

PRESS KIT

PIERRE BONNARD

Inauguration	September 17, 2015 from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Press conference	September 17, 2015 at noon
Dates	September 19, 2015 to January 10, 2016
Location	Paseo de Recoletos, 23
General curators	Guy Cogeval and Pablo Jiménez Burillo
Scientific curator	Isabelle Cahn
Production	FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE, Musée d'Orsay and Fine Art Museums of San Francisco
Website	http://exposiciones.fundacionmapfre.org/exposiciones/es/pierrebonnard
Facebook	http://www.facebook.com/fundacionmapfrecultura
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#expo_bonnard

Exhibition organized by the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE, Madrid; and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

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PIERRE BONNARD

From September 19, 2015 to January 10, 2016, the *PIERRE BONNARD* exhibit, which provides a renewed look at the original work of the French artist, may be visited at the FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE exhibition rooms (Paseo de Recoletos, 23, 28004, Madrid).

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) was a decisive figure around the time of birth of modern art and also an artist whose — profoundly personal — work is difficult to classify. A founding member of the symbolist group Les Nabis, his work offers a vital key to understanding the transition from Post-Impressionism to Symbolism at a time when painting was undergoing a radical revolution through color. Influenced by the painting of Gauguin and Japanese prints, Bonnard developed his own, lively and truly original style, which he reflected on different surfaces, from folding screens and posters to large murals.



Nude in an Interior, 1934
Oil on canvas, 134 x 69.2 cm
Washington, National Gallery of Art
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015
/ Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington

From 1900, Bonnard's painting began to change, moving away from prevailing avant-garde movements and immersing himself in his daily world. He preferred to center on subjects from his private life, where the painting gains ground over reality little by little, and on landscapes of an Arcadian, vibrant and luminous nature. The expressive power of color takes on an ever more relevant role, becoming the predominant theme of his works, the main organizer that structures his compositions and the medium with which he guides the spectator's gaze.

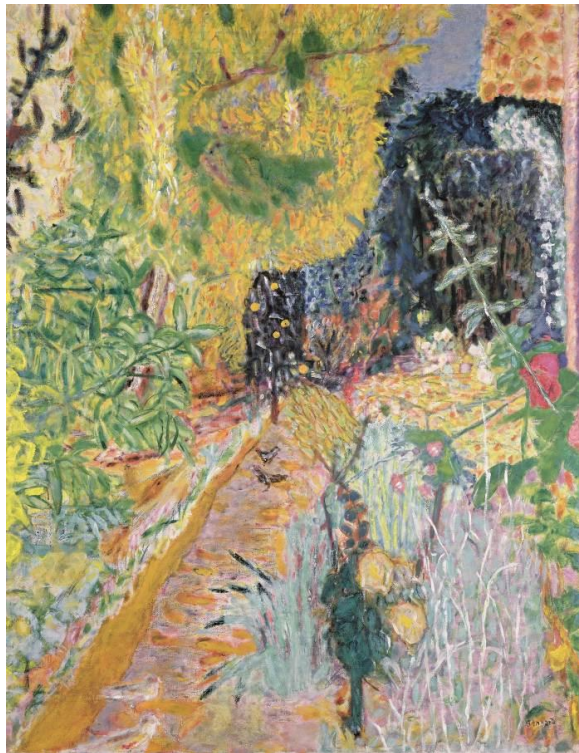
Bonnard, who is frequently defined as the “painter of happiness”, declared at the end of his life that “he who sings is not always happy”. Likewise, his painting — under an appearance of calm simplicity and happy harmony — is revealed as complex and full of nuances. In his work, Bonnard embodies a lyricism impregnated with melancholy, a dream sensation that sometimes becomes strangeness, where the presence of incongruous elements and furtive appearances increases the mystery. He would work for years on the same paintings, returning to them time and time again, changing their shapes and

emphasizing their chromaticism until he achieved the intensity of feeling that he wished to convey.

Woman with Cat, ca. 1912
Oil on canvas, 78 x 77.5 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015
/ Musée d'Orsay, Dist. Rmn-Grand
Palais / Patrice Schmidt



This exhibit is the first retrospective in Spain on the work of Pierre Bonnard in over thirty years. The exhibition, organized together with the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Fine Art Museums of San Francisco, will display around eighty paintings, a dozen drawings and fifty photographs — most of which have never been seen in Spain — that have been loaned from over thirty private and public collections, specifically the Musée d'Orsay, the Georges Pompidou Center, the Tate in London, the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



The Garden, 1936-1938
Oil on canvas, 127 x 100 cm
Paris, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Rmn-
Grand Palais / agence Bulloz

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

The exhibition is conceived as a review of the different subjects that marked the work of Bonnard and that appear in the various genres and techniques that he used throughout his life. In this way, the exhibit will highlight the painter's intimate spaces, glimpsed on his canvases through doors and windows, as well as his large decorative works, where nature merges with the colors and light of the Mediterranean. The exhibition intends, therefore, to present a full view of the work of Bonnard articulated around the fundamentals of his painting more than a strict chronological division, to convey the unity of his work, without losing sight of his evolution throughout his extensive career.



Women in the Garden, four decorative panels, 1890-1891; *Seated Woman with a Cat*, 160.2 × 48 cm
Woman in a Polka Dot Dress, 160.3 × 48 cm; *Woman in a Blue Pelerine*, 160.5 × 48 cm
Woman in a Checked Dress, 160.5 × 48 cm

Tempera on paper attached to canvas, 160.5 × 48 cm each panel Paris, Musée d'Orsay

© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Rmn-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski (the first three panels) and © Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Musée d'Orsay, Dist. Rmn-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt (fourth panel)

I. A VERY JAPANESE NABI

In 1888, at barely twenty years of age, Pierre Bonnard founded the group of Les Nabis with his colleagues from the *Académie Julian* Denis, Vuillard, Ranson and Sérusier, inspired by the painting on wood *The Talisman* which the latter had painted following indications from Paul Gauguin. The members of the group called themselves prophets (meaning of the word “nabi” in Hebrew) as they intended to embody a truth that was beyond the visible world in their paintings through the exaltation of color, simplification of shapes and the mystic and enigmatic transcendence of their compositions.

In their aspiration to simplify artistic expression to its essential form, the Nabis — and especially Bonnard — found inspiration in Japanese art, which they could see at the famous exhibition of Japanese prints held at the School of Fine Arts in Paris in 1890. This esthetic translated in Bonnard's painting into matters such as abandoning the illusionist modeling of the body, the rejection of the traditional central perspective and

the modification of Western laws of proportion and movement. The influence of Japanese art on Bonnard's painting was so strong that the painter was nicknamed "the very Japanese Nabi", and it is obvious in works such as the group of four decorative panels *Women in the garden* or in *Child making a sand castle* (both in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris).



Dusk, also known as A Round of Croquet, 1892
Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 162.2 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Musée d'Orsay / Patrice Schmidt

During the decade when the Nabi group was active, Bonnard developed a decorative esthetic where the motifs fit and fold into a complex network of lines, arabesques and spots of striking colors. Very involved in the cultural

life of Paris, he contributed to the magazine *Revue Blanche*, founded by his friend Thadée Natanson, and cultivated both matters of modern life in the big city (such as in *Dancers* and in *Nannies' Promenade*) and scenes from his daily life of great elegance and delicateness, such as *Twilight* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

II. INTERIOR

In contrast to his fellow Nabis, in particular Denis and Sérusier, Bonnard was opposed to dominant artistic theories and pompous subjects and preferred to embody his everyday world on his canvases, representing mostly subjects of his private life and the intimacy of his home. His interiors, with or without figures, do not describe any noteworthy event but they refer to important subjects and sentiments,



such as tenderness, loneliness, lack of communication or eroticism. Bonnard masterfully manages to provoke these sensations by using imagery that is very close up and, in most cases, sharply cut off to center attention on a place, on a person or on a particular group, such as in his work *Homage to Maillol* (Philadelphia Museum of Art).

The subjects of these interiors are frequently his family and friends and they often take place around the dining table, emphasizing the private

The Table, 1925
Oil on canvas, 102.9 x 74.3 cm
London, Tate
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Tate, London

nature of these scenes. Nonetheless, in spite of the sensation of familiarity, the artificial illumination and the settings strengthen the impression that the characters are enclosed, creating an atmosphere loaded with mystery, evident in *The Table* (London, Tate) or in *The Breakfast Room* (Brooklyn Museum). Separately, the frequent changes of perspective and the play on mirrors refer to the enigma of our gaze, while also making it difficult to read the space at first glance, obliging the spectator to contemplate his works slowly to capture all of their subtleties.

III. PRIVACY

Within his interest of representing daily life, Bonnard turned the representation of the nude body in the domestic arena into one of his favorite subjects. Bonnard invites us to come into the intimacy of the female toilet, turning the spectator into a *voyeur* who peeps around the door or watches female abandonment through a mirror. The Bonnard nudes in the exhibition allow us to contemplate the evolution of the artist, from his darkest and most erotic paintings from the turn of the century (*The indolent woman* or *The man and the woman*, Musée d'Orsay) to the explosion of light and color in his later work (*Nude in an interior*, National Gallery of Art, Washington), through works full of mystery and melancholy that transmit a dull sensuality and extinguished eroticism.



The Bath, 1925
Oil on canvas, 86 × 120.6 cm
London, Tate
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 /
Tate, London



The Man and the Woman, 1900
Oil on canvas, 115 × 72.3 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Musée
d'Orsay, Dist. Rmn-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt

Most of these nudes represent Marthe de Méligny — Bonnard's lover from 1893, whom he would finally marry in 1925 — although he also used other women as models, whose identity is of little importance in general as they all epitomize Bonnard female ideal: skinny body, porcelain skin, high bust and undefined face. In Bonnard's painting, Marthe's body never grew old, remaining over the years just as it appeared

in his first nudes. A misanthropist of a nervous disposition, Marthe used to take long therapeutic baths, which Bonnard represented in a series of striking pictures where the languid body of his wife is diluted by the colors and light that pierce the water (*The bath*, London, Tate).

IV. CHOSEN PORTRAITS

The portrait is a genre where we once again see Bonnard interested in representing his closest reality. Therefore, the subjects of these works are his most intimate circle, who are shown performing everyday activities, without artifice or posing: his companion, Marthe (*Woman with cat*, Paris, Musée d'Orsay or *The bowl of milk*, London, Tate); his lover, Renée Monchaty (*Model at rest*, private collection); his family, represented ironically in *A bourgeois afternoon* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay); his brother-in-law Claude Terrasse; his friends Thadée and Misia Natanson; and his dealers, the Bernheim-Jeune brothers (*The box*, Musée d'Orsay). These portraits offer a mixture of observation and subjectivity, of likeness and deformation, of banality and embellishment.



The Boxer (Portrait of the Artist), 1931

Oil on canvas, 54 x 74.3 cm

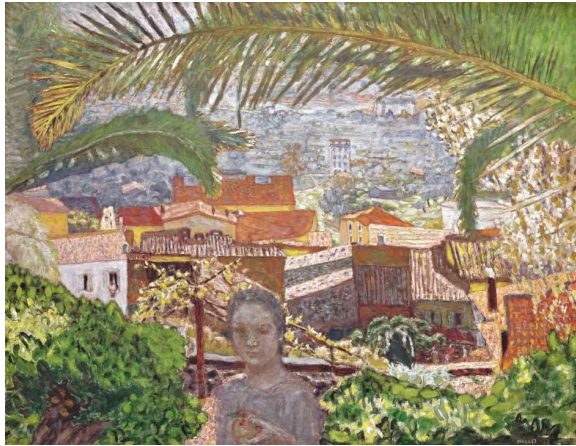
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Michèle Bellot

In his self-portraits, nonetheless, Bonnard goes without context to present himself, bereft of any complement, to the spectator. Painted for himself, they reveal with great intensity the existential anguish, profound loneliness and almost monstrous concern that frequently accompanied him. In *The Boxer* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay), he presents himself as the artist in a constant struggle with his painting, with his work, but also with himself.

V. ULTRA-VIOLET

After several visits to Normandy, Bonnard purchased — in August 1912 — a small house on pillars, located in Vernon on the banks of the Seine, which he called “Ma Roulotte” (my trailer). Three years earlier, Bonnard had visited Saint-Tropez, invited by the painter Henri Manguin. The Côte d'Azur, with its hedonistic atmosphere, close to the ideal of ancient Arcadia, seemed like paradise to Bonnard, who went back almost every year, renting villas in Grasse, Saint-Tropez and Cannes, before purchasing a little house in Le Cannet in 1926, which he called “Le Bosquet” (the copse) with a panoramic view of the bay and which he embodies in works such as *The palm* (Phillips Collection).



The Palm, 1926

Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 147 cm

Washington DC, The Phillips Collection

© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 /

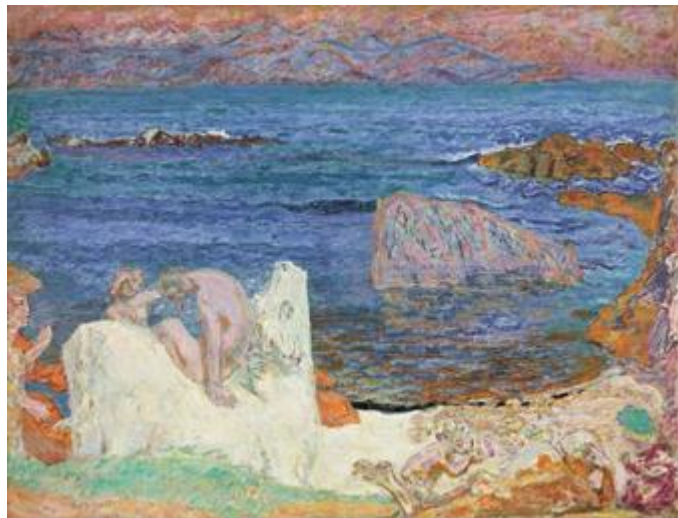
Luisa Ricciarini / Leemage

During his ever longer stays in Normandy and the Côte d'Azur, Bonnard uncovered the pictorial possibilities of landscape, a genre through which he projected his most intimate idea of painting and the world as an ideal, Arcadian place completely in tune with man. He began to free himself from naturalism and to develop a lyrical interpretation of nature, where what is real merges with what is

imagined in compositions saturated with light and color. The ample setting of his landscapes transforms perspective, dispersing planes, so as to reproduce all the angles of view on one sole surface, while the space is

transfigured by vibrations of colors and light, and planes and materials merge.

The landscapes painted by Bonnard in Le Cannet vibrate with all the nuances of yellow, which are used in interiors, on walls, in baskets of fruit and in the mimosa at the workshop window, like in *Corner of a table* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay, on loan to the Georges Pompidou Center) or *The garden* (National Museum of Modern Art in Paris). The effervescence of this color contrasts with the



irradiating presence of an intense blue, which at times becomes ultra-violet, such as in *The abduction of Europa* (Toledo Museum of Art).

The Abduction of Europa, 1919

Oil on canvas, 117.5 x 153 cm

Toledo (Ohio), Toledo Museum of Art

© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 / Photo

Richard P. Goodbody Inc.

VI. ET IN ARCADIA EGO. LARGE DECORATIONS

The reputation Bonnard earned as a decorative painter allowed him to dedicate a large part of his work to painting panels for wall decorations in residences. The exhibition presents some of the most important commissions for decorative work received by Bonnard, some of the highlights of which are the friezes painted for the dining room of Misia Sert, one of the most important figures in the Paris cultural life of his time; the urban landscapes painted for his friend George Besson; or the large canvas *Summer* (Fondation Maeght). In all of them, the artist adapts to the architecture of the place where the different panels are to go, and also to the client's personality, without forgetting thematic and esthetic unity.

These panels, without any imposed program, represent paradisaical scenes that blend contemporary characters with mythological beings completely in tune with nature. The expressive power of color took on a new, especially relevant role in these works, where Bonnard develops similar formal concerns in large format as on his medium-size canvases.



Summer, 1917
Oil on canvas, 260 x 340 cm
Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015 /
Claude Germain - Archives Fondation Maeght,
Saint-Paul de Vence

Bonnard represented a happy and Arcadian, harmonious and pacific world in these works, for which he took his inspiration from the light and scenery of Vernon and Le Cannet. Bonnard's monumental Arcadia expresses a joie de vivre and a joyful exaltation that is at times toned down by a certain existential anguish: *Et in Arcadia ego* (even death exists in Arcadia), state Virgil's shepherds in a picture by Poussin, and Bonnard seems to affirm it in each of his paintings.

VII. GRAPHIC WORK

Although he had his models and scenery very close at hand, Bonnard rarely painted from life. On the contrary, he used to do drawings and watercolor paintings on the pages of small diaries and he used them, along with his memory, to paint the pictures in his studio. Drawing was, therefore, a mode of thinking for Bonnard and an essential part of his creation.

The selection of drawings on display at the exhibition cover different stages and facets in Bonnard's creation: they include projects for decorating fans, a dining room and for designing a poster of his first stage, quick sketches for his modern life and

urban landscape compositions, such as *Study of a feminine silhouette for the lithograph "The square at evening"*, and still lifes painted in watercolors and gouache that are true studies of color for his interior scenes. These simple and spontaneous sketches show how sharp Bonnard's eye was and they are often an example of his delicate sense of humor.

VIII. CLICK, CLACK, KODAK

Like many of his contemporaries, Bonnard was fascinated by the possibilities offered to him by photography, at its peak at the time. At the start of the 1890s, he acquired one of the first simple-to-use, portable cameras. His first photographs depict day-to-day moments of his family life, particularly stays in the family farm of Grand-Lemps; his only intention was to add to a family album. However, he soon began to discover how useful photographs could be for his painting, as they offered him models with both chosen and spontaneous poses, the compositional imagination and immediacy of which are reflected on many of his canvases. He took several series of photographs of Marthe nude under the foliage of his garden in Montval and inside their house, of which the highlight is *Marthe in the tub*. Bonnard seemed to lose interest in photography around the time when color became the most important element in his painting.



Marthe in a tub, 1908-1910
Modern print from a gelatin silver
bromide negative on flexible film,
7.8 x 5.5 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Pierre Bonