studio and transformed into images that represent the painter’s imagination or ‘inner world’; in doing so, these images will reveal the true essence of things, rather than how they initially appear. So, while artistic expression in Baudelaire’s opinion should always start with the raw materials of everyday life, the poet believed it was the subjective distortions of this data, envisaged and carried out by the painter-*flâneur*, which would ultimately result in the presentation of universal truths. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, he writes: “[T]he external world is reborn upon [the artist’s] paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive

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300 Baudelaire saw it as the artist’s objective to use his imagination in a way so as to “penetrate beneath material appearances.” Mayne, ‘Introduction’, xiv.
life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature."301

Bonnard’s artistic practice, which involved morning sojourns around the streets of Montmartre near his studio, making sketches of the raw data that he would later use for his painting, places him very much in the category of the painter- flâneur. While it might be accurate to say that Bonnard only painted what he had seen,302 it is the subsequent distortion of this material in the imagination that is most significant in understanding these pictures. With this in mind, Bonnard’s use of differing techniques in The Cab Horse now appears to be fundamental in producing what was for him an authentic representation of the city; the intertwining of naturalist description with overt Symbolist imagery displays to the viewer the very process of the artist’s imagination at work, as information received by the senses in the visible world is distorted and transformed in order to portray the inner world of the artist.

In addition to this, by the early 1890s, some of the issues regarding modernity that had concerned the Impressionists did not seem as relevant to a younger generation of artists, who had not themselves experienced the drastic transformation of the Parisian landscape. For instance, Bonnard’s depictions of Paris display a sense of familiarity with the city and assimilation with the surrounding environment, features often lacking in many Impressionist paintings of the capital. This can be sensed in Views of Paris, for while it presents an urban street from a perspective similar to the one seen in Monet’s Boulevards des Capucines, Bonnard’s insistence on describing the individual characteristics of the people in the crowd prevents them from being portrayed as mere components of an anonymous and alienating, homogenous mass. The couple depicted arm-in-arm in the centre of the picture create a focal point, encouraging the viewer to share in their experience as they observe the activity circulating around them,

302 Giambruni, Early Bonnard: 1885-1900, 149.
while their leisurely walk suggests a community that is now more at ease in its environment. In fact, it has been noted in much of the literature that the degree of familiarity Bonnard expresses with the subject matter in some of these urban scenes is similar to that exhibited in the intimist interiors he produced during the same period, an affinity the artist would later claim was because both sets of paintings drew their inspiration from “the modest acts of life”. It will be my argument over the following sections that Bonnard was able to produce a sense of interiority in these scenes set out of doors in order to draw attention to the fabricated structures that make up civilisation, thus providing us with a critique of modernity.

Street theatre

A further example of how Bonnard’s urban scenes differ from the work of the Impressionists can be assessed by comparing The Cab Horse with Renoir’s Le Pont des Arts. Although Bonnard also uses shadow in the foreground of his painting to produce an effect like the one seen in Renoir’s painting of a hidden viewer, while the latter painting depicts a monolithic metropolis, the scene portrayed in The Cab Horse is of an intimate space that envelops rather than overwhelms the individual. Using pictorial strategies to suggest the interiority of an outside scene conforms in a general sense to the Nabis’ attempt to transcribe onto the canvas the inner mind of the artist, but by specifically depicting the urban city as an intramural space, Bonnard draws on an analogy that was particularly popular with poets and authors writing about the Haussmannisation of Paris. Walter Benjamin has pointed out how the ambiguity between exterior and interior in the city had been a favourite ruse of the authors of the feuilleton – short,
often gossipy pieces in newspapers – in the late 1850s, for whom “walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.”\textsuperscript{306} Zola also catches this strange characteristic of the urban city in \textit{The Kill}, his novel set amidst the Haussmannisation of Paris, depicting his characters so that they “behave as if indoors”.\textsuperscript{307} Bonnard’s own intervention into this tradition can be seen in paintings like \textit{The Cab Horse}, in which the contrast between the brightly lit and colourful backdrop and the dark silhouetted figures in the foreground reverses the usual hierarchies of vision and transforms the action on the street into a theatrical performance played out for the viewer. As has been pointed out by Watkins, the viewer is thus encouraged to feel as if they are part of an audience subsumed in darkness at the front of the picture.\textsuperscript{308}

Although Bonnard’s paintings from the early 1890s had already demonstrated an interest in theatrical imagery,\textsuperscript{309} it was not until midway through the decade, when he became more actively involved in the world of Symbolist theatre, as a set and scenery designer, illustrator of programmes, and manufacturer of marionettes, that the different influences converged more conspicuously into one pictorial space. It was also at this time that his use of silhouette and shadow, features especially prized in the theatre for their symbolic value, became a noticeable feature of his work. As Forgione has demonstrated, for Symbolist artists in particular, the outlined form of the silhouette portrayed the concrete and recognisable features of an object, but in such a way as to reduce it to its essential properties, enabling it to suggest simultaneously both outer and inner reality;\textsuperscript{310} writers and artists often used the analogy of the silhouette to

\textsuperscript{306}Benjamin, 37.
\textsuperscript{307}Nelson, xvi.
\textsuperscript{308}Nicholas Watkins, \textit{Bonnard: Colour and Light} (London: Tate Publishing, 1998), 17-18. Hyman also, tentatively suggests Bonnard was inspired to paint scenes as if they were theatre sets. Hyman, 30.
\textsuperscript{309}Groom has pointed out that Bonnard’s earliest depictions of women “perhaps show the influence of boneless puppetry”. Groom, 91.
\textsuperscript{310}Nancy Forgione, ‘Shadow and Silhouette in Nineteenth-Century Paris’, \textit{Art Bulletin}, Vol. 81, No. 3 (September
convey the essence of a person or an object, distinguishing this from mere appearances.\textsuperscript{311}

While it is true that the Impressionists also imbued the urban landscape with an air of theatricality, Bonnard’s use of exaggeration and symbolic metaphor has more in common with aesthetic theories concerning the theatre that were the subject of essays by writers and directors who were part of the Symbolist milieu, such as Paul Fort (1872-1960), Jarry, and the ever-influential Mallarmé, who had stressed the importance of ambiguity in dramatic productions as a means to enrich the performance with several potential interpretations.\textsuperscript{312} It is conceivable, therefore, that the theatrical arena Bonnard provides in small scenes like \textit{The Cab Horse} should be regarded as spaces in which the artist invites the viewer to use their own imagination so as to unite the disparate elements in order to ‘complete’ the picture. From his own experience of working with the miniature theatres that hosted puppet and shadow performances, Bonnard would have been aware of how the intimate atmosphere produced in these small environments allowed the audience to momentarily take part and invest in the world being acted out before their eyes.\textsuperscript{313} The silhouetted figures, which had initially seemed to create a barrier between the viewer and the scene in the background, conversely draw the viewer into the scene, allowing them to participate in the imaginary world of the picture. Moreover, the emphasis on the materiality of the painting as an object mirrors the crudeness of the sets and props that were used in these types of theatres, which further encouraged audiences to use their imaginations to bring the action on stage to life.\textsuperscript{314} Between the audience of silhouettes in the foreground and the vignette of city life that provides the scenery, Bonnard leaves an empty space for the imagination to anticipate what is about to take place ‘on stage’.

\textsuperscript{1999}, 500.
\textsuperscript{311}Ibid., 501.
\textsuperscript{312}Giambruni, \textit{Early Bonnard: 1885-1900}, 112.
\textsuperscript{314}Ibid.
Paintings like *The Cab Horse* use naturalist description only sparingly and, when it is incorporated into the picture, it is constantly thwarted by distortions that establish the primacy of the artist’s imagination over nature. For instance, details such as the stripes on the dress worn by the woman in the centre, as well as the stripes of the shop hoardings, comply with the overall decorative design of the picture by corresponding with and accentuating the vertical structure of the background created by a series of trees that act as scaffolding. This draws attention to the flat surface of the canvas, an artistic conceit that not only suggests comparisons with the scenery of a theatre set, but ultimately reflects the artificiality of the urban landscape as a man-made construct. And it is this critical aspect of these paintings I shall turn to next.

**Re-presenting the city**

While it has been common to view the manipulations of design in Bonnard’s work as merely an indication of the artist’s interest in the decorative possibilities on offer using the surface of the canvas, such analyses must surely have to be reconsidered in light of the psychological and political implications that are betrayed within the subtle and clever use of imaginative distortions; what Baudelaire termed as “argot plastique”. In using these pictorial strategies to represent the structures that comprise the urban city, Bonnard reveals an astute apprehension of what many anarchists and other critics of the Third Republic perceived as an engrained superficiality lurking beneath its respectable visage. By piercing through the very fabric of these ‘appearances’ in his representations of the urban environment, Bonnard displays a certain cynicism towards his society’s conviction in the project of modernity; what the

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313 For instance, Groom claims that Bonnard was “more concerned with surface design than poetic suggestion.” Groom, 87.


317 “Just beneath the glossy surface of turn-of-the-century France festered widespread corruption, favouritism and prejudice in many of its most respected institutions: the Church, the army, the government, the nobility, the newspapers and the courts.” Julia Frey, *Toulouse Lautrec: A Life* (London: Orion Books Ltd., 1994), 396.
philosopher José Ortega y Gasset describes as the presumption held by modern civilisations that the world into which they are born is as self-generating and permanent as nature.\textsuperscript{318}

Bonnard portrays the cityscape as a façade in the vast majority of his pictures of Paris from the 1890s, including the series of lithographs he produced for an album entitled \textit{Quelques aspects de la vie de Paris} (c.1895), which was commissioned by Vollard. In \textit{The Boulevard} [fig. 68], Bonnard uses the representations of the islands of trees, which had been planted along the streets of Paris during its renovation, to partition the street into a series of equally sized sections, a layout that resembles a design he had begun working on in 1894 for a production of screens to be sold at the Galerie Laffitte in Paris. The screen, called \textit{Promenade} (1895) [fig. 69], is one of many examples of the Nabis’ shared interest in the applied arts, which were still viewed as this point as a lower form of art than the disciplines taught at the academy, such as easel painting and sculpture. In elevating objects such as screens to the same level as painting and sculpture, the Nabis conspired to subvert these traditions. But a comparison of this screen with the aforementioned lithograph also reveals how artists like Bonnard incorporated references to the applied arts into their pictures in order to highlight the materiality of the artwork. The wooden grooves dividing the picture in \textit{Promenade} into four separate parts finds its counterpart in the trees used in \textit{The Boulevard}, producing the analogy that the background is a screen, a strategy that undermines the picture’s appeal as a representation of nature. The irony, of course, is that the grooves of the screen are genuinely made of wood. A prototype Bonnard produced for the screen [fig. 70] indicates that Bonnard had initially conceived that the wooden grooves should represent trees. In this initial design, which was later simplified for the lithographs that made up the screen’s panels, Bonnard has painted falling leaves onto the surface of each of these

\textsuperscript{318}“Civilisation is not ‘just there’, it is not self-supporting … The mass-man believes that the civilization into which he was born and which he makes use of, is as spontaneous and self-producing as Nature, and \textit{ipso facto} he is changed into primitive man. For him, civilisation is the forest.” José Ortega y Gasset, \textit{The Revolt of the Masses}, anonymous translation (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 88-9.
Artists like Monet and Renoir had often hidden the mundane and repetitious architecture, the very staple of Haussmann’s Paris, behind a veneer of trees in an attempt to produce pictures more pleasing to the eye. In exaggerating the ‘natural’ features of Paris, these artists attempted to introduce a sense of familiarity into what was still then a new and bewildering environment. If by the 1890s, the public had become more comfortable in the by now familiar streets, then Bonnard’s mission is to defamiliarise them. Instead of covering up Haussmann’s project, Bonnard’s use of the representation of trees to frame the monotonous architecture reveals it as essentially a contrived structure; in doing so, Bonnard’s artistic imagination distorts such scenes to make noticeable that which is usually concealed behind appearances. In another lithograph in the same series as The Boulevard, entitled Houses in the Courtyard (c.1895) [fig. 71], Bonnard uses the window frame of his Parisian studio much to the same effect as the trees in these other pictures, but in this instance, instead of transforming the view into a folding screen, the buildings appear as part of a painting within the picture, a visual trick that Bonnard would continue to use in his interior paintings until the 1940s. Again, the flatness of the buildings is accentuated, this time by likening them to the two-dimensionality of a framed picture, which equates the cityscape with the flimsy, cardboard façade of a Potemkin village.

Using distortion to re-present to the viewer their familiar surroundings, but in an unfamiliar way, places such images in the category of the ‘uncanny’. Sigmund Freud claims that the

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319 Herbert, 17.
320 Herbert suggests that this strategy emulates Haussmann’s idea of bringing nature to the city. Herbert, 18. Zola, a friend of many of the Impressionists, certainly had only contempt for such ideas. In The Kill, he lampoons the notion, by bringing the city’s artificiality to the forefront in his descriptions of Paris as a lavishly decorated habitat. Nelson, ‘Introduction’ in Zola, The Kill, xvi.
321 In 1898, around the same time that Bonnard produced his urban landscape pictures, the Austrian architect Adolf Loos wrote an article in which he compares the homogeneous architecture of Vienna to a Potemkin village. Alfred Loos, ‘The Potemkin City’ in Alfred Loos, Ornament and Crime: Thoughts on Design and Material, tr. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2019), 73-80.
322 According to Sigmund Freud in his study of this phenomenon published in 1919, the uncanny is “nothing new or
uncanny only occurs within a setting or environment that is initially believed to be familiar, such as an artistic representation that ostensibly presents the world as it is; it is the way the artist deviates from the viewer’s initial expectations of what they are looking at that activates in them a sense of the uncanny. In these pictures, Bonnard attempts to communicate to the viewer that, although the world around them might seem natural, even indestructible, the structures that make up the appearance of the city and the institutions they represent are anything but.

_Anarchist inclinations_

Previously, critics have failed to identifying in these pictures any manifestations which would point to Bonnard’s own political views, despite it being acknowledged that he sympathised with anarchism at this time. It has often been suggested that Bonnard had a slight disdain for political ideology, in much the same way that he was supposedly uncomfortable with the more esoteric interests of some of the other Nabis. The image of Bonnard as being aloof to issues that concerned his more radical friends has meant that, if politics is mentioned at all in regards to these pictures, the literature has generally concentrated on the fact that they are devoid of any content that would highlight the social deprivation that was a sad reality for many Parisians. However, Bonnard’s lack of direct social commentary should not be a surprise and certainly does not rule out the possibility of viewing these pictures in light of his own anarchist sympathies. By the end of the nineteenth century, many anarchist sympathising artists and writers had become disillusioned with the idea that artists were part of the ‘avant-garde’ or

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323 “The uncanny, deriving from superannuated modes of thought, retains its character in real-life experience and in writings that are grounded in material reality, but it may be lost where the setting is a fictive reality invented by the writer.” Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in Sigmund Freud, _The Uncanny_, tr. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003), 148.
324 “[T]he uncanny, deriving from superannuated modes of thought, retains its character in real-life experience and in writings that are grounded in material reality, but it may be lost where the setting is a fictive reality invented by the writer.” Ibid., 157.
324 Olivier Renault describes Bonnard as a “mild anarchist” in his recent biography. Olivier Renault, _Bonnard, jardins secrets_ (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2015), 50. For more on Bonnard’s links with anarchism, see Hyman, 26.
325 Giambruni, _Early Bonnard: 1885-1900_, 132.
326 Both Giambruni and Groom comment on the lack of social commentary in Bonnard’s urban scenes. Giambruni, _Early Bonnard: 1885-1900_, 156 and Groom, 89.
vanguard that would eventually force social change. This sense of cynicism was voiced by the writer Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915) for instance, the co-founder of the influential Symbolist journal the *Mercure de France*, who believed that direct involvement in politics was ultimately futile, a point of view influenced by his admiration for the subjectivism advocated by Schopenhauer; the only recourse left to the individual in order to live free from the constraints of bourgeois conformity, according to Gourmont, was to completely dedicate oneself to art.\(^{327}\)

Later in life, Bonnard would remember that his younger self had shared this sentiment, claiming it was not art he had been attracted to, but “the artist’s life, with all that I thought it meant in terms of free expression, of imagination and liberty to live as one pleased ... I wanted, at all costs, to escape from a monotonous existence.”\(^{328}\)

Nevertheless, the pictures of the urban landscape that Bonnard produced between 1894 and 1896, such as *The Cab Horse* and lithographs collected in the *Quelques aspects de la vie de Paris* series, suggest he had begun to move away from the artistic solipsism advocated by Gourmont. With their mixture of naturalist description and Symbolist imagery, inviting the viewer to participate in their resolution, Bonnard demonstrates a more optimistic view of the role the artist could play in society, epitomised in Mallarmé’s belief that the poet’s ability to transform the contingent into something meaningful could be edifying for society as a whole. Moreover, the revelation in 1896 that Dreyfus had been falsely accused of espionage had changed the political landscape in Paris; if anarchism had been the main political motivation for the artists and writers involved in *La Revue blanche* before the Affair, their attention was now very much centred towards this issue.\(^{329}\) It is not surprising then that, at around the same time that the

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\(^{328}\)Quoted in Hyman, 17.

Affair first became a cause célèbre, Bonnard began to produce pictures of French society in which its inhabitants and institutions are portrayed as ridiculous and, in some cases, grotesque. In a number of paintings, Bonnard uses caricature and the represents figures so that they resemble marionettes, Jarry’s favourite means of expression, in order to poke fun at society as well as revealing its sinister underbelly. Bonnard had by this time become particularly close to Jarry, who had taken on the role of the schoolboy prankster among the passionate Dreyfusards at *La Revue blanche*. In the following sections, I shall argue that it was this collaborative relationship between the pair in both the theatre and on a series of satirical almanacs that was to encourage this more critical aspect in Bonnard’s work, especially those which with a politically satirical element to their imagery.

*Ubu-sing the Republic*

One painting where the collaboration with Jarry is visible is *Les Grands Boulevards* (c. 1898) [fig.]. The pictorial space is once again manipulated so as to resemble a small theatre set, while the symmetry of the picture, such as the wheels of the bicycle being matched by the wheels of the cab, increases this sense of the scene being an artifice. The empty black space where the cyclist’s body should be recedes into the shadows of the shop interior, while the few people depicted in the background also dissolve into the space behind them. The silhouettes of the trees above the building creates a flat surface that goes all the way from the skyline to the edge of the pavement so that, similarly to *The Cab Horse*, the background appears almost static in spite of the spontaneous seeming brushstroke. The three boys represented on the left-hand side appear to be in mid-movement, as if they have just entered the ‘stage’. Their dark outfits could be seen as yet another invocation of the shadow theatre, if it was not for the more modelled description of their faces, as well as the colourful details on parts of their clothes and their hats; their dangling legs, which seem to float over the surface, as well the jerky, upright movement of the arm of the boy on the right, are evocative of the marionette puppet. Indeed, the way in which
Bonnard captures the movement of these figures, as if they are hopping along the street, correlates with the comparison to frogs that W.B Yeats, a member of the audience at the premier in 1896 of Jarry’s play *Ubu Roi*, used to describe the marionette type movements of the actors onstage.330

While much has been made of the influence of the shadow theatre on Bonnard’s output of the 1890s, no study exists looking into the particular impact that marionettes had on his work. This is surprising given Bonnard’s obvious interest in this form of puppetry as a source upon which to base depictions of the human figure, such as the gangly clown in *La Parade* (c.1892) [fig. 72] or the boys in *Municipal Guard* (1893) [fig. 73], pictures that pre-date his application of the silhouette and other theatrical imagery into his paintings by a couple of years. The unnatural movement of the marionette can also be detected in the figure in *Woman Pulling on her Stockings* (1893) [fig. 74]. In one of a series of ink studies Bonnard prepared for the painting [fig. 75], the movement of the woman reaching down to take off a sock forces her torso to slump down to her legs much in the same way a marionette does when it is in its natural resting position, a posture that Bonnard would eventually use in the painting. In other drawings that make up the studies for the painting, Bonnard explores different ways to capture the movement and position of the figure’s wooden-like limbs, manipulating his creation like a puppeteer. In treating the represented human figure in such a way, these ink studies draw comparisons with the belief shared by many Symbolist playwrights and directors that advocated the use of puppets in the theatre in order to allow the artist to maintain control over their overall vision, something that traditional human actors might undermine; the malleability of the marionette’s movements was therefore intrinsically linked with the artist’s imagination.331

330 “The players are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes, and now they are all hopping like wooden frogs, and I can see for myself that the chief personage, who is some kind of king, carries for a sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet.” W. B. Yeats quoted in Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2010), 88.
331 For instance, in an article from 1894, Maurice Maeterlinck wrote: “It is necessary to dispense entirely with the living being on the stage.” Quoted in Jannarone, 244. Likewise, the author Anatole France wrote in a review of a
Although these examples demonstrate that Bonnard’s fascination with this form of puppetry and its symbolic potential certainly existed before any relationship with Jarry had been formed, the young writer’s appearance onto the scene, bringing with him not only the cortege of marionettes he had been making since his teenage years in Rennes, but also a “hallucinatory view of the world as vast cosmic joke”, provided the painter with a fresh, even revolutionary impetus. The two probably met in 1894, when Jarry reviewed the sixth exhibition at Le Barc de Boutteville for a short-lived journal called *Essais d’art libre*. Léon-Paul Fargue, a school friend and later rival of Jarry’s, who shared his ambition to make a name for himself in the columns of Symbolist journals, remembers the Nabis painters as being approachable and affable to young writers who were interested in their paintings. Once introduced, Bonnard and Jarry would go on to collaborate on various projects, most notably on productions of *Ubu Roi*, for which Bonnard made marionette puppets and designed sets, as well as two books both called *Almanach du Père Ubu*, published in 1898 and 1901 respectively. Their closeness is further evidenced by Bonnard being rewarded with ‘The Grand Cross of the Order of the Belly’, an accolade that made reference to both the corpulence of Jarry’s most famous creation and the *grande Gidouille*, a spiral on Ubu’s belly that became a symbol for *pataphysics*. After Jarry’s death, Bonnard would pay tribute to his friend by calling one of his beloved dachshunds ‘Ubu’, most likely a reference to both the character and to Jarry himself who famously answered to the name.

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332 Giambruni, *Early Bonnard: 1885-1900*, 120.
333 Alfred Jarry, ‘Minutes d’art: Sixième Exposition chez Le Barc de Boutteville’ in *Essais d’art libre*, Nos. 25, 26 & 27, Tome V (Fév.-Mars-Avril 1894), 40.
334 For an account of the rivalry between Jarry and Fargue, see Fell, 28-9.
337 Renault, 69.
The increasing use of caricature and exaggerated physiognomy in Bonnard’s painting during this period in his career suggests that Jarry’s anarchic vision, which would soon cause a sensation following the performance of Ubu Roi at the end of 1896,\(^{338}\) had made a profound impact. The effect of their collaboration on Bonnard is clearly visible in Views of Paris, a comédie humaine, where the street becomes a stage in which the artist presents the viewer with a series of both amusing and peculiar character studies. Two imprecise vertical lines divide the canvas into three sections, their haphazard handling stressing that the edifice facing the viewer is not an attempt at emulating nature, but a space in which the artist’s imagination prevails. This is further emphasised by the blue atmosphere that permeates the painting, transporting the viewer into the artist’s make-believe universe. In their work for productions of Symbolist plays, the Nabis often discarded descriptive or elaborate scenery in favour of simple backdrops painted in one colour, a means of convincing the audience that the performance was a figment of the artist’s imagination.\(^{339}\) Once again, Bonnard appears to draw inspiration from certain methods that he had used while working in the Symbolist theatre, which he is then able to appropriate into the pictorial makeup of the picture. One of the things which makes Views of Paris fascinating is the way Bonnard applies certain themes that I believe he had absorbed from Jarry, resulting in a picture in which comedy becomes a vehicle to criticise bourgeois society. In an article written in 1897, around the time that Bonnard painted Views of Paris, Jarry defended his plays, describing them as a mirror onto society, albeit an exaggerated one, which revealed a world “composed of eternal human imbecility, eternal lust, eternal gluttony”.\(^{340}\) While Bonnard’s caricatures in Views of Paris are predominantly good-humoured in nature, there are certain instances where the comical moves into the territory of the grotesque, carrying with it

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\(^{338}\) The play was criticised by Henry Fouquier, a critic at Le Figaro, as a form of literary anarchism. Fell, 93.

\(^{339}\) Giambruni, Early Bonnard: 1885-1900, 115.

more subversive connotations. Although this feature of these works is not something we particularly associate with Bonnard today, when reviewing a new edition of Verlaine’s *Parallèlement* (1899) for which the artist had provided the illustrations, Jarry would praise among other things his friend’s use of the grotesque which captures “that other side of beauty”\(^{341}\)

The most explicit instance of this is Bonnard’s portrayal in the centre of the picture of a policeman, recognisable by his distinctive hat and the truncheon sticking out by his belt. This figure is not only fascinating because it is Bonnard’s most overtly political representation in any of his paintings, a facet of his output that was usually reserved for his illustrative work, but also because the policeman's physiognomy is similar in shape to the head of a marionette Jarry had made of his unscrupulous anti-hero Ubu in 1897 [fig. 76].\(^{342}\) In comparing the policeman with Jarry’s monstrous creation, Bonnard places the ostensibly respectable public servant and representative of the Third Republic in the same bracket as the tyrannical and corrupt Ubu. The policeman’s unseemly nature is further insisted upon in the way that, instead of keeping an eye on the activities taking place around him, Bonnard has portrayed him slyly moving away from the scene.

Caricature as a form of subversive political satire had been revitalised in France in the mid-nineteenth century by Honoré Daumier (1808-79), who Baudelaire had praised in one of his numerous essays on the use of humour in art.\(^{343}\) These essays, which analyse caricature not only


\(^{342}\) This marionette should not be confused with another one of Ubu created a few years later that has been attributed to both Jarry and Bonnard. The similarity in appearance between the policeman in Bonnard’s painting and Jarry’s marionette suggest this painting, which is usually dated at around 1896, cannot have been painted any earlier than 1897. The connections between this painting and Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, first performed at the end of 1896, also seems to suggest 1897 would be a more accurate date.

\(^{343}\) Baudelaire, ‘Quelques caricaturistes français’, 312-22.
as a form of political agitation but as a way to present universal truths, would have been a useful resource for both Bonnard and Jarry when creating the grotesque world of Ubu. Their knowledge of the history of caricature as a political tool is highlighted by Jarry’s description of the head of his main character as pear shaped, a visage Bonnard would repeat for his illustrations of Ubu in the almanac. The pear-shaped head pays homage to the caricaturist Charles Philippon (1800-61), whose depiction of King Louis-Philippe I using the same fruit had been redrawn by Daumier for publication in 1831 [fig. 77], an image that had been analysed by Baudelaire in Some French Caricaturists. In fact, one of the drawings Bonnard produced of Ubu for the almanac [fig. 78] is remarkably similar to the final representation of the king once he has fully metamorphosed into the pear. For Baudelaire, as for both Bonnard and Jarry, the simplicity of such depictions could be the most effective means of expression; according to Baudelaire the simple distortions in Daumier’s and Philippon’s work rids the image of any unnecessary descriptive detail, revealing instead its ‘essence’.

Similarly, Jarry had remarked that simplicity does “not have to be simple”, but could instead be a “complexity, compressed and synthesized”. The remarkably oversized and exaggerated skull and grotesque features of the policeman in Views of Paris, attributes that a phrenologist would have claimed indicates a criminal mentality, is thus a simplification that conveys a more profound message than the sum of its parts, one that points at the corruption and hypocrisy of the institutions of the Third Republic, the same structures of power that had resulted in the wrongful arrest, imprisonment and banishment of Dreyfus. As Baudelaire had written in his essay ‘On the Essence of Laughter’, “the caricature is a double thing; it is both drawing and idea – the drawing violent, the idea

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345 Daumier’s copy is reproduced in Arsène Alexandre, L’Art du rire et de la caricature (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies,1892). Bonnard would likely have been aware of this book as it briefly mentions him in relation to the poster he had designed for France-Champagne in 1889. Of Bonnard’s contemporaries, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec and Henri-Gabriel Ibels are discussed in some detail.
347 Quoted in Fell, 133.
caustic and veiled."348

This view of policemen and of the establishment as a whole, which Bonnard conveys in this one image, was one that Jarry would have shared. Moreover, it might even have been Jarry’s influence that sparked the idea for such a depiction of authority, given that an earlier painting by Bonnard, Soldier with a Woman (1892) [fig. 79], portrays a military officer more sympathetically. The more cynical stance that Bonnard would later display in Views of Paris can be detected in a semi-satirical article Jarry wrote for La Revue blanche in 1901, a hilarious piece of satire lampooning the police.349 Interestingly, Jarry also bases his criticism of the constabulary by concentrating on the skull of one of its officers. ‘The Brains of the Chief of Police’ is a mock opinion piece that comments on the “recent and lamentable affair” of an autopsy carried out on a French city’s chief of police.350 Jarry reports that, when the officer’s skull was opened up, instead of revealing his brain, it was in fact “stuffed with old newspapers”.351 Despite the public’s shock at such a thing, the writer remains unmoved by this revelation, as “there is no doubt that such a commodity [as newspapers] is less rare than the cerebral substance.”352 Another article written later in the same year, ‘Experimental Psychology of the Policeman’, ends with Jarry claiming that, as it is the job of the police to catch criminals, it is in their best interests to encourage criminality among citizens, otherwise they would find themselves out of work;353 the policeman in Jarry’s universe thus becomes the mastermind criminal par excellence.

Although these paradoxes of Jarry’s creation are playful, they also have a more deep-rooted and

350 Ibid., 301.
351 Ibid.
352 Ibid.
political purpose, becoming a means in which to alter commonly held perceptions in order to show things not as they appear, but how they really are.\textsuperscript{354} In a soliloquy at the beginning of his play \textit{Ubu Enchaîné}, the protagonist demonstrates Jarry’s perverse, yet penetrating, dialectics when he exclaims:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Now that we are in the land where liberty is equal to fraternity, and fraternity more or less means the equality of legality, and since I am incapable of behaving like everyone else and since being the same as everyone else is all the same to me seeing that I shall certainly end up killing everyone else, I might as well become a slave…}\textsuperscript{355}
\end{quote}

This ‘logic’ that uses the self-aware pseudo-philosophy that Jarry had devised and christened pataphysics – a “personal strategy of interpreting and creating a world that rejects existing paradigms”\textsuperscript{356} – links both Jarry’s and Bonnard’s policemen to a tradition that uses caricature as a form of social agitation; the caricaturist avoids any idealisation with their distortions, instead emphasising the essence, good or bad, of the subject matter. The pair would continue this subversive form of humour in the almanacs, using Jarry’s words and Bonnard’s illustrations to take aim at the Republic for its handling of the Dreyfus affair, as well as for its colonial policies.\textsuperscript{357} In fact, as one recent study of the almanacs has argued, Bonnard is likely to have also had an input in regards to the text as well as the illustrations.\textsuperscript{358} Either way, the gang of boys depicted in \textit{Les Grands Boulevards}, who appear again in \textit{Views of Paris}, perhaps embody the schoolboy humour at the centre of this collaboration between the friends. The figure of Ubu, which had begun as a joke between students at a lyceum in Rennes had, in Jarry’s imagination,

\textsuperscript{354}Some more ‘serious’ observers of French society might agree with Jarry’s opinion of the police. The historian Eugen Weber claims: “[T]he police in France are less about public order than about public power, which may occasionally benefit from some disorder. Instrument of the ruling power, or else of those who seek to overthrow it, police may serve either interest in tolerating some outbreaks while suppressing others.” Eugen Weber, \textit{The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s} (London: Reed Consumer Books Ltd., 1995), 135.


\textsuperscript{356}Jannarone, 240.

\textsuperscript{357}For an in-depth analysis of both almanacs, see Marieke Dubbelboer, \textit{The Subversive Poetics of Alfred Jarry: Ubusing Culture in the Almanachs du Père Ubu} (Abingdon and New York: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2012).

\textsuperscript{358}Dubbelboer claims the texts in the almanacs are written not only by Jarry, but also by Bonnard, Claude Terrasse and others such as the anarchist poet Paul Fagus, with Bonnard being the main contributor after Jarry. Dubbelboer, 1-15.
been transformed into a grotesque mirror upon which to hold up society’s ills.\textsuperscript{359} As Ubu remarks in one of Jarry’s plays: “...what makes children laugh can frighten adults.”\textsuperscript{360}

However, at the same time that Bonnard was producing these satirical and non-idealistic swipes at modernity, he had also begun to use the streets of Paris as a setting for very different theme which would ultimately dominate his work in the following century – that of a transcendental vision of beauty, an analysis of which will be the focus of the final stages of this chapter.

\textit{The woman in the crowd}

According to some accounts, it was one spring morning in 1893, as Bonnard strolled through the streets near his studio in Montmartre on the lookout for subjects to sketch, that he first laid eyes on the woman who he would go on to paint continuously over the course of the next six decades. This alleged chance encounter with Marthe, a 24-year-old funeral parlour assistant masquerading as a 16-year-old girl, is now ingrained in the folklore that surrounds the enigmatic relationship between the couple;\textsuperscript{361} one account of the incident claims that Bonnard followed this complete stranger from a tram to her place of work, before persuading her to leave her job and share the rest of her life with him.\textsuperscript{362} A series of depictions of women glimpsed at

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{359}The figure of Ubu had originally been concocted as a way of lampooning a certain Monsieur Hébert, one of the teachers at the lycée in Rennes that Jarry attended. For more information on the formulation of the character, see Fell, 18-20. Although Jarry did not come up with the idea, as Fell has concluded, he was able to take the ridiculous character originally used by the schoolboys to make fun of their unfortunate teacher and turn him into a figure who represented “the pitiless tyranny he wanted to satirize.” Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{360}Jarry, ‘Ubu Enchaîné’, 103.

\textsuperscript{361}It has been most recently repeated in Renault, 47-48. For a more factual biographical account of the relationship between Bonnard and Marthe, see Sarah Whitfield, ‘Fragments of an Identical World’ in Whitfield and Elderfield (ed.). In court proceedings over Bonnard’s estate after his death, it was claimed that Marthe had been a model for other Paris-based artists before meeting Bonnard, which suggests these were the circumstances in which they first became acquainted. Giambruni, \textit{Early Bonnard: 1885-1900}, 146.

