

Vie des arts

Pierre Bonnard: The *Late Interiors* / Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org, January 27, 2009 - April 19, 2009

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Volume 53, numéro 215, supplément, été 2009

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/61881ac

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Éditeur(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN 0042-5435 (imprimé)
1923-3183 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Grande, J. (2009). Pierre Bonnard: The *Late Interiors* / Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org, January 27, 2009 - April 19, 2009. *Vie des arts*, 53(215), 6–7.

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Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867-1947)
Basket of Fruit: Oranges and Persimmons
 ca. 1940
 Oil on canvas
 22 3/4 x 29 1/4 in. (58 cm x 74.5 cm)
 Private Collection

NEW YORK, N.Y.

PIERRE BONNARD

THE LATE INTERIORS

By John K. Grande

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 Robert Lehman Wing
 1000 Fifth Avenue.
 New York, New York 10028
 Tel.: 212-535-7710
 www.metmuseum.org
 January 27, 2009–April 19, 2009

At what strange crossroads in the history of art Pierre Bonnard's art stands.

The dilemma of his art is that it is so private, so diametrically opposed to the avant-gardists of his era. Picasso famously referred to Bonnard's paintings as "a pot-pourri of indecision" and yet it is exactly these qualities that make Bonnard so fascinating. Interiors are not just interiors with Bonnard, they are sublime reflections of a state of mind. We enter into a world of "habitudes" of daily life, of impressions and an intimacy expressed above all through tonalities, colours. These later

paintings, all done while Bonnard lived at Le Bosquet (The Grove), his home in the village of Le Cannet near Cannes, express a consciousness more akin to the New York painter Chuck Close than Picasso. The numerous sketches Bonnard made in the daybooks (also on view) or pocket diaries with their rough sketches, as Bonnard thinks his way along in lines, hatch marks and scribbles, - sources for the paintings. And these compositions were never ultimately painted from life, but instead assembled with their interchangeable elements, from memory.

As early as 1891, Bonnard met Toulouse-Lautrec and exhibited his paintings at the annual exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. While his first show was at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1896, Gauguin was his inspiration, and early on he helped form Les Nabis, along with Vuillard, Maurice Denis, and Paul Serusier.

Bonnard was truly a different sort of painter... It is said that Pierre Bonnard was so perfectionist he would visit his paintings in museums and art collections to retouch them. With a paint box in his pocket, he considered some works unfinished, even as they were exhibited, and sought to "improve" them. It was idiosyncrasies such as these that led to the term *Bonnardisme* as a disparaging tendency to be overly perfectionist. And yet, as this comprehensive showing of Bonnard's late paintings on interior scenes reveals, Bonnard was a composer as much as he was a painter, for these paintings' individual "props" – the furniture, tablecloths, vases, doors, windows, baskets of fruit – build a psychological tension, often with his lifelong companion Marthe de Meligny as part of the composition.

The Metropolitan Museum's *Late Interiors* exhibition seeks to recast Bonnard as a modernist. Bonnard commented: "I find it very difficult to introduce a new object into my still lifes." Yet those same objects are presented in an incredible range of situational combinations, often with a beautiful perspective distortion. *The French Window (Morning at Le Cannet)* is so intimate a painting. Marthe and Pierre are together in



Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867-1947)
The White Interior
1932
Oil on canvas
43 1/8 x 61 3/8 in. (109.5 x 155.8 cm)
Musée de Grenoble

this scene. The spaces are extended, stretched. The window view to a landscape plays on this painting of an inner world worthy of Ibsen. Outer and inner worlds are endlessly fusing, transferring with Bonnard. A landscape has the tones of an interior, and vice versa.

The complex inter-relation of object and figure (usually Marthe or Bonnard) in pictorial space, and the frontal or skewed perspectives are devices Bonnard uses to build his compositions intuitively. *The Yellow Shawl* (ca. 1925) superficially resembles a Matisse painting with its areas of colour and compositional relations. *Flowers on a Red Carpet* (1928), initially looks like an innocent interior scene, but as we spend time taking it in, we become aware of the complex compositional integrations in each painting. Bonnard, fully aware of this, would draw on a given object, or element, to place it in a particular compositional situation. It is as if each element had its own habitual persona, well known to Bonnard. Scottish

painter Peter Doig suggests in a guided tour tape to the show, whites are not really whites for Bonnard. Instead, white more often reflects and absorbs the colours surrounding it. Bonnard himself claimed he was "investigating the secret of the colour white his entire life". Funded by the Florence Gould Foundation, and comprising some 80 paintings, drawings and watercolours dating from 1923 to 1947, *The Late Interiors* reveals Bonnard's sensitive inner vision, one that moves colour and tonality to the point of dematerialization and in a way only Bonnard could.

EXHIBITION

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