\textsuperscript{362}It was Hans Hahnloser, a collector of the artist’s work who became a good friend, who claimed that this was how the couple had met. Because many of these myths originate from people who were very close to Bonnard, such as Hahnloser and Thadée Natanson, one can speculate that it was the artist who started spreading such stories. Hahnloser is quoted in Hyman, 31. For a more sober analysis of the couple’s relationship, which takes into account a lot of new evidence, see the excellent article by Lucy Whelan, \textit{Who was Marthe Bonnard? New evidence paints a different picture of Pierre Bonnard’s wife and model}, The Conversation, viewed 16 May 2020, <https://www.theconversation.com/who-was-marthe-bonnard-new-evidence-paints-a-different-picture-of-pierre-bonnards-wife-and-model-137723>.\end{flushleft}
as they make their way through crowded Paris boulevards, such as *The Street in Winter* (1894) [fig. 80], undoubtedly encouraged the proliferation of this likely made-up story, providing an example of how Bonnard’s personal life is often conflated with his art. Nevertheless, critics such as Watkins and Hyman have rightly resisted positing these overly biographical interpretations of these pictures, instead placing them within the historical context in which Bonnard produced them: namely the fascination many writers and artists had in the second half of the nineteenth century with the flâneur.

In *Figures in the Street* (1894) [fig. 81], Bonnard captures a ‘vision’ of contemporary femininity with the depiction of the young passer-by in the foreground, who is adorned with certain features which clearly distinguishes her as a fashionably dressed, modern woman, such as the ruff around her neck, the pair of gloves she wears and the white flower in her hat. In drawing attention to her modern clothes instead of her body, the artist avoids interpretations that would link her with an embodiment of ideal Beauty, a concept traditionally associated with the female nude. Moreover, although she is alone, she is nonetheless part of the crowd; her black outfit is in keeping with the habiliments worn by those around her, thus assimilating her into their singular mass, while the lowered position of her head mimics the self-absorbed sense of purpose of the rest of the crowd. The image of a solitary female passer-by that Bonnard depicts in this and numerous other paintings and lithographs in the mid-1890s is also a reflection of a change in social mores at the end of the nineteenth century that, in no longer associating such a sight with prostitution, resulted in a greater visible presence of woman walking alone through the streets of Paris. Meanwhile, two dogs depicted playing on the right-hand side, apparently

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363 Watkins, who has endeavoured to sort out a lot of the fact from fiction in Bonnard’s private life, suggests the story is untrue. Nicholas Watkins, *Bonnard* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 36. In fact, it is clear that, not only do some of these paintings depict different women, but some pre-date Bonnard and Marthe having even met.

364 Indeed, some critics have viewed Bonnard’s fascination in depicting such details of the fashions worn by women as primarily pictorial, a way of complimenting the overall decorative design of the picture. While this is undoubtedly a factor worth considering, it ignores the deeper, more symbolic implications of such images. For such a view highlighting the artist’s use of fashion as a decorative strategy, see in particular Groom, 87.
unaffected by the banal trappings of human existence, humorously contrast with the conformity and monotony of urban life that Bonnard conveys in the lines of people seemingly shuffling from one side of the canvas to the other. Such depictions demonstrate Bonnard ability to use societal developments, especially those effecting relations between men and women, not merely as a form of social commentary, but as a context in which to express ideas of a more universal and enduring significance. Symbolist writers and artists held in high esteem the ability of artistic representation to infer universal ideals from personal experiences of the world, what Gourmont labelled as the ‘relative absolute’.\(^{365}\) Whether in the busy streets of Paris or, as we shall see in the following chapter, in the intimate environs of the bathroom, the commonplace interactions between men and women provided Bonnard with the means to convey ideas concerning the symbolic role associated with femininity that go back millennia. But it is in the urban depictions of the female passer-by that Bonnard first uses the image of the modern woman to combine the particular with the universal in this way. In order to understand how Bonnard achieves such a synthesis, it is helpful to compare his representations of modern women with certain ideas that had been made popular by Baudelaire, particularly those relating to beauty as it is represented by the female ‘passer-by’ (\textit{une passante}).

\textit{\textquote{Une passante}}

For Baudelaire, it was vital that the artist avoided purely idealised portrayals of women that aimed at equating them with visions of goddess-like perfection, but should instead draw attention to the explicitly modern attributes of their appearance, such as fashionable clothes, make-up and ornamentation, as a way to convey a more authentic representation of ‘beauty’.\(^{366}\) Conversely however, rather than negating all associations with an ideal, Baudelaire believed

that such depictions display an “indivisible unity” or synthesis that treats the beautiful representation as something that can be both universal, as well as particular to an epoch with its transitory tastes in fashion and style.\footnote{Ibid., 31.} According to Baudelaire, just as the sculpture or painting improves upon nature, the outer, visible features adorned by a woman accentuate rather than dissemble her inner beauty. In 'The Painter of Modern Life', Baudelaire asks: “What poet, in sitting down to paint the pleasure caused by the sight of a beautiful woman, would venture to separate her from her costume?”\footnote{Ibid.}

With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the pictures Bonnard produced in this period depicting a woman emerging from the crowd have often been compared to Baudelaire’s poem ‘A Une Passante’, from Les Fleurs du Mal, in which a brief yet meaningful encounter with a female passer-by produces in the narrator a feeling of ecstasy, a transcendental beauty which promises to transport him beyond the contingent confines of the urban landscape. However, as Baudelaire’s poem makes clear, the withdrawal from reality that is provided in the shape of the beautiful passing vision is only brief; the woman walks away from view, leaving the narrator rueing over what might have been.

Nevertheless, Benjamin has interpreted the finale of the poem not as an expression of frustration, but as an erotically charged crescendo due to the narrator being “spared, rather than denied, fulfilment”.\footnote{Benjamin, 125.} Baudelaire’s use of the word ‘jamais’ at the beginning of the final stanza is, Benjamin has claimed, a way of representing the universal element that is contained in the particular passing moment, a word that is uttered in exasperation by the narrator, who assumes he will “never” set eyes on the woman again, except in the eternity she has brought
him into contact with (‘Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?’). The same erotic intensity is apparent in *Figures on the Street*, with the object of the observer’s desire momentarily breaking through the dark conglomeration of the crowd just before she is once again swallowed back up by it. According to Benjamin, the erotic atmosphere in much of Baudelaire’s work relies on an aura, a sort of unique distance, which exists between the observer and the observed, which is how the narrator can distinguish the passer-by from the other people and objects on the street. However, while Baudelaire conveys this aura to the reader through the mesmerising image of his interlocutors’ eyes momentarily meeting (‘Fugitive beauté/Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renâitre’), Bonnard eschews such use of a narrative in his urban scenes, relying instead on pictorial strategies to produce a similar effect. For instance, in the lithograph *The Square at Evening* (c.1896) [fig. 82], the woman on the right is depicted shrouded in light as she walks through the glare emanating from a lamp on the street, distinguishing her from the rest of the scene. But in paintings that depict a similar subject matter, like *Figures in the Street*, in which there is not as much of a marked contrast between light and shade as there is in a lithograph, this aura is achieved in a more subtle way. To understand how Bonnard does this, it is helpful to briefly return once again to an aspect of Benjamin’s analysis of Baudelaire, in which the critic points out that the urban crowd as depicted by the poet is used like a veil that reveals the erotic object to the observer. Similarly in *Figures in the Street*, in once again treating the urban scene he depicts in such a way as to evoke a stage set, Bonnard exploits the image of the crowd so as to transform it into a theatrical curtain that momentarily opens, revealing the erotic object of desire. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the veil was often used in painting as a metaphor for the uncovering of a sacred sight, such as the revelation to Actaeon of the naked body of Diana. But while the veil in this instance underlines a transgression that will result in

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370 Ibid., 45.
372 Ibid., 123–4.
the death of the observer; in the context of the city street, the ‘crowd-as-veil’ delivers a moment of transcendence beyond the banality of the urban environment. In *Figures in the Street*, the woman appears in the gap created for her in the instant before the row of people walking towards the left will meet with the man wearing the glasses who is walking in the opposite direction; yet the observer will lose her among the dark outfits of the crowd that is about to consume her, and the monotony of life will prevail. Therefore, despite her appearance lacking the numinous qualities that are traditionally associated with the idealised woman, it is the brief relationship she has with the observer through the veil of the crowd that momentarily turns her into a transcendental vision. The vision of beauty revealed in the instant is even more fleetingly captured in *The Street in Winter*, with the face of the passer-by pressed to the far left of the canvas, under threat of complete obliteration from the black figures who take up almost half of the pictorial space. Again, there is a lack of narrative in the picture, only the reliance on the crowd to both deliver and threaten the erotic ‘object of desire’.

In the following chapter, attention moves away from the public city street to the private spaces of the house in pictures where there is no threat from the mass of the crowd and a more immediate access to the object of the spectator’s desire. Yet, many of the same themes Bonnard developed in his depiction of the urban street remain in these other paintings, most predominantly the fleeting vision of a beauty that promises a brief moment of transcendental fulfilment.

*Conclusion*

Bonnard’s depictions of urban city life have generally been viewed as part of an intense, yet short-lived engagement with Parisian culture around the turn of the century, a milieu that inspired in him a desire to transpose its exciting and enticing atmosphere onto the canvas. However, as I have argued, such an interpretation often excludes from consideration the
underlying critical aspects contained within the pictorial makeup of these pictures. The content of these urban scenes persuaded early critics that they signalled a belated interest in naturalism, while an admittedly more nuanced concentration on Bonnard’s formal techniques has, on the whole, deemed them of interest purely in terms of the ways that the decorative possibilities of the artwork as an object are explored. Both these points of view ultimately do the artist a disservice by treating either content or form as ends in themselves, not, as I have contended throughout this thesis, as means of communicating more universal concerns such as the epiphanic moment of beauty. Bonnard’s foray into the city has been seen as reflective of the world around him, as opposed to reflecting on it.

It would also be wrong to conclude that the intimist paintings of the streets produced in the 1890s only represent a passing interest in the themes that they convey. In next chapter, I shall look at some the landscapes Bonnard produced in the final two decades of his life, analysing how the expression of the canvas as a singular entity was itself undermined by the artist’s own awareness that the plastic world represented in the picture is not immune from the outside forces of nature. In a diary entry in 1934, Bonnard wrote to himself: “When one distorts nature, it still remains underneath, unlike purely imaginative works of art.”373 This tension between the hermetic and finite picture and the natural world, an all pervading presence that is the source of what is represented on the canvas, is already apparent in pictures such as The Cab Horse; the atmosphere of an enclosed space produced by the analogy with the theatre is disrupted by the wheel on the right hand side, disappearing into a world beyond the picture’s boundaries.

The anti-establishment sentiments that underpin many of these pictures would also continue to manifest itself in his subsequent work. Although in the early 1900s, Bonnard moved away

373 “Quand on déforme la nature elle est toujours dessous, au contraire de l’œuvre de pure imagination.” Bonnard, Observations sur la peinture, 33. Own translation.
from representing the city as an artifice that is peopled with strange and grotesque caricatures, probably reflecting a softening of his anarchist beliefs, an aversion towards the industrialised world and its negative impact on both society and the individual becomes an important feature of his work representing the female nude and the natural world, a consideration that will be discussed in the remainder of this thesis. As well as this, although the incorporation of imagery suggesting artificial constructs such as the theatre or decorative screens disappears from his city scenes after the 1890s, Bonnard would continue to use such analogies in the pictorial structures of his interiors.

But perhaps the most important aspect of Bonnard’s depictions of urban life, in terms of the work he would go on to produce, is the representation of the passing woman in the street, a poetic image symbolising the transcendence of the strictures of time and environment. These representations of femininity as an alluring, yet elusive ideal, a contrasting image to the contingency of the visible world, would find its greatest expression in Bonnard’s paintings of a woman in the domestic setting of the bathroom. This notion of womankind as a counterpoint to visible reality was conceived in the earlier paintings of Parisian streets.

For instance, by 1934, Bonnard could quite happily sit around a dinner table with Jacques Bainville, a monarchist and member of the rightwing Action Française, François de Wendel, an industrialist and politician, and Jean de Pange, a leftwing writer and historian. Weber, 136.
Chapter Five: Displaying Her Body

Introduction

Over the course of the present chapter, I shall continue to analyse Bonnard’s depiction of an idealised vision of feminine ‘beauty’, but one that is relocated from the street to the private setting of the house. In concentrating on this theme, I analyse the ways in which Bonnard portrays the interrelation between the self and the ‘other’ and, in particular, the symbolic and psychological implications of what such an image of beauty means when presented in an intimate environment shared between two people. As we shall see, the symbolic and psychological aspects of these works invariably depend on one other.

It should also be made clear that, similarly to the street scenes discussed at the end of the previous chapter, in mobilising the female body for this purpose, the artist is not merely presenting a simplistic correlation between the image of womanhood and beauty. It is in fact the way that Bonnard depicts the image of the woman in the framework of the picture that conveys to the viewer a sense of enduring beauty. In particular, we shall see how Bonnard uses various pictorial strategies to present the female form so that it resembles ancient Graeco-Roman sculpture, thus evoking through the body an image of permanence. While Bonnard’s use of poses taken from Graeco-Roman sculpture has always been acknowledged, this chapter will demonstrate the symbolic significance of such borrowing, with particular regard to the instant. Specifically, it will be argued that, like his ancient predecessors, Bonnard uses bodily posture to symbolise a state between movement and rest that represents harmonious perfection, a posture that the Greeks associated with the divine: while a static position suggests inertness, any exaggerated portrayal of movement would upset the overall unity of the represented body. I shall therefore demonstrate how Bonnard would eventually develop a way to present the nude between movement and rest, capturing the instant when the body momentarily resembles the
pose of an ancient deity.

It is clear therefore that, like in the street scenes, these expressions of beauty in a domestic environment provide a sense of meaning, albeit a fleeting one, to the otherwise contingent world of reality. The sense that such a vision is a mere flicker that will disappear is another feature that these paintings share with their urban counterparts. But unlike the paintings set in the street, the bathroom scenes present through their imagery a certain psychological tension with their imagery between the observed and the observer, presenting the vision of beauty as something that is not fully attainable. In these pictures it is no longer the crowd in the street that threatens to obscure the woman and what she is to represent, but a psychological barrier emanating from the object of the viewer’s attention, which does not appear to register or return the gaze resting upon it. These paintings thus present a strange, mixture of intimacy and estrangement. What I have said may seem particularly vulnerable to feminist criticism. I consider this problem in the chapter and attempt to show how some works by Bonnard are trapped in patriarchal power structures in their depiction of a woman, the ones that I argue overcome it produce a subtle and new kind of interplay of male and female subjectivities.

In contrast to previous interpretations, I do not interpret the sense of discord in these paintings in biographical terms. In doing so, I follow a line of argument that is similar to the one put forward by Louise Wallace, who has argued that male criticism in particular has used the “mythology” surrounding the relationship between Bonnard and Marthe as a means of interpreting the artist’s presentation of the female body when it does not conform to heterosexual expectations of desire. Consequently, instead of seeing in these paintings a

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375 Biographical interpretations of Bonnard’s work are ubiquitous in the literature. Most recently, Philippe Comar has claimed that in painting the “same woman for an entire lifetime”, Bonnard ultimately depicts her as “skinned alive” due to her presence having taken away his “dreams of happiness”. Philippe Comar, ‘The Distant Body’ in Cogeval and Cahn (ed.), 145.

376 Wallace, 269-277.
dramatisation of the couple’s relationship, I interpret the psychological barrier to be a symbolic strategy representing what on one level is the unavoidable difficulty that exists in the shareability of feelings and desires between all human beings, a product of our innate knowledge that we can never truly know another person – what in philosophical terms is sometimes referred to as the “problem of other minds”.377

In keeping with this anti-biographical interpretation, I have resisted referring to the nude woman in the paintings as Marthe unless identifying her is a necessary part of the argument I am making. While most of the pictures discussed contain portraits of her, this is not always the case – Bonnard used other models throughout his career and even when the initial sketch for a painting was a depiction of Marthe, sometimes the features would morph into other women, or another non-specific woman, once transposed onto the canvas. While the relationship Bonnard had with Marthe was a crucial part of his artist practice – something that I shall discuss in the main body of this chapter – it does not follow that the interpretation of the image itself should be conditioned by this. I am in complete agreement with Rikha Burnham when she says: “The mythology of Marthe and her reclusive life with Bonnard has kept us from seeing Bonnard’s work as Bonnard wanted us to see it – with our own eyes, with our own experience.”378

No other subject in Bonnard’s painting has been written about as much as his depictions of a solitary female bather in a domestic setting, but unfortunately much of the literature on how the artist tackles this theme tends to treat it as one homogenous mass. Contrary to this tradition, I track the developments in the ways Bonnard tackles the theme over the course of his career, showing for instance how it responds to societal changes. I argue that Bonnard was able to use

377 For a recent study of such problems from a phenomenological perspective, see Dan Zahavi, Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
378 Burnham, 70.
evolutions in the way people bathed at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in order to present the nude in ways that introduce new symbolic aspects into his work. This will be seen when I discuss how the increasing ubiquity of the bathroom allowed Bonnard to exploit its sense of seclusion and privacy to further emphasise through the nude a sense of space that exists solely for the individual. Ultimately, Bonnard would take advantage of the opportunity the bath offered for people to lie flat in the tub and relax in a place removed from the rest of the world in order to produce a series of paintings that represent the theme of dreaming, a theme that would become especially prominent during the years of the Second World War when the artist looked for ways to counter the nihilism of the moment with the portrayal of beauty.

However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea that art should seek to portray ‘beauty’ had begun to be questioned by various movements and individuals, who saw such an aesthetic venture as representative of certain traditional and elitist groups. Moreover, Bonnard’s depiction in his work of themes that were judged to be ‘bourgeois’, such as domestic family life and picturesque portrayals of the countryside, were at best seen as old fashioned and at worst as barely significant in relation to the issues then facing the modern world. It was particularly his decision to continue with such themes during the Second World War, the period that is the focus of the final part of this chapter, which undermined perceptions of his relevance as an artist, or indeed his political allegiances.

Nevertheless, certain artists and critics, most prominently Albert Camus (1913-60), continued

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379 For an insightful analysis of the denigration of beauty in art, with a particular emphasis on post-modern critiques, see Prettejohn, 9-13.

380 Bois interprets Picasso’s dislike of Bonnard’s work as due to what he interpreted in the other artist’s work as “banal and insipid petit-bourgeois sentimentality and cowardly abdication in the face of History.” Bois, 53.

381 Hyman notes that Bonnard’s work was often seen to exemplify the aesthetic endorsed by the Vichy regime. Hyman, 200.
to champion the notion of beauty throughout this period, viewing its representation through art as the only means in which humankind might express an intrinsic and ahistorical yearning for meaning in a contingent universe.\textsuperscript{382} In his book-length essay *The Rebel* (1951), primarily an attack on the ideologies at the centre of both Nazi and Communist atrocities that he began to write following the Second World War, Camus argues that in depicting beauty, the artist is able to communicate an unceasing common bond between humanity.\textsuperscript{383} Crucially in terms of this thesis, Camus commends in particular the artist who, in transforming nature to conform to their own ideal vision of it, continues to engage with the physical world in order to uphold the aspects of it that are universal and worth preserving.\textsuperscript{384} In 'Helen's Exile' (1948), a much shorter essay written a year after Bonnard's death, Camus laments the fact that, while the Ancient Greeks took up arms for beauty, a reference to the Trojan War; his own era has exiled it.\textsuperscript{385} Camus continues:

\begin{quote}
*Nature is still there, nevertheless. Her calm skies and her reason oppose the folly of men ... Both the historical mind and the artistic seek to remake the world. But the artist, through an obligation of his very nature, recognises limits the historical mind ignores. This is why the latter aims at tyranny while the passion of the artist is liberty. All those who struggle today for liberty are in the final analysis fighting for beauty.*\textsuperscript{386}
\end{quote}

By turning its back on the beauty in nature, Camus affirms, humanity cuts itself off from an ever-present grounding that provides it with a reminder of universal principles that tie men and women of different societies together; in other words, nature offers a source of hope.

It is therefore in the spirit of Camus’ defense of beauty that I intend to present a re-evaluation


\textsuperscript{383}“We notice … that in the contest between Shakespeare and the shoemaker, it is not the shoemaker who maligns Shakespeare or beauty but, on the contrary, the man who continues to read Shakespeare and who does not choose to makes shoes … It is going far beyond simple and necessary humility to pretend to dismiss beauty … until the end of time, and meanwhile, to deprive all the world, including the shoemaker, of this additional bread…” Ibid., 221.

\textsuperscript{384}Although Camus never mentions Bonnard in his writings on art and beauty, according to Jean Clair, he greatly admired the work of the artist. Jean Clair, “A Brief Metaphysics of the Colour Violet in Pierre Bonnard’s Paintings” in Véronique Serrano (ed.), *Bonnard and Le Cannet* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2011), 41.


\textsuperscript{386}Ibid., 152.
of Bonnard’s aesthetic concerns, concentrating primarily on paintings of the bather that he produced during and just after the Second World War. In particular, I shall examine how Bonnard’s depiction of nature and myth in these pictures, themes that he had always been drawn towards, became especially important to the artist during this period, not only offering a beacon of hope to the artist in what were dark times for him and his country, but also as a project of defiance against the nihilism that had spread across Europe and many other places in the world. It is in these paintings that Bonnard would find a way in which to present a more meditative image that, in its final representation painted in the 1940s, provides a counter to the times in which he lived.

**Flirtations with the erotic**

Around the same time that Bonnard became interested in representing the female passer-by in the street, he also produced his first image of a woman at her toilette, a lithograph entitled *Le Tub* (1894) [fig. 83]. The pose of the woman looked at from behind clearly shows Bonnard was aware of works by Degas, such as *The Tub* (1886) [fig. 84], and he had also perhaps seen a series of lithographs that the same artist had produced only a few years before, such as *Nude Woman Standing, Drying Herself* (c. 1891-2) [fig. 85].

In fact, the pose of the woman in *Le Tub* is similar to one Bonnard had depicted in a painting from the year before, *Le Baignade* (1893) [fig. 86], with both pictures relying on the hidden voyeur as a means of presenting the female body to the viewer. In *Le Baignade*, the trees in the foreground of the painting create a spyhole through which the nymph-like woman is presented, suggesting an influence from Mallarmé’s poem ‘L’après-midi un faune’ (1876), in which the mythical creature spies on two nymphae through a gap in some bushes. Similarly, the lithograph

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387 Indeed, Bonnard produced his own drawings in pen of a woman at her toilette in the presence of a maid at around this time, which once again demonstrates the influence Degas had on the artists during this period.
lacks any compositional cues that would place the observer in the same space as the woman, a strategy Degas also often exploited in his nude scenes, producing the effect that the woman is unaware of being observed.

However, this voyeurism ultimately lacks the psychological impact felt in the street scenes discussed in the previous chapter, which was provided by the erotic atmosphere that exists between the observer and the observed. In order to achieve the same sort of atmosphere that he had achieved in the urban environment, but this time in the intimate surroundings of an enclosed space, Bonnard seemingly turned away from the theme of the bather for the time being, instead appropriating the late nineteenth century trend for representing the female body in a state of undress in the bedroom. In particular, Bonnard began to incorporate the naturalist trope of a woman portrayed in a state of dishabille in order to depict the nude female form in a plausible setting. In Young Girl with Black Stockings [fig. 87] for instance, Bonnard presents a believable situation, that of a woman getting dressed following a sexual liaison, which allows him to portray a moment of erotic intimacy. But as Degas had already demonstrated in nudes from the 1880s, it was possible to subvert the naturalist desire for plausibility by reinstating classical allusions into the picture without upsetting its modern sensibility. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Two, the image of the woman putting on her stocking on the edge of the bed in Man and Woman in the Bedroom can be interpreted as a reference to the images of the goddess Diana that had been painted by Boucher the previous century. Therefore, although Bonnard embraced certain naturalist conventions, these were often used to portray a ‘relative absolutism’ that many Symbolists strived towards. And it is this combination of these two forms of representation that are crucial in any understanding of Bonnard’s representation of the nude

throughout the twentieth century.

In some of the paintings of the nude that Bonnard produced at around the turn of the century, the poses he chooses to depict the body can be quite daring, as can be seen in *Nude with Black Stockings* (1900) [fig. 88] with its unusual and compelling depiction of a woman lifting her top above her head. However, such poses as the one in this painting are also a means for the artist to ensure that the body is presented as a sexualised object to be looked at; with her eyes covered by the clothes she is removing, the voyeur can enjoy at his own leisure the spectacle of the naked body on view. Nevertheless, it is evident that in other paintings produced at the same time as *Nude with Black Stockings*, Bonnard was seeking ways in which to present the nude that do not conform so much to the tradition in painting to objectify the female body. In *Indolence* (c. 1899) [fig. 89], for instance, the depiction of the woman returning the gaze of the presumably male observer flouts the conventions of decency at the time that disapproved of women staring at men in public. Although the scene in question takes place in the bedroom and not a public place, in capturing such an image in a painting that would have been displayed in a more communal space, possibly an art gallery but more likely a living room, the depiction of the woman staring back at the viewer transforms it into one of sexual provocation. Perhaps Bonnard had some room to manoeuvre in regards to the different ways in which he presents the female body depending on his intended audience. Generally, Bonnard would have wanted to produce an image of the nude that would appeal to a male dominated marketplace with certain expectations concerning how the female body is portrayed, resulting in him depicting the nude in the voyeuristic way that is seen in *Nude with Black Stockings*. However, given that some of these paintings were sold or given to close friends such as Natanson, Vuillard and Aristide Maillol (1861-1944), Bonnard might have been afforded the opportunity in these circumstances

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389 For more on the perceived threat associated with the woman’s gaze, see Griselda Pollock, ‘The Gaze and the Look: Women with Binoculars – A Question of Difference’ in Ibid., 109-12.
to be more adventurous in how he portrays women.\textsuperscript{390}

It was also in this series that Bonnard first appropriated a pose taken from a classical sculpture, basing the figure in \textit{Siesta} [fig. 90] on \textit{The Hermaphrodite} [fig. 91], a sculpture that he would have been familiar with from his trips to the Louvre. However, such suggestions of the divine are presented with a measure of subtlety, no doubt to prevent such allusions from disturbing the modern setting of the image. Another common feature of the nudes from this period is the sense the artist produces that there is no psychological barrier existing between the observer and the object of desire, as can be seen in the face like shadow that encroaches on the scene in \textit{Indolence}. In this sense, scenes such as the one depicted in \textit{Siesta} differ from the images of women in the street that the artist produced at around the same period, in which the crowd constantly threatens to break down the atmosphere that the artist establishes between the observer and the observed. Nevertheless, from this time onwards, the depiction of the nude, like that of the passer-by, would depict a \textit{shared} space.

\textit{Allusions to the classical nude}

Bonnard produced these erotically charged scenes of the nude body only for a short period in the years around 1900 before abandoning the theme, perhaps deciding he had taken it as far as he could.\textsuperscript{391} Nevertheless, for some critics these paintings mark a high point in the artist’s youthful output that would be followed by a less interesting and “reactionary” period in which Bonnard produced seeming conventional naturalist depictions of women,\textsuperscript{392} sometimes

\textsuperscript{390}Natanson owned another version of \textit{Indolence} (1899), as well both \textit{Man and Woman in an Interior} (1898) and \textit{Man and Woman} (1900), as discussed in Chapter Two. Maillol owned the slightly earlier version of \textit{Man and Woman} (c.1899-1900), and Vuillard owned a painting by Bonnard produced at around this time of a woman on a bed, clothed, but depicted in a provocative way. The version of \textit{Indolence} discussed in this chapter was kept by Bonnard until his death. Most of this information has been gathered from catalogue entries in Elderfield and Whitfield (eds.), 74, 82, 84 and 94.

\textsuperscript{391}This is one of a number of reasons suggested by Antoine Terrasse for Bonnard abandoning the genre. Interestingly, Terrasse, who was the artist’s grand-nephew, suggests another reason might have been because these particular paintings were too self-revealing. Terrasse, \textit{Bonnard: Nudes}, np.

\textsuperscript{392}For instance, Steven A. Nash claims: “Although aspects of Bonnard’s late style can be detected in his earliest work, it
depicted naked, but often in a state of semi-dress, as can be seen in *Young Woman Seated on a Chaise* (1904) [fig. 92]. The vast majority of these pictures are very small scale in scale, and certainly lack the deep symbolic resonances that are so striking in paintings like *Indolence* and *Siesta*. Yet, as is often the case in Bonnard’s oeuvre, such seemingly inconsequential portrayals of contemporary life hide allusive references to more universal themes, undermining the view that he had embraced more conservative conventions. For instance, it was during this period that Bonnard first showed interest in depicting the nude standing in a position poised between movement and repose, a conceit clearly borrowed from classical sculpture. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the appropriation of these poses, or non-poses, became an integral feature in many of Bonnard's depictions of the nude. Additionally, while the influence of Degas is still very prominent in these naturalist pictures, the sculpturally modelled figures in paintings such as *Seated Nude Reflected in a Mirror* (1905) [fig. 93], suggests that by this point, the classical inspired nudes of Renoir had become a point of reference. From the 1880s, Renoir had begun to make the nude the central focus of his pictures, depicting women as monumental sculptural forms that dominate over the rest of the design of the painting [fig. 94].

Nevertheless, critics have been correct in viewing Bonnard’s depictions of women roughly between the years 1904 to 1906 as less captivating than the nudes produced both immediately before and after, a consensus that is reflected in the fact that they are often omitted from retrospective exhibitions. Perhaps such unevenness in the overall standard of this work can be explained by the artist’s desire to appeal to an art market that treated naturalism as a very saleable commodity; the artist admitted later in life that he had rushed many smaller canvases in order to procure sales, a state of affairs that is visible in a photo from 1905 showing many

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began to emerge as a confident and mature language only toward the end of the century’s first decade, following a somewhat reactionary, somberly naturalistic interlude in his development.” Steven A. Nash, ‘Tradition revised: some sources in late Bonnard’ in Newman (ed.), *Bonnard*, 19.

393 For this insight into Renoir’s use of sculptural modeling, see Patrick Heron, ‘Renoir’ in Patrick Heron and Mel Gooding (ed.), *Painter as Critic – Patrick Heron: Selected Writings* (London: Tate Publishing, 1997), 113-15.
such pictures being worked on simultaneously [fig. 95].

By the end of 1906, Bonnard appears to have made a conscious effort to recapture the more complex and enigmatic elements of his earlier nudes in a series of pictures that centre on the washstand in the bedroom he shared with Marthe in the rue de Douai. A photo from around the same time [fig. 96] shows that Bonnard even borrowed back the earlier painting *Man and Woman*, suggesting he intended to revisit the themes in this enigmatic work produced at the turn of the century. This is born out in a painting from this period, *Nudes Reflected in the Mirror* (1907) [fig. 97], which is in many ways a re-imagining of the situation that took place in the same bedroom depicted seven years earlier. However, this time, Bonnard makes it more explicit that the viewpoint is established through the reflection in the mirror with the inclusion of several items on the washstand, which positions the viewer in the same place outside of the canvas occupied by the man staring at himself. The mirror as a pictorial device that could expand the portrayed parameters of an intimate space had been a regular strategy Bonnard used in his so-called naturalist pictures, as can be seen in *Seated Nude Reflected in a Mirror*. However, Bonnard also developed new ways to exploit the flat surface of the canvas in order to reduce the depth represented in a reflection and produce an analogy between mirror and painting. For instance, in *Woman Getting Dressed* (1906) [fig. 98], it is only the nude figure who appears in the mirror, the depth of which is curtailed by its reflecting the brown wall in the top right corner of the picture, producing the likeness of a painting of a woman within the painting. Such an analogy complies with the Symbolist principle that treated the decorated, flat surface of the canvas as an object separate from nature, demarcated by its frame. In such instances as *Woman Getting Dressed*, Bonnard plays on the traditional view of the mirror as symbolic of both

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Footnotes:

394 For the argument that Bonnard produced paintings of a sub-standard quality in order to satisfy the art market, see Nicholas Watkins, *Bonnard: Colour and Light*, 11.

395 It has recently been stated that these paintings depict the bedroom shared by Bonnard and Marthe in the Rue Lepic (Benesch, 26). However, Bonnard and Marthe did not move into this flat until some time in 1908, the year after most of the washstand paintings had been painted.
truth and deceit to emphasise his own aesthetic conviction that the painting as a decorative object is also representative of these two contrasting polarities. In doing so, the mirror is a means of revealing to the viewer the woman who is otherwise hidden, thus emulating art itself. In *Nudes Reflected in the Mirror*, meanwhile, the reflection distorts the perspective in which the woman in the background is viewed, combining with the light depicted shining on her body so she appears to us as a gold figurine, conforming to the idea that mirrors capture and immortalises youthful beauty. Intriguingly, this image would be re-imagined in the context of an outdoor bathing scene for the sketch *Nude in a Landscape* (1907) [fig. 99], which highlights that, in the course of looking again at themes present in paintings like *Man and Woman*, Bonnard had become reinvigorated by the portrayal of a woman as a goddess-like vision.

Although Bonnard continued to utilise ancient sculpture in his representations of the nude in the years following *Man and Woman*, it was appropriated primarily as a counterpoint to the everyday, allowing the artist to allude to something more permanent without upsetting the naturalist image. The portrayal of the woman in *Nudes Reflected in the Mirror* breaks with such naturalist description, evident in the way that the artist explicitly transforms the woman into a figuration of something attaining to an ideal. From this point onwards, Bonnard would continue to use his depictions of women situated in a washing area in the bedroom, and later in a bathroom, as a means of symbolising a vision of beauty, much in the same way that he had used the figure of the passer-by in his street scenes from the 1890s. Moreover, in returning to the theme of bathing at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Bonnard embarked on a body of work that would occupy him until the end of his life, in which the depiction of the nude female form in an intimate space is used as a means to meditate upon questions concerning the fabric of existence.

*Reflections on the nude*
Bonnard had first envisaged depicting the nude in the mirror of a bedroom in the previous decade, as witnessed in an early version of *Indolence* (1899) [fig. 100]. For whatever reason, he abandoned this perspective in the two subsequent versions of the scene he painted, opting instead for a more direct approach in the portrayal of the nude body, perhaps realising this would increase the immediate eroticism of such an image. His decision to revisit this vantage point in a series of paintings from around 1908 was surely partly due to his newfound interest in the symbolic potential of the mirror. But the use of the mirror also provided a means for Bonnard to incorporate a new pictorial image into his work, namely the female body cropped so as to resemble a ‘fragment’ of an ancient sculpture.

The use of cropping to depict the human body as a fragment was particularly widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century among artists like Manet and Degas, who had used it to articulate the disconnection that was felt to lie at the heart of urban existence. However, specifically portraying a sculptural fragment within a painting goes back further still, having been a popular motif with Romantic artists who often used such imagery to symbolise a yearning to revive the perceived glories of ancient civilisations.\(^{396}\) The first artist to have produced ‘fragments’ as modern pieces of work in their own right was the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), who in the late nineteenth century began making sculptures of the body that were intentionally incomplete [fig. 101].\(^{397}\) In 1904, only shortly before Bonnard began to use such imagery in his own work, Rodin published two articles on classical sculpture in which he argued that the fragment, while incomplete in the eyes of an archaeologist, contained a “power within” for the modern artist.\(^{398}\) Bonnard, who was in contact with Rodin during this

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\(^{396}\) For an examination of the use of the fragmented body in Western art, see Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).


period, might have read these articles written by the sculptor, and perhaps even visited his private gallery of antiques in Meudon, which included many such fragments. The fragment was certainly very much on Bonnard’s mind in 1908, as evidenced in certain illustrations produced for Octave Mirbeau’s motorcar memoir *La 628-E8* (1908), which contains two depictions of ancient sculptures that are missing various parts of their ‘body’ [fig. 102].

Such an image resembling a sculptural fragment is visible in *Mirror on the Washstand* (c. 1908) [fig. 103] in the depiction of the model on the right of the reflection, presumably getting dressed after posing for the artist. In portraying the moment that the headless and almost limbless reflection of the woman picks up an item of her clothing, she is transformed into a fragment of one of the many Roman copies of the now lost *Aphrodite of Knidos*, a sculpture which was distinctive for its depiction of the goddess lifting up a robe having just bathed. Again, this demonstrates Bonnard’s use of the instant to extract symbolic meaning from the seemingly commonplace, infusing it with something otherworldly. Once captured permanently onto the canvas or, in this instance, a reflection that imitates a canvas, the image transcends the here and now with its suggestion of something more permanent. Yet the inclusion of a fully clothed woman who sits to the right of the fragmented nude in *Mirror on the Washstand*, likely a depiction of Marthe, initially strikes the viewer as strange, especially given that she appears to be absorbed in her own world and unaware of the other woman in front of her. Once again, Bonnard’s desire to resist including a narrative in the image emphasises the seeming randomness and ambiguity of the instant that has been captured. Nevertheless, this also appears to be a reversal of the tactic Bonnard often employs of gradually disclosing something unusual from a seemingly banal situation. With Marthe and Bonnard sharing the apartment in

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399The possible influence of Rodin on Bonnard’s depiction of fragmented bodies was first suggested by Anna Gruetzner Robins in Anna Gruetzner Robins, ‘Reflections in a Mirror: Bonnard’s Aphrodite’ in Amy C. Smith and Sadie Pickup (eds.), *Brill’s Companion to Aphrodite* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 379-80.
the rue de Douai, it is likely she would have been present when models were posing for the artist. Although the studio was above the rest of the apartment,\footnote{This information is garnered from an account in Count Harry Kessler’s diary which describes a visit he made to Bonnard at the rue de Douai in 1908. Laird M. Easton (ed.), Journey to the Abyss: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler, 1880-1918, Vintage, Random House, New York, 2013, 442.} as Bonnard rarely painted in front of his models, he probably had them pose for him in the domestic quarters. In capturing the instant Marthe lifts up a cup and the model begins to get dressed, Bonnard exploits the symbolic potential of this moment to produce a dialogue between the pair, representing two different concepts of women: the sacred and the profane. Such a depiction again allows for a comparison with the work of Baudelaire, who had insisted that beauty was a synthesis of the modern and the universal; even in the urban atmosphere of ‘A Une Passante’, the modern woman who mesmerises the narrator is described as having a leg “like a statue” (“avec sa jambe de statue”), belying a permanence behind the modern façade of her dress. The reflected image in Mirror on the Washstand depicts these dual properties of the singular ‘object of desire’, articulated in this instance in the form of two separate women.

In his notes on painting written in the 1930s, Bonnard would distinguish between “the model you have before your eyes, and the model you have in your head”,\footnote{“Le modèle qu’on a sous les yeux, et le modèle qu’on a dans la tête.” Bonnard, Observations sur la peinture, 39.} an observation that indicates his conception of the female form as an ‘object’ that is confronted in the visible world, which in the painting must be reconciled with a plastic conception of beauty. This distinction also has similarities with the Platonic notion that there is a special relationship between ideal ‘Beauty’ and visible beauty. Although Platonists conceived of universal absolutes or ‘Forms’ as existing in a realm separate from that of material reality, in the case of ‘Beauty’ it was believed that traces of it were available to the senses, particularly in the shape of the erotic object.\footnote{Robin Waterfield, ‘Introduction’ in Plato, Phaedrus, xlv.} According to Plato then, the beauty before our eyes and the ideal form of Beauty in our minds are indelibly linked, as it is through the former that we can aim towards attaining an
understanding of the latter; erotic love therefore becomes a pursuit of the eternal. In his influential studies on classical art, the nineteenth century German archaeologist Heinrich Brunn (1822-94) had asserted that Greek sculpture was a material embodiment of the Platonic ideal of ‘Beauty’.\textsuperscript{403} The ‘fragment’ when represented in the mirror thus provided Bonnard with a pictorial image that became shorthand to express the plastic beauty that resides in the realm of ideas.

In \textit{The Washstand} (1908) [fig. 104], Bonnard focuses on the same part of the bedroom portrayed in the previous painting, but this time it is only the ‘fragment’ of a woman that is depicted in the mirror. The emphasis the artist places on the theme of washing in this painting and others can be seen as another reference to Venus or Aphrodite, who the Ancient Greeks associated with water and purity.\textsuperscript{404} Hesiod for instance had claimed in his genealogy that Aphrodite had been born in the sea, an episode that had been a popular theme for artists since the Renaissance. In fact, with the mirror taking up such a prominent position in \textit{The Washstand}, the body of the model becomes the focal point of the painting, while the rest of the space taken up predominantly with washing implements seemingly exists \textit{for her}, producing an image of a woman that is both intimate and distant; as will be discussed later, this tension would become a major theme in Bonnard’s bathroom paintings over the next three decades. While naturalist pictures of models posing either clothed or undressed in his apartment in the rue de Douai had occupied Bonnard since the turn of the century, with its depiction of a lover or model washing herself seemingly unaware of being seen, \textit{The Washstand} highlights how Bonnard had started to re-engage with the seemingly incidental moments provided by the nude body, now transformed in his imagination into a figuration of universal import, a theme which had

\textsuperscript{404}Ibid., 36.
preoccupied him before 1900.

*Celestial* Venus and *Earthly* Venus

Re-imagining images of ‘Venus’ in a secular setting had been a regular subject in Western art going back to the Northern Renaissance, but it is likely that Bonnard was particularly influenced in his decision to portray this theme from examples he would have seen by the Flemish painters of the Fontainebleau School, through whom the tradition had come to France in the sixteenth century. A year before he began working on *The Washstand*, Bonnard had used one of the paintings in the collection of the chateau of Fontainebleau, *Apelles Painting Alexandra’s Mistress Campaspe* [fig. 105] of which he owned a postcard, as the basis for his own picture *The Rape of the Nymph* (1907) [fig. 106].

However, the circumstances presented by modern life would also have played a part in Bonnard’s decision to tackle this theme. Following a spate of cholera epidemics in the nineteenth century, a concerted effort had been made to improve the amenities for delivering clean water into households, offering painters such as Bonnard the opportunity to present a vision of Venus in an intimate and modern setting. The most ambitious of these pictures in terms of both its scale and symbolic content is *Nude Against the Light* (1908) [fig. 107]. Bonnard’s portrayal in this painting of a room radiating in an atmosphere of light and a symphony of colour became a pictorial device that, as was discussed in Chapter Three, he would continue to use throughout his career in order to transform the everyday into a vision of otherworldliness. The interaction between the sunshine and the material of the thin, translucent curtains, provides a pattern that is repeated throughout the painting, bestowing the

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406 Ibid., 39-40.
408 Havelock, 35.
objects of the room with an effervescent texture that strengthens the overall decorative appeal of the image. Again, the viewer is presented with a ‘fragment’ of a woman’s body resembling a sculpture in the mirror above the washstand, but in *Nude Against the Light* this area of the bedroom is positioned in the upper left corner of the canvas, while the depiction of the woman spraying perfume onto her nude body becomes the main focus of the composition; instead of concentrating on the image reflected in a mirror, the painting displays a direct view onto the scene. No longer merely represented within the reflection of the mirror; the space of the room is opened up, providing a sense of depth, which had been curtailed by the artist in the previous painting, as well as emphasising that this is now a shared environment between two lovers, producing a similar sense of intimacy that was apparent in the erotic paintings from the turn of the century. It is also noticeable how the depiction of the nude in this picture, more than many others of the period, seems to conform to expectations regarding ‘feminine beauty’, the breasts of the centrally placed and sensuously rendered nude tilted upwards as if on offer to the viewer.

Whereas before, the body had been revealed at one remove through a reflection, in *Nude Against the Light* it is imbued with the same symbolic potency that had been achieved through the depiction in the mirror in the other paintings. The nude is depicted in a moment when her statuesque body basking in the light produces a *contre-jour* effect, surrounding her body in a radiant glow. The same strategy would be repeated in a later painting, *The Bowl of Milk* (c. 1919) [fig. 108], in which the action of a young girl as she lifts up one of her arms combines with the backdrop of the light to momentarily transform her into an Ancient Greek kore [fig. 109].

In placing the figure in *Nude Against the Light* almost in the centre of the canvas, Bonnard highlights her significance as the dominating element of the composition. While he often left an empty space in the middle of his paintings, in the nudes from this period he followed the example of Renoir by focusing the pictorial design around a centrally positioned and
sculpturally formed body that produces a sense of monumentality. Conversely, the almost passing reference to the metaphysical beauty of the fragment makes it seem less significant in contrast to the representation of the ‘living’ woman glowing in the light from the window. This juxtaposition is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s claim that Phryne, the Athenian courtesan who was the model for Praxiteles’ Aphrodite of Knidos according to ancient sources, makes Plato frown, her sensuous facticity more appealing to humankind than the abstract metaphysical love advocated by the Greek philosopher.

The resemblance the ‘fragment’ in Nude Against the Light has with the Venus de Milo [fig. 110] also suggests an interesting parallel with Mallarmé’s ambition to fashion a post-Christian idea of ‘beauty’ at the heart of his work. For the poet, the Venus de Milo represented an incarnation of the classical world’s unconscious and immediate sense of beauty as a continuous and attainable presence in the universe. However, according to Mallarmé, Christianity with its promise of a paradise after death had “bitten the heart of beauty”, as conveyed in the strange smile of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, resulting in humankind’s indifference and dissatisfaction with this world. Therefore, his principle objective had been to develop in his work “an explicitly post-Christian embodiment of beauty” that, while accepting of the contingent world for what it is, still strives to create meaning from this nothingness. Viewing Nude Against the Light within this framework, Bonnard’s different depictions of the woman in the mirror and in the room echo both the classical concept of beauty, as well as an image of beauty that is present in the modern world. The representation of these two apparitions side-by-side – one fragmented and remote, the other whole and attainable – allows Bonnard to create a distinction between a ‘celestial’ or metaphysical Venus and an ‘earthly’ physical Venus; the latter, who had been

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409 Ibid., 42-3.
411 Pearson, 68.
412 Ibid., 69.
413 Ibid., 68-70.
associated by Plotinus and the Roman poet Lucretius with ‘Mother Earth’,\textsuperscript{414} is captured in the image Bonnard produces of the concrete woman in the sunlight, a symbol of nature and its continuous regenerating power. It will become apparent later in this chapter that, as the twentieth century progressed, the depiction of the female form as an embodiment of the creative and regenerative powers of nature, as well as a ‘post-Christian’ portrayal of beauty, would become increasingly important for the artist in combatting his own disillusionment with the political climate in Europe. Whether as a ‘fragment’ in a mirror representing a classical ideal [fig. 111], or expressed as a whole body personifying the ineradicable presence of nature [fig. 112], Bonnard would continue to use the image of the female nude as a way to symbolise these different conceptions of beauty. The artist was also versatile with his use of such imagery, as demonstrated in a painting such as \textit{Nude Bathing} (1930) [fig. 113], in which the symbolic roles of these two different manifestations of the female form are seemingly reversed so that it is the ‘fragment’ that can be seen as an embodiment of physical beauty. Painted over a decade after \textit{Nude Against the Light}, the artist once again uses the representation of light entering a room from outside in order to illuminate the woman's body. However, while in the earlier painting, the woman is shown facing the window basking in the ethereal atmosphere produced, the posture of her counterpart in \textit{Nude Bathing} is turned away from the source of the light, almost cowering from it, rendering parts of her frozen body in a stone-like white. This time it is the fragmented female form in the reflection that, positioned directly towards the light, seems to ‘come alive’, the shimmering and sensuously painted flesh providing a contrast with the statuesque body in the room. Meanwhile, Bonnard continued to develop new strategies in order to portray the relationship between the observer and the observed, some of which will be

explored in the following section.

**A shared environment**

Although Bonnard would continue to include mirrors in many of his depictions of the nude in a domestic environment, from around 1910 the artist became increasingly concerned with producing compositions which present a shared and intimate space in which the female body appears directly to the viewer and not through a reflection. As pointed out by Hyman, the subject of many of these paintings is not merely the representation of a body, but an exchange between the self and the ‘other’.\(^{415}\)

Bonnard’s decision to produce interior bathing scenes at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, a subject he had shown only a passing interest in before, is likely to have once again been encouraged by the example that had been set in this genre by Degas, an artist he was personally close to at the time. The two painters regularly saw one another at the dinner parties hosted by Vollard in the basement of his gallery,\(^{416}\) and it is here as well where Bonnard would have had the chance to see some of the ageing artist’s latest nudes then owned by the dealer, such as *Bather Drying Herself* (c. 1905-6) [fig. 114].\(^{417}\) Bonnard’s decision to portray the nude with the same type of portable tub seen in the Degas picture, instead of on a bed, shows that the older artist had begun to inspire him in his choice of imagery. However, it is not only the bathing motif in Bonnard’s nudes from this period and throughout the 1910s that shows a closer affinity to the work of Degas than in his previous depictions of the female body from the turn of the century. In a series of paintings of a woman crouching in a tub as she washes [fig. 115], her body

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\(^{415}\) Hyman, 170.

\(^{416}\) Hyman, 72.

\(^{417}\) As related in Count Kessler’s diaries, Vollard would often show off his latest purchases to his guests. On one such occasion, an initially skeptical Bonnard was won over by Picasso’s recent proto-cubist work after the dealer placed them side-by-side with a self-portrait by Vincent van Gogh. Bonnard is quoted as saying: “Since I have seen this portrait of van Gogh, so blurred and drab in comparison, I have a better opinion of Picasso.” Easton (ed.), 442.
is viewed from above, an imposing perspective that had notoriously been used in representations of the nude by Degas, such as The Tub referred to above. While the paintings Bonnard produced of a woman lying on a bed at the turn of the century had provocatively portrayed her as staring directly at the viewer, in these later pictures the artist uses the naturalist convention that depicted the nude woman seemingly unaware she is being watched, her face obscured to prevent the audience from interpreting her psychological state.

Yet, while Bonnard certainly uses many of the same pictorial strategies that had been developed by Degas, it is the way he subsequently manipulates such conventions for his own expressive purposes, of both psychological and symbolic import, that become a blueprint for his own representations of the nude. Specifically, in the pictures he produced in the 1910s of Marthe crouching in the tub, Bonnard subverts certain elements of Degas’ paintings of the nude that were then associated with voyeurism, in order to present a more intimate portrayal that combines naturalism with Symbolism. For instance, while Degas had maintained an atmosphere of aloof observation in his representations of women at their toilette, so as to capture them behaving as they would in private, Bonnard sought ways in which the portrayal of the nude in an unguarded moment could be transferred into a shared space, thus producing in this intimate environment a psychological tension between the viewer and the object of desire; as certain critics have noted, although the women in Bonnard’s nudes are physically present, they are often emotionally distant as well.

A photograph Bonnard took of Marthe washing herself in their shared Paris apartment from around 1908 [fig. 116], an image he would use as the basis for the paintings of a woman crouching in the tub, offers an insight into how the artist manages to convey in his paintings this

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418 For contemporary views on Degas in terms of a perceived voyeurism, see Richard Thomson, *Degas: The Nudes*, 139-42.
complex relationship between the subject and the observer in a shared space. While Marthe carries out her ablutions, Bonnard has raised his closed fist into the foreground of the shot, so that when the picture is taken, it not only captures the image of her absorbed in washing herself, but also of his hand in a position that shares the same space as her; with his body hidden behind the camera lens, this sense that there are two objects inhabiting the same space could not otherwise have been achieved had Bonnard taken a regular photo. In *Nude Crouching in the Tub* (1918) [fig. 117], one of the paintings based on this snapshot, the woman is seen from a closer position than in the photograph, meaning the viewer now takes up the position of Bonnard’s fist in the initial image. Meanwhile, the sudden cropping of the bottom of the picture, so that only half of the tub can be seen, accomplishes the visual illusion that another person is immediately in front of the woman, outside the confines of the canvas. Bonnard’s use of cropping to suggest a cohabited space combines with his portrayal of the woman as uninhibited by the presence of the other person so as to produce within the painting a psychological barrier between her and the observer. It is in this way that such representations differ from those works by Degas that present the same subject matter; for instance the pastel composition *Woman in a Tub* (c. 1883) [fig. 118], where the lack of any compositional cues indicating the presence of another person entitles the viewer to freely examine and explore the image of the naked body with a more detached attitude.419

Similarly to the example of *Man and Woman* discussed in in Chapter Two, the viewer of Bonnard’s bathing pictures is made conscious if their own complicity in looking at the subject of the painting, but this is now achieved in the tension the artist provides in presenting a seemingly inaccessible nude within an intimate atmosphere. Paintings such as *Nude Crouching*  

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419 Harrison argues that Bonnard’s use of compositional cues in his paintings of Marthe distinguishes them from Degas’ pictures. Harrison, 120. The comparison that I have made between the nudes of Bonnard and Degas is not meant to imply that there is nothing uncomfortable in the imagery of the former’s work.
in the Tub can therefore be seen to demonstrate Bonnard’s ability to develop his own variation on the naturalist depiction of a woman washing, broadening the thematic range to include a relationship between two people sharing the same intimate space.

The unattainable body

On one level, the subject matter of these paintings is undoubtedly a testament to the bohemian lifestyle that Bonnard enjoyed with Marthe during this period of his life, for although by the beginning of the twentieth century specific washing areas within the household were no longer the preserve of the rich, societal strictures still dictated that even married couples should carry out their ablutions in private.420 Living together out of wedlock in an apartment in the rue de Douai, the couple slept and washed in the same room below the artist’s studio, a situation that provided Bonnard not only with a constant resource in terms of subject matter, but also the means to present a non-contrived image of the nude that was both naturalistic and risqué in its setting. So, although paintings presenting the nude in the tub might appear more straightforward in comparison to the images of works such as The Washstand, it would be a mistake to regard these pictures purely in terms of naturalism. Devoid of much of the suggestive imagery Bonnard had used previously, such as the depiction of mirrors and fragmented bodies, the more direct approach presented in paintings such as Nude Crouching in the Tub manages nevertheless to convey to the viewer symbolic associations. For instance, the depiction of a florescent pink light glow emanating from a crack below the door provides the source for a light that floods the surface of the floor and reflects off the water being poured from the jug, imbuing the entire image with an ethereal atmosphere of bright colours that encircles the body depicted in the centre of the canvas. The portrayal of light and water also has a more symbolic purpose, for it is the association they have with renewal and fecundity that transforms the body they

420 Laneyrie-Dagen and Vigarello, 143-5.
surround into a depiction of Venus, the goddess of sex and fertility. Bonnard is thus able to produce this metaphor in *Nude Crouching in the Tub* without relying on the more explicitly symbolic imagery of the fragmented body, allowing instead for a ‘metamorphosis’ to occur the instant that the light and water engulf the woman, freezing in time her statuesque figure. In doing so, Bonnard follows a tradition made popular in France in poems by nineteenth-century writers such as Baudelaire and Théodore de Banville (1823-91), in which the flesh of the contemporary female nude is re-imagined as stone or marble to produce a modern representation of ‘beauty’ that marries the present day with antiquity. The depiction of a woman pouring the water in paintings like *Nude Crouching in the Tub* is particularly symbolic in this respect, as it elicits an image of the Ancient Greek custom in which statues were ceremoniously bathed as if they were living women. Yet, by emphasising the sensuous texture of the female body, Bonnard also uses the portrayal of the transitory moment to capture the mutation of the female form in the opposite direction, from an inanimate object of desire into living flesh, thus evoking the myth of Pygmalion as told by the Roman poet Ovid, in which a statue revered by its creator is transformed by Venus into a living woman.

However, it is again the artist’s appropriation of a naturalist trope that provides the painting with its most significant symbolic use of imagery; in depicting the woman as self-absorbed while she washes herself, her seeming indifference to the presence of another person in the room imbues her with a goddess-like aloofness. While Degas had used strategies such as presenting the nude from an invasive angle or obscuring the faces in order to present the women in his paintings as unaware that they are being looked at, Bonnard uses the same strategy, but instead in order to produce the impression that the bather is unmoved by the

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intrusion into her space. Although goddesses were sometimes depicted as vengeful, as in the story of Diana and Actaeon, they were also often portrayed as unconcerned with the world inhabited by mortals. This same sense of remoteness is discernible in the Greek sculptures of goddesses that provided Bonnard with many of the poses he uses in his depictions of the nude, such as the Venus de Milo, in which the represented deity is said to appear indifferent to the gaze directed at her naked form. This same detached aura can be seen for instance in the figure depicted in Large Nude in the Bath (1924) [fig. 119], in which the allusion to a deity disarms the sensuousness of the rendered flesh so that her beauty is both enchanting but also out of reach. Large Blue Nude (1924) [fig. 120], another painting that Bonnard appears to have based on the same initial sketch, has been described by one critic as portraying the woman as “more remote than ever”, despite the depiction of the artist’s presence in the room. The leg that encroaches into the scene, highlighting the physical closeness between the pair, ultimately adds to this sense of psychological disconnection.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the sense of detachment on the part of the woman depicted in these paintings should not be read in biographical terms. Nevertheless, the fact Bonnard spent most of his adult life living with one woman naturally had an impact on his artistic development, enabling him through this constant contact to explore themes about intimacy and estrangement, two poles of emotional response that are perhaps features of any long-term relationship. As we shall see in the following chapter, it was particularly the invention of the bathroom, an increasingly popular feature of the home in the first half of the twentieth century, which provided Bonnard with a particular space conducive to his artistic practice.

Disintegrating perspectives

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422 Havelock, 94.
423 Hyman, 163.
At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Bonnard gradually began to withdraw from life in the city, as he increasingly spent more time with Marthe in the countryside, a change of lifestyle that is reflected in the reduction of urban scenes in the artist's output. The representations of the nude from the mid-1920s usually, but not exclusively, depict Marthe in the bathroom of their villa at Le Cannet, pictures that use the same pictorial strategies he had developed over the preceding years. The private and secluded space of the bathroom, a sanctuary for the individual that is cut off not only from the rest of the house but also from the world, became an integral theme in Bonnard's depiction of everyday life. Although bathrooms had first been introduced into the houses of the wealthy towards the end of the previous century, by the 1920s they were a ubiquitous feature of day-to-day life. Nevertheless, the bathroom in ‘Le Bosquet’ had been specifically built for Bonnard when he first bought the property.

Bonnard would take advantage of this opportunity to explore in his representations of the nude the symbolic potential of this shrine to the solitary person, thus providing a further example of how, throughout his career, the artist was able to exploit developments taking place in French society for his own artistic purposes. Armed with paper on which to sketch, Bonnard would observe as Marthe carried out her daily ablutions, paying close attention to her movements and gestures and noting down any that particularly aroused his interest. Living together for so many years meant that such an arrangement occurred unaffectedly, but when other women modelled for Bonnard, he was often obliged to encourage them to move around the room instead of posing. It would seem therefore that it was crucial for Bonnard that the women he observed in the bathroom acted naturally in order for him to capture in his sketchbook a fleeting gesture rather than a contrived pose, the objective being to both record this appearance of self-

absorption, but also to use it in order to embellish the everyday routine of washing with a symbolic sense of grandeur. In *Nude on a Chair* (c. 1935-8) [fig. 121], it is the movement of the woman's left leg, a trivial action, which allows Bonnard to freeze her into a contrapposto position, resembling the pose of the *Aphrodite of Knidos*; even the image of the towel, an innocuous item casually placed on the chair, becomes part of this transfiguration on the canvas with its allusion to the sheet the goddess is often depicted as holding in copies of this classical work [fig. 122].

The contrapposto position as a basis upon which to portray the female form became an important pictorial strategy for Bonnard, its particular significance for the artist being the way it presents a body poised between rest and motion, thus suiting his desire to capture a fleeting instant that eschews both contrivances and narrative. Portraying an upright figure in this manner had first been developed in Ancient Greece by Polykleitos, whose sculpture the *Doryphorous* [fig. 123] portrays a soldier with one foot slightly off the floor. This state between movement and repose allowed Polykleitos to balance the axis of the body so as not to disturb its overall symmetry, producing a harmonious whole in the sculpture. Inspired by the numerology of the Pythagoreans, ancient sculptors believed that achieving this unity within a concrete form would give expression to the object's essence. Therefore, by appropriating the contrapposto stance in paintings like *Nude on a Chair*, Bonnard is able to use this established classical convention to express with the female form a vision of both metaphysical and physical beauty.

In *Nude Getting Out of the Bath* (c. 1926-30) [fig. 124] we can also see how Bonnard had begun to produce depictions of the female body towards the late 1920s that relied less on building the

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427Havelock, 17.
rest of the picture around its dominant, sculptural presence, but rather integrates the figure into the overall layout and texture of the image. In two paintings both called *Nude in the Bathroom*, one from 1931 [fig. 125] and the other from 1932 [fig. 126], the figure of the woman is placed in a position to one side of the central ‘void’, a pictorial strategy that integrates her body into the all-over decorative composition; in this sense, both these paintings are similar to the interiors that Bonnard produced in the same decade with their focus on the self-contained image. However, while in the interior pictures the portrayed figures blend in with the atmosphere of the room, to the extent that they are often barely visible, in the bathroom scenes, the image of the nude is always prominent, if not as dominating as in earlier paintings. Although the interiors discussed in Chapter Three contain images of other people, the autonomy of the figure is often undermined as it is subsumed by its surroundings, diminishing the presence of the body in the room. In fact, whereas with Bonnard’s interiors it is always the subjective relationship between an individual and the exterior world that is expressed in the image, this theme, previously so intrinsic to most of the artist’s work, begins to fade in the paintings of the bathroom produced from the 1930s onwards, as a sense of an observing presence disappears. For instance, in the slightly earlier version of *Nude in the Bathroom*, the lack of any clear pictorial cues to suggest the presence of an observer combines with the self-absorbed image of the nude to create a sense that the viewer is now inside a world that exists solely in the imagination of the woman depicted sitting on the edge of the bathtub.

With *In the Bathroom* (c. 1940) [fig. 127], another painting from this period, the relationship between an observer and a subject being observed has now completely dissolved, as we are instead presented with a depiction of the space of the room from the internal point of view of the person lying in the bathtub. Although this picture has understandably been interpreted as
a portrayal of the artist himself in the bath;\textsuperscript{428} it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Bonnard presents the scene from the perspective of the woman in an attempt to understand what it is like to be the subject of continual observation; it was around this time that Bonnard had begun work on his series of large nudes lying in the bath, paintings which, it shall argued, portray the room not from the point of view of the observer, but from the dreamlike perspective of the bather. Whether or not the painting depicts the scene from the point of view of the woman or of the artist himself, \textit{In the Bathroom} demonstrates just how far Bonnard had taken the theme of the bather by the time he reached the final decade of his life. And it is this very ambiguity between subject and object that Bonnard would continue to exploit in the final paintings he produced of a woman subsumed in the water of the bath.

\textit{The bathroom as sanctuary}

In 1926, when Bonnard bought the villa in Le Cannet known as ‘Le Bosquet’, one of the first things he did was to arrange for a bathroom to be fitted;\textsuperscript{429} consequently, from this point on, the bathroom in ‘Le Bosquet’ would become the setting for the vast majority of the nudes Bonnard produced over the next twenty years. Moreover, having a bath in the new house would provide Bonnard with the material to depict the nude in a new way not previously seen in his work, in which the body is almost completely covered by the water of the bath.

Although it was around this period that a bath, as opposed to portable tubs, started to become a common feature in Bonnard’s paintings of the nude, he had first depicted one in \textit{The Source} (1917) [fig. 128].\textsuperscript{430} in which we see a woman kneeling on one leg as she runs a hand through a

\textsuperscript{428}Hyman, 166. Mann makes the point that it must be Bonnard himself who is in the bath, as he always depicts the woman facing away from the French windows. Sargy Mann and Belinda Thomson, ‘Catalogue’ in Sargy Mann and Belinda Thomson (eds.), 82.

\textsuperscript{429}Michel Terrasse, \textit{Bonnard at Le Cannet}, 13.

\textsuperscript{430}The setting of this painting has been identified by Marina Ferretti Bocquillon as a bathroom in an apartment in Auteuil where Bonnard and Marthe moved in 1916. Marina Ferretti Bocquillon, ‘Brushstrokes Straight to the Heart: Bonnard’s Nudes’ in Cogeval and Cahn (ed.), 162.
running tap – a reinterpretation in a modern, interior setting of a theme that had in the past been used to portray the nude surrounded by nature, as can be seen in Courbet’s 1868 painting of the same title [fig. 129]. But it was not until the mid-1920s that Bonnard turned his attention to a new domestic bathing practice known in France as ‘détente’, meaning relaxation, which had only become customary during the first part of the twentieth century, replacing the previous convention of pouring water over the body, as seen in paintings such as *Nude Crouching in the Tub*. The transformation of the bathroom into the private space that it still is to this day was complete, offering a preserve for the individual in which they are secluded from the daily interactions of domestic and public activities; and it was precisely this aspect of the space that would be exploited by Bonnard in his images of a woman in the bath. Just as the bohemian-style cohabitation with Marthe in their Parisian flat had provided Bonnard with the opportunity at the turn of the century to subvert the voyeuristic depiction of the nude, replacing a sense of an intrusion into a private domain with the atmosphere of a shared space, once again, the artist was able to take advantage of his domestic situation to present the female form in a novel way.

Nevertheless, it was before the couple moved permanently to their villa in Le Cannet that Bonnard completed *The Bath* (1925) [fig. 130], which was to be the first of these images the artist produced over the following three decades in which the body is depicted from the neck down as completely immersed within the water. Despite *The Bath* presenting its audience with a body which is inert, it is worth pointing out that the painting shares certain similar themes with the artist’s depictions of the mobile nude. For instance, the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn to the sculpturally rendered body in the centre of the canvas, denoting its importance as an ‘object’ that is distinct from the other elements of the room, which consequently seem to exist *for* the bather. Presenting the nude in this way allows the artist to

\[\text{Laneyrie-Dagen and Vigarello, 167-8.}\]
continue to draw on the symbolic significance of water with its classical allusions to rebirth and regeneration, transforming the body into an image of the 'earthly' Aphrodite, the goddess the Ancient Greeks associated with the cyclical process of nature.

While these aspects of the painting demonstrate a continuation of the themes Bonnard had previously expressed through a depiction of the nude at her toilette, the state of détente in which the body is now presented provides the context for the artist to approach such concerns in new ways. Whereas before, the portrayal of the upright body in transit was used to convey an instant in which the female form assumes the grandeur of a classical sculpture, it is now the image of the nude subsumed in the water of a protective, womb-like bath that provides the picture with its symbolic import in its reference to the birth of Venus. Moreover, in avoiding any suggestion of movement in the depiction of the nude, Bonnard produces a picture that replaces the metamorphic instant with an image that is more meditative, further enhanced by the way in which the body is presented to the viewer from a point of view that hovers over it. In fact, although depicted in a central position on the canvas, this peculiar perspective looking down onto the body makes it more difficult for the viewer to position themselves in the space of the room, producing the effect that the female form lacks the immediate presence seen in previous paintings. Bonnard magnifies this sense of unattainability – one that is both physical and psychological – by exaggerating the size of the bath, so that the room appears to expand outwards from the body, producing a barrier between the observer and the observed. The physical space depicted in *The Bath* therefore represents the psychological sanctuary that the bathroom had become by the early twentieth century, one that provided its inhabitant with the environment in which to dream, as is conveyed through the image of the lowered eyes of the woman depicted in the painting. This portrayal of a dreaming bather, submerged in the protective womb or shell of the bath, would become an integral feature in subsequent depictions of the nude.
Meanwhile, the imagery of another painting Bonnard produced at the same time as The Bath offers a hint as to how he might have achieved a depiction of the nude that appears as both present and distant. Nude in the Bath (1925) [fig. 131] is a remarkable painting for various reasons, one of which is the way Bonnard uncharacteristically presents the scene from an ‘out of body’ perspective so that the image of the painting portrays the artist in the third person. Previously, Bonnard had relied on a reflection in a mirror in order to portray himself within the content of the picture, as was the case with Man and Woman, a painting that Nude in the Bath is often compared to. Bonnard depicts himself on the left side of the canvas standing over the stiff body in the bath he is presumably making a sketch of, an initial drawing that might be the basis for the other painting. So, although the woman in The Bath is presented in such a way so that it appears she is seen from the perspective of a bodiless gaze hovering over her, if the contemporaneous painting of this couple together in the bathroom is anything to go by, the idiosyncratic way in which her body is displayed was in fact conceived very much through a concrete situation in which the artist positioned himself directly above Marthe. However, by making the bath take up most of the space of the canvas and depicting the woman as though she is unaware she is being looked at, Bonnard reduces the impression that there exists a direct contact between subject and object. In this way, the painting takes as its starting point a form of representation that is particularly prominent in the work of Degas, in which a woman is depicted from the point of view of an observer standing directly above them. Yet forced to contemplate the presence of the woman in this unstable space, it is the viewer of The Bath and not the ‘other’ depicted that, in being unable to ground themselves in relation to the body,

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432 See Suzanne Pagé, catalogue entry for In the Bath, Pagé (ed.), 220 and Bocquillon, 162.
433 While Nochlin has claimed that the artist is captured making a sketch of his own face in the mirror for a prospective self-portrait, the similarity this painting has with The Bath suggests that it was a companion piece that takes a step back from the former, portraying the observer being observed, so to speak. For Nochlin analysis of the painting, see Nochlin, Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 135-7.
434 Richard Thomson, Degas: The Nudes, 12.
consequently loses a sense of their own selfhood. Nevertheless, although *The Bath* demonstrates that Bonnard had begun to experiment with ways to confuse the perspective upon which the viewer enters the space inhabited by the nude, negating his previous emphasis on the relationship between observer and observed, it would be another eleven years until he once more undertook such a pictorially complex depiction of the bather submerged in water.

*Dream worlds*

Between 1936 and 1938, Bonnard produced two large-scale paintings of a woman lying in the bath [fig. 132 and fig. 133], in which the body is once again presented from above and at an angle that makes it difficult to situate an observer. In *Nude in the Bath* (1936), the image of the woman submerged in the water of the protective shell or womb-like structure once again alludes to the birth of Venus. But unlike the similar painting from 1925, the symbolic significance of the overall scene in these two later pictures also relies on the depiction of an instant; for while the bath in the earlier painting is almost muddy in its texture, in these later representations of this motif, it is now covered in the various luminous colours produced from the light coming into the room from outside, an effect that is similarly produced in the tiles of the surrounding walls. Bonnard has thus frozen in time the fleeting instant in which the light passing through a window momentarily transforms the room into a dream-like arena – but whether it is the dream of the artist or of the bather remains intentionally unresolved. As discussed previously, the concept of ‘dream’ was an important concept for Bonnard and other Symbolist artists and writers, positioning the imaginative process somewhere between sleep and lucidity and transforming the arbitrary substance of material reality into something more meaningful once transposed onto the canvas. In *Nude in the Bath* for instance, it is the way that

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435 Depicting Venus or Aphrodite in a shell has, of course, a long tradition in Western art dating back to the fourth century B.C., and was most famously portrayed in Botticelli’s painting of the scene. As Geoffrey Grigson has pointed out, this is truly an invention of painters, as no poem – including Hesiod’s genealogy – mentions Aphrodite emerging from a shell. Geoffrey Grigson, *The Goddess of Love: The birth, triumph, death and return of Aphrodite* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1978), 36.
the artist portrays the walls in a radiant cascade of colours that particularly captures the reconfiguration of an otherwise everyday space into a dreamlike arena. However, while in his previous interiors Bonnard had included compositional cues that stress the image on the canvas is an expression of the observer’s imagination, in *Nude in the Bath* the scene is presented from a perspective that hovers above the depicted space, allowing the artist to suggest that it is the inner world of the sleeping bather that is portrayed in the painting. So although the painting of a woman lying motionless in the bath from 1925 had similarly removed from the represented space a sense of a relationship between the observer and the observed, it is the additional imagery of the light flooding the room that allows the artist to produce this other possible interpretation.

Using the imagery or pattern on the walls to represent the inner mind of a subject depicted sleeping is a pictorial strategy that Bonnard would have been familiar with in certain paintings by Gauguin such as *The Little One is Dreaming* (1881) [fig. 134], where the decorated space above the child’s head can be interpreted as wallpaper or alternatively as a depiction of the imagination souring free from the space in the room.\(^{436}\) It will also be recalled from the discussion in Chapter Three that Bonnard had always been interested in exploiting the environment of the intimate and confined domestic interior as means to depict the vast space of the imagination; therefore, in depicting the entire room filtered through the lens of a dream, the picture as a whole perhaps represents a projection of the imagination of the woman and not the observer. Depicting the room in this way to suggest the image represents the state of mind of the subject implies that the painting is a depiction of the bather looking down onto the representation of herself below as she sleeps, transporting the viewer into her own dream within a dream. Moreover, the lack of any window or open door depicting the outside world in

\(^{436}\)Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought*, 89.
Nude in the Bath, a feature in many of the artist’s previous interiors, suggests that it is the image of the woman who represents the vast enormity nature with its capacity for regeneration, a theme I shall explore in greater detail later in this chapter.

Although the portrayal of a woman lying submerged in the bath would become one of the themes with which Bonnard would be most associated, the fact he produced no more than five oil paintings of such a subject highlights what a difficult undertaking he found it to be. Bonnard himself, while painting The Large Bath (1937-8), claimed in an interview that he would “never again dare to engage upon such a difficult theme”, going on to claim that the image never came out in the way he wanted it to.\textsuperscript{437} It would, nevertheless, be a promise that he could not keep.

The image of this slightly later painting might at first seem almost identical to the one discussed above, yet the artist has now made the bath much larger so that it takes up a lot more of the canvas. The face of the bather is also less distorted, which has resulted in one critic conjecturing that it might be a portrait of a woman other than Marthe.\textsuperscript{438} However, a photograph of the painting [fig. 135] taken before the artist reworked certain sections reveals a face that is very similar to the image that looks like Marthe in the slightly earlier picture, suggesting that Bonnard has in fact made this alteration in order that the visage of the bather is more representative of an idealised image of ‘womanhood’. Bonnard’s fascination in both paintings with an ideal form of beauty conveyed through an engagement with his immediate surroundings demonstrates that that he continued to adhere to the Symbolist principle that envisaged universal themes within the microcosm of everyday life. During the final years of his life, Bonnard would continue to draw on his immediate environment, in particular using it in

\textsuperscript{437}Rydbeck, 49.
\textsuperscript{438}Although both paintings appear to be based on one initial drawing of Marthe, as Suzanne Pagé has noted, the slightly later painting also resembles one of Bonnard’s former lovers Renée Monchaty, demonstrating again the problem in always associating the image in the painting with Marthe. Pagé, catalogue entry for The Large Bathtub, in Pagé (ed.), 226.
order to express a theme of renewal in his work, both through the depiction of the body and in a portrayal of the natural world. This artistic objective would have especially important ramifications during the years of the Second World War, the subject of the final section of this chapter.

**An affirmation of life**

Following the outbreak of hostilities between France and Germany in 1939, Bonnard and Marthe left Paris for their secluded villa in Le Cannet, a move that would prove to be permanent, although they would have been unaware of this at the time; following the Fall of France in 1940, it became safer for the couple to remain in the south of the country, then under the control of the Vichy government. Bonnard continued to live at ‘Le Bosquet’ until his death in 1947, not visiting Paris until after the war, while Marthe, who died in 1942, would never see the city again. Thus it came to be that this artist who very rarely stayed in one place for long stretches of time had finally been forced to settle down. Nevertheless, these eight years that Bonnard spent in Le Cannet would be one of the most turbulent periods of his life. As well as having to cope with the loss of his wife, Bonnard would also have to contend with the deaths of Vuillard in 1940, his brother Charles the following year, Denis in 1943 and Roussel in 1944. Not wanting much company following his wife’s funeral, Bonnard invited only a picture dealer and a young local artist he had been teaching called Gisèle Belleud back to ‘Le Bosquet’ for the wake. Belleud notes in her journal that the usually reticent artist suddenly sat up and began shouting: “*Merde, merde, je t'emmerde, je t'emmerde.* No life is terrible. I have no sorrow. I am just furious, furious.”

Conditions in Le Cannet during the war were often difficult, and the artist could not help but see the irony of this when contrasting the current situation with how life in the south had once been. In a letter to the widow of another recently deceased friend, the Polish painter Józef

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Pankiewicz (1866-1940), Bonnard wrote that he remembered “the good times we spent together in the Midi”, before likening his current predicament to that of a “refugee”. In describing himself in these terms, Bonnard reflected an attitude shared by the thousands of French citizens who had fled their homes in the Nazi occupied zone to get to the Vichy and Italian controlled Mediterranean coast.

Given this increasing sense of isolation from both loved ones and a world now in the past, the artist turned to long solitary walks in the countryside and his continued fascination with capturing his surrounding environment in his painting as forms of comfort. While this decision to disengage from the wider events of the world has been used as a reason to attack Bonnard’s work, it is my contention that this attitude on the part of the artist in fact represented a form of resilience. In a letter written in 1940 to Denis, Bonnard maintained that it was only by continuing to work that older men like themselves could offer the “best form of defence” in these troubling times. While such a statement might be seen as merely referring to the artist’s own sense of self-preservation, I believe that, on the contrary, in continuing to use his painting as an expression of beauty, the work Bonnard produced in Le Cannet during the war was intended to present a message of hope through renewal, as well as representing a form of defiance against what Camus had labelled an era “intoxicated with nihilism”.

For Camus, artistic expression is both a rejection and an affirmation of concrete reality, a desire to replace its contingency with a unity of form, or ‘beauty’, that is already conceivable through an engagement with the natural world. Beauty expressed through art, according to Camus,
delivers humankind “the promise [that] can make this mortal and limited world preferable to and more appealing than any other”, thus providing a rejoinder to a nihilism that throws scorn on the universe as it is. Bonnard too had always regarded art as a response to a form of nihilism in which the material phenomena making up the universe is considered to be empty of any intrinsic meaning. As argued at the beginning of this thesis, instead of embracing such a state of affairs, Bonnard had at an early age been drawn to the Mallarméan concept in which the poet, facing such a void, must create meaning using this contingent data in order to present through the means of art the abstract Idea, or what I have argued Bonnard referred to as ‘beauty’. Therefore, rather than turning a blind eye to the cataclysms engulfing France and the rest of the world in the 1940s, as has been suggested, Bonnard’s continued pursuit of beauty offered a counterpoint to the crisis of civilisation. Refusing to change tact at this late stage of his life, Bonnard continued to use his art in order to affirm, not comment or criticise.

With this in mind, while a painting like *Nude in the Bathtub* (1941-6) [fig. 136] conveys the same universal theme of regeneration that is present in Bonnard’s work prior to the outbreak of war, given the almost hopeless political situation in France in the early 1940s, as well as the setbacks in the artist’s personal life, in presenting this portrayal of the cyclical process of nature, the image acquires a relevancy that is specific to the period in which it was produced. The woman in the bath can once again be seen to embody an ‘earthly’ Venus, this time protected by the faithful dog that the goddess had often been depicted with in paintings by artists such as Titian [fig. 137]. Meanwhile, the bath surrounding her static body is not only reminiscent of a

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444Ibid.
445“Art thus leads us back to the origins of rebellion, to the extent that it tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but which the artist presents and wishes to snatch from the grasp of history.” Ibid.
446I discuss these criticisms aimed at Bonnard in more detail in the Conclusion.
447Camus says: “In art, rebellion is consummated and perpetuated in the act of real creation, not criticism or commentary.” Ibid., 237.
protective shell or womb, but also of a coffin; the portrayal of Marthe in what would be the artist’s final painting of her thus evokes both life and death, communicating more markedly than ever through the picture’s symbolic imagery the idea of regeneration. The artist’s allusions to nature and myth in this work, as well as in others painted at the same time, is used to represent the hope implicit in nature’s continuous cycle, a reminder during these dark times that everything which dies will be reborn.

Although Marthe died during the period *Nude in the Bathtub* was being painted, it would be wrong to interpret the greater emphasis on the theme of life and death in the imagery as being linked specifically to this event; Bonnard’s fascination with the subject can be traced back to almost half a century earlier when he painted *Man and Woman*. Nevertheless, the spectre of mortality was certainly something that consumed Bonnard at the time, as is noticeable in the self-portraits he produced in the final two decades of his life. In *Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror* (1943) [fig. 138] for instance, Bonnard presents the viewer with a stark and unmerciful depiction of the frailty of his body, an image that is consistent with his description of it as a “carcass” in letters to friends at the time. But these images in the self-portraits of the fragility of life can also be interpreted as a counter to the ever-youthful appearance of the woman in the bathing pictures, who represents the vitality of something which is unaffected by the atrophy inherent in existence. Bonnard’s use of mythological iconography to depict such an ideal should therefore not be regarded as a way of ignoring the harsh realities of his era, but instead as a means of challenging through universal themes the transitory illusions of his own civilisation. This “search for the absolute”, a notion that the artist equated primarily with the work of

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448 For this interpretation, see Nochlin, *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye*, 139.
449 Bonnard refers to his body as a carcass in two letters written to Matisse in the 1940s. For instance, in a letter dated November 17, 1941, Bonnard writes: “[I] have to keep moving my old carcass around, but I manage it, and if I’m not tired I sleep badly.” Letter reprinted in full in Antoine Terrasse (ed.), *Bonnard/Matisse: Letters Between Friends*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 98.
Mallarmé,\textsuperscript{450} found its expression in the contemplative pictures Bonnard produced at the end of his life that draw on the stories humankind had always relied upon in order to make sense of the world. As we have seen earlier in this thesis, for Mallarmé, the yearning for something absolute was not only the preserve of the Symbolist poet or painter, but was an imaginative function intrinsic to humanity, as demonstrated by the folk tales and myths of every civilisation. Myth was thus a vehicle in which Bonnard could posit an image of beauty – his own term for this brief fathoming of an ‘absolute’ – to act as a counterpoint to the facticity of existence, just as it had been at the beginning of the century when he had used the Creation Story as the basis for \textit{Man and Woman}.

But if myth represented a search, as opposed to a fulfilment of the absolute, then it was the permanence of the natural world that provided a very real source of both comfort and inspiration for Bonnard.\textsuperscript{451} Writing to Henri Matisse (1869-1954) in 1940, Bonnard discussed the impact the surrounding countryside had on him during his morning walks: “[I] see things differently every day, the sky, objects, everything changes continually. You can drown in it. But that’s what brings life.”\textsuperscript{452} It was therefore the ever-changing appearance of nature that provided Bonnard with glimpses of a beauty that, while only manifesting itself momentarily, also contains a promise of something eternal through its continuous process of renewal. In \textit{The Garden at Le Cannet} (1945) [fig. 139], one of the last landscapes Bonnard would paint, the artist captures the ephemerality of a vision of beauty by using the underpainting to ensure that the different elements of the depicted habitat appear gradually, conveying to the viewer a sense that a fresh image has emerged in front of their eyes. But in freezing this moment of beauty onto the canvas, this sense of freshness also has a permanence that is expressive of nature’s constant

\textsuperscript{450}Mallarmé. \textit{La recherche de l’absolu.}” Bonnard, \textit{Observations sur la peinture}, 49.

\textsuperscript{451}Belleud notes: “For [Bonnard], nature was the most important part of his life, he reveled in the countryside and solitude, to better create and collect his thoughts.” Belleud, 148.

cycle of renewal. So, despite Bonnard’s conviction that the artwork is distinct from nature, it was only through a desire to emulate it that the artist could aspire to produce something that could equal it in its beauty. As he would assert in his notebook at around this time: “It isn’t about painting life, it’s about making the painting alive.”453 Such a reverence for the physical world is evident in another of Bonnard’s observations that, even when nature is distorted in the work of art, “it remains underneath”.454

There is therefore a conviction lying at the heart of Bonnard's painting that regards the presence of nature as integral to the production of the artwork, providing the physical matter that might in certain circumstances be conceived by the human mind as an image of beauty. Nevertheless, the lack of any inherent meaning in the world means that it is through the depiction of the instant, the moment that the perceiving subject senses a manifestation of beauty, that Bonnard is able to insert a unity into the image that is lacking in the transient and ever-changing appearances of nature. The desire to present such a unity highlights Bonnard’s belief that is only through transcending nature in the autonomous work of art that beauty can ultimately be communicated. This aesthetic principle that views art as something that must be independent of nature in order to be truthful, yet cannot turn its back on the visions of beauty that it offers, was one that was shared by Camus. In The Rebel, Camus states:

Art is an activity which exalts and denies simultaneously. ‘No artist tolerates reality,’ says Nietzsche. That is true, but no artist can ignore reality. Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is.455

Instead of viewing beauty as something that had been devalued in the first half of the twentieth century, its expression through art was, according to Camus, a rebuke to the nihilism that had

453 “Il ne s’agit pas de peindre la vie, il s’agit de rendre vivante la peinture.” Bonnard, Observations sur la peinture, 53. Own translation.
454 Bonnard, Observations sur la peinture, 33.
455 Camus, The Rebel, 219.
spread throughout the world. “Art,” Camus claims, “tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but which the artist presents and wishes to snatch from the grasp of history.” It was in this same sense that Roussel praised an exhibition of Bonnard’s work that took place in Paris in 1943. In a letter to Bonnard, Roussel told his friend: “[It was] a great moment finally, always clarity, a quiet and simple affirmation in this disorganised turmoil where our miserable time tries to find its way … [Some] coloured bits of canvas … justify, as Mallarmé would say, the raison d’être of the Universe.”

The depiction of beauty as a form of affirmation is, I believe, the pervading theme in Studio with Mimosa (1939-46) [fig. 140], a painting that depicts in one space the three vital components of Bonnard’s life: his relationship with Marthe, his work as an artist, and the presence of the natural world. In fact, although the painting is set indoors, portraying Bonnard’s studio in ‘Le Bosquet’, it is the portrayal of nature through the large window that dominates the space of the canvas, imposing itself on the interior both visibly and atmospherically in the way its protruding light colours the contents of the room. The bannister that appears at the bottom of the picture indicates that the observer looking out at the scene is positioned on a mezzanine, a separate part of the studio where he produced his smaller works that was accessible from a small set of stairs [fig. 141]. Depicted about to ascend these stairs is a woman, whose face can only just be made out in the bottom left corner of the picture. Although this depiction of human activity indicates that the scene has its basis in a memory, the shimmering effect of the yellow mimosas in particular imparts a sense of freshness into the picture that ensures the image pulsates as if taking place in the present moment. It is this overwhelming momentary vision of beauty of the scene outside that drowns the rest of the picture in its radiance, wresting time from the past in order to present it as something new. Looking at a painting like Studio with Mimosa, one is

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456 Ibid., 224.
457 'Pierre Bonnard and his Circle – A Crossed Chronology’, 147.
reminded of the words Camus uses in praise of the work of Proust: “[His] passion for faces and for the light, at the same time, attached him to life. He never admitted that the happy days of his youth were lost forever. He undertook the task of recreating them and of demonstrating, in the face of death, that the past could be regained at the end of time in the form of an imperishable present, both truer and richer than it was at the beginning.”

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter by analysing the ways in which Bonnard transported the theme of his depictions of women in an urban environment into the context of the domestic interior in a way that underlines the powerful relationship that exits between two concrete individuals. Furthermore, by using such poses as those in Graeco-Roman sculpture, Bonnard communicates the inner harmony and perfection associated with the goddess through the guise of a real-life woman. Moreover, such references to classical sculpture in Bonnard’s portrayal of the nude indicates the artist’s continued engagement with Symbolist aspirations, particularly the use of a representation of femininity to express the Mallarméan post-Christian ideal of beauty.

By producing a reappraisal of the final paintings Bonnard produced in his career, with an emphasis on those depicting a woman lying in the bath, I re-evaluated Bonnard’s reaction to the events that rocked France during the Second World, a conflict he is sometimes seen as ignoring in his work. In continuing to present a form of beauty through the image, I argued that Bonnard attempted to resist the overwhelming nihilism of his period. Ultimately, it was through presenting to the world a vision of beauty which transcends time and place that Bonnard wished to be valued. A year before his death, he wrote down: “I hope my painting will endure without craquelure. I should like to present myself to the young painters of the year 2000 with

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the wings of a butterfly.”⁴⁵⁹

Conclusion

Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I have endeavoured to provide the reader with a fresh understanding of Bonnard’s work through an attentive and sustained analysis of the images he produced, one which takes into account the particular importance of the theoretical issues at play which helped to shape his own aesthetic values. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that a certain pictorial strategy he developed early in his career in order to instill into the image a vision of beauty, what I have labelled the instant, should be considered an important feature of many of his artworks. Rather than using this conclusion to repeat at length some of the arguments I have already made, I shall take this opportunity to discuss the trajectory of Bonnard’s reputation over the course of the twentieth century and beyond, and briefly conclude with how I believe the current thesis fits into this critical heritage.

Contrasting trajectories

Bonnard’s work continues to present art historians looking at French painting in the first half of the twentieth century with a unique and fascinating case study. While the later work of many of his peers who emerged from the same late nineteenth-century artistic milieu as him has often not fared as well critically, Bonnard’s output from the second decade of the century onwards is regarded as containing many of his most important and accomplished paintings. This is surely due in part to the fact that, although Bonnard never lost interest in depicting the same themes and settings that first begin to appear in his work in the 1890s, he continued to develop new, innovating means of expressing these everyday subjects well into old age, as has been put forward in this thesis. Meanwhile, even before the twentieth century had reached its second decade, some of those around Bonnard had stalled in terms of their development, an example
of which can be seen most markedly in the case of his great friend Vuillard. In my opinion, Vuillard was the most exciting young artist in Paris in the 1890s, a decade which saw him produce a body of work that is far more radical in its approach and engaging to look at than most of what Bonnard produced during the same period. However, while much of Vuillard’s subsequent output is of a great standard, it often lacks the imaginative and visceral appeal that is so visible in the earlier work. Contrastingly, whereas the twentieth century saw a gradual stagnation in the innovations Vuillard had produced early on in his career, Bonnard has increasingly been viewed as an artist whose work does not seem out of place displayed alongside those of his younger Modernist successors. This disparity in each artists’ reputation is perhaps reflected in the fact that, although the two are often compared with one another, Bonnard is usually treated in an art historical context as a twentieth century painter, while Vuillard is more often considered to be relevant to an era that existed before the emergence of Modernism. Nevertheless, as the next section will go on to suggest, this contrast in the way the two artists have subsequently been categorised has not always been beneficial to Bonnard in terms of his legacy.

A “great painter”?

Despite the fact that Bonnard’s reputation has fared better in comparison to many of his friends and colleagues from the early part of his career, it is when his work has been placed in context with the various avant-garde movements of the twentieth-century that it has often been subject to criticism and sometimes even outright contempt. The most infamous dismissal of Bonnard’s relevance as an artist was made by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who is reported to have said:

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In an essay on the similarities and differences between the two artists, Belinda Thomson comments on the fact that somebody organising the slide collection at The University of Edinburgh made a decision to “categorise Bonnard as modern/twentieth-century artist … but to locate Vuillard, his junior by a year, with the artists of the nineteenth century. Belinda Thomson, ‘Bonnard and Vuillard: For and Against their Pairing’ in Zutter (ed.), 164. This different way of classifying each of them is a trend that I have observed elsewhere. For instance, in London currently, a number of paintings by Vuillard are on display at the National Gallery, whereas Bonnard’s work can be seen at Tate Modern.
That's not painting what he does. He never goes beyond his own sensibility. He doesn't know how to choose. When Bonnard paints a sky, perhaps he first paints it in blue, more or less the way it looks. Then he looks a little longer and sees some mauve in it, so he adds a touch or two of mauve, just to hedge. ... The result is a potpourri of indecision. ... Painting isn't a question of sensibility; it's a matter of seizing the power, taking over from nature, not expecting her to supply you with information and good advice. ... He's not really a modern painter: he obeys nature; he doesn't transcend it. ... Bonnard is just another neo-impressionist, a decadent; the end of an old idea, not the beginning of a new one.461

Picasso's scorn is directed both at an indecisiveness he detects on the part of Bonnard and the technique that he uses, associating the latter with a latent form of Impressionism. Bonnard can thus be disregarded as "not really modern", an accusation that he appears to have been aware of himself.462 But while Picasso's attack seemingly centres on issues aesthetics, there is, according to Bois, a political motivation underlying the diatribe, in which Bonnard's work is seen by the other artist as "banal and insipid petit-bourgeois sentimentality and cowardly abdication in the face of History."463 As discussed in Chapter Five, the impression among some that Bonnard ignored the events of his time, in particular the upheavals caused by two world wars, has been one that has persisted.464 While the notion that Bonnard was a peddler of conservative values has been challenged,465 it is a reputation that has stuck to a certain degree, as can be seen in some of the reviews for the recent exhibition which took place at Tate

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461 The comments about Bonnard were made to the painter François Gilot (b. 1921), Picasso's then partner, who later included them in her controversial book on the part of her life spent with the artist. François Gilot and Carlton Lake, Life with Picasso, 14th edn. (London: Virago Press, 2012), 254-5. There is another occasion on record in which Picasso discusses Bonnard at some length, but which has not received any attention in the Bonnard literature. In this other statement, Picasso compliments Bonnard – he might be talking about Twilight – in a very backhanded fashion: “I like him best when he isn’t thinking about being a painter, when he painted pictures full of anecdotes, literature, ‘told stories.’ Sure, when he put down a blue, then a mauve and so [sic] a pink, that was painting. But do you know the picture of a man with a boating hat and people in a garden, and a dog? ... what a marvelous painting! Actually that’s the best part, pictures full of literature, rotten with anecdotes, that tell stories. ...” Quoted in Dore Ashton (ed.), Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views, tr. Dore Ashton (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 161.

462 As quoted in the introduction, Bonnard is reported as saying: “Society was ready to welcome Cubism and Surrealism before we had reached our objective. We found ourselves in some sense suspended in the air.” Antoine Terrasse, Bonnard: The Colour of Daily Life, 75.

463 Bois, 53.

464 For instance, see the statements made by John Berger below.

465 For instance, in an essay on the representation of women in the work of both Bonnard and Matisse, Charles Harrison writes that his aim is to “question the assumption of [both] painters' conservatism”. Charles Harrison, 116. In a more recent essay by Jack Flam, the art historian states that Bonnard’s paintings project “a strong feeling of melancholy, alienation, and disquiet that they seem to propose something more like a critique rather than a simple affirmation of happiness ... quite the opposite of the ‘discreet charm of the bourgeoisie’ with which they are usually associated.” Jack Flam, ‘Bonnard in the History of Twentieth-Century Art’ in Amory (ed.), 56.
Modern.  

With this in mind, it is interesting that Matisse – the only artist who comes close to challenging Picasso as the most discussed painter of the first half of the twentieth century – regarded Bonnard as “the best of us all”.  

When in 1947, the leading art magazine Cahiers d’Art, published an opinion piece asking ‘Pierre Bonnard: Is He a Great Painter?’ – to which the answer was a resounding no – an angered Matisse scrawled across his own copy of the article: “Yes! I certify that Pierre Bonnard is a great painter, for today and for the future.”  

The article in question was written by Christian Zervos, described as a mouthpiece for Picasso by Hyman, who claims that it elaborated on a feeling among some people that Bonnard’s work was “laughably irrelevant and inconsequential” when viewed in the context of the social and artistic upheavals that took place during the twentieth century.  

A few decades later, just as Bonnard was beginning to be reassessed following a number of landmark exhibitions, critics such as John Berger attacked the painter for being “essentially a conservative artist”. Berger particularly condemns those who praise Bonnard’s work for “a retreat ... from political realities”, a criticism he also levels at the artist:

There is very little of the post-1914 world in Bonnard’s work. There is very little to disturb – except perhaps the unnatural peacefulness of it all. His art is intimate, contemplative, privileged, secluded. It is an art about cultivating one’s own garden. ... The fact that he is praised as a ‘pure painter’ underlines this. The purity consisted in his being able to accept the world as he found it.

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466 For instance, in his review in The Guardian newspaper, Adrian Searle writes: “I am ambivalent about Bonnard. The things I admire and that interest me in his paintings are not perhaps the things he fully intended. Aspects of his work that others find charming or life-affirming I soon weary of. ... Everything was absolutely lovely. I couldn’t wait to get away.” Adrian Searle, Pierre Bonnard review: monumental, monstrous – and rubbish at dogs, The Guardian, viewed 24 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jan/21/pierre-bonnard-the-colour-of-memory-review-tate-modern-london>.


468 Hyman claims that the artist’s son Pierre had rarely seen his father so angry than he was after reading the article. Hyman, 211.

469 Ibid.

470 Ibid.


472 Ibid.
Before the twentieth century was over, the art theorist Thierry de Duve managed to launch one more broadside aimed at Bonnard’s legacy, as well as at those who would consider him to be worthy of a place among his avant-garde contemporaries. In a section of his book *Kant after Duchamp* (1996) called ‘The Rodchenko/Bonnard Alternative’, Duve questions whether the avant-garde can still be seen to carry much currency when an artist such as Bonnard who is lacking in what he calls a ‘critical function’ is “rehabilitated”.473 Similarly to Berger, who admits to seeing some value in the artist’s depictions of the nude,474 Duve is quite willing to accept that Bonnard was an accomplished artist, stating that he is “infinitely better than Mondrian’s epigones”.475 What both of these critiques have in common then is not so much a disdain for Bonnard’s style of painting, but more a suspicion of what the function of his work is; what it is trying or, not trying as the case may be, to convey. The critical acceptance of Bonnard’s output is ultimately symbolic for each of these writers of what they deem to be a failure in art historical and theoretical discourse to make politically sound judgements.

*A painter’s painter*

Many of the issues that were at stake during the twentieth century that seemed to force people into a position of either condoning or defending Bonnard do not now seem as pressing as they must have done back then. In today’s world when even postmodernism seems antediluvian, it is not so easy to understand why the concern over whether Bonnard’s work is ‘modern’ (Picasso) or contains a ‘critical function’ (Berger/Duve) was once of such importance.

However, the desire to “rehabilitate” Bonnard – which surely can no longer be termed as “revisionist” as it was when Duve was writing in the 1990s –476 is still in vogue, as can be seen

474 Berger, 209.
475 Duve, 437.
476 Ibid.
in many of the recent exhibitions on the painter, which have made a point of highlighting aspects of his work that contradict any accusations of bourgeois sentimentality. In the catalogue of an exhibition analysing the relationship between Bonnard and Matisse, which took place between 2017 and 2018 in Frankfurt, Felix Krämer writes: “[On] closer inspection ... almost all [Bonnard’s] paintings have a threatening undertone that unsettles many viewers.”

This thesis might also be regarded as a further example of this trend. One of the presumptions that I set out to challenge from the beginning, for instance, is the notion, still very prominent today, that Bonnard is primarily a painter’s painter; in other words, Bonnard was more concerned with the presentation of formal considerations than he was with those things which might underpin his artistic practice like theoretical concepts or wider social and political issues. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Bonnard’s work does seem to have a particular appeal for painters, as is evident in the amount of them who have written monologues or articles about the artist, such as Hyman, Mann and Julian Bell. In fact, although Matisse’s enthusiastic appraisal of Bonnard is often used to counter the criticisms made by Picasso and Zervos, it is noticeable that his defense is based on purely painterly grounds – he celebrates Bonnard as painter who transcends the strictures of a specific era; he is a painter “for today and for the future”. One is reminded in Matisse’s words of Ben Jonson’s epitaph written for Shakespeare that he was “not of an age, but for all time”.

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478 I base this assertion purely on the large amount of people, both artists and art historians, who have told me they have always considered Bonnard to be an “artist’s artist”, once I have told them about my research project. This conception of Bonnard is also alluded to in Searle’s review of the Tate exhibition, when he claims that David Sylvester once told him that “if I didn’t get Bonnard, I didn’t get painting”. The reviewer goes on to say that this remark “might have something to do with why I am no longer a painter, but I doubt it.” Searle, op. cit.

479 This is not to say that Bonnard was as interested in these other issues, rather, my point is that he did have an interest in them, a recognition of which is of great relevance in understanding his work.

480 Other painters who have written about Bonnard include Jean Bazain, Patrick Heron and André Lhote, while Peter Doig and Eric Fischl have made a number of complimentary statements about him in interviews. People are also often surprised to learn that Francis Bacon was very fond of Bonnard’s work.
In a sense, my own approach has also been to treat Bonnard fundamentally as a painter; one who saw the artwork itself as an autonomous, almost sacrosanct object. Nevertheless, one of the motivations in writing this thesis has been to draw attention to the wider issues at play which, I believe, governed Bonnard in his decision making and, more importantly, in what he chose to express through the artwork, whether it be of a theoretical or of a social or even political nature. Ultimately, it has been my desire to convince the reader that Bonnard continues to be an artist who is worthy of both our attention and our admiration.
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Fig. 131 – Pierre Bonnard, *Nude in the Bath*, 1925, Oil on canvas, 104.8 x 65.4cm, Tate, London.
Fig. 132 – Pierre Bonnard, *Nude in the Bath*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 93 x 147cm, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Fig. 133 – Pierre Bonnard, *The Large Bath*, 1937-8, Oil on canvas, 94 x 144cm, Private Collection.
Fig. 134 – Paul Gauguin, *The Little One is Dreaming*, 1881, Oil on canvas, Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen.

Fig. 135 – Rogi André, Bonnard’s hotel room in Deauville, 1937.
Fig. 136 – Pierre Bonnard, *Nude in the Bathtub*, 1941-6, Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 151.1cm, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

Fig. 137 – Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1534, Oil on canvas, 119 x 165cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.
Fig. 138 – Pierre Bonnard, *Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror*, 1943, Oil on canvas, 73 x 51cm, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Musée national d’Art moderne, Paris.
Fig. 139 – Pierre Bonnard, *The Garden at Le Cannet*, 1945, Oil on canvas, 63 x 55cm, Private Collection.
Fig. 1440 – Pierre Bonnard, *Studio with Mimosa*, 1939-46, Oil on canvas, 127.5 x 127.5cm, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Musée national d'Art moderne, Paris.
Fig. 141 – Henri Cartier-Bresson, Photograph of Bonnard in his studio in Le Cannet, 1944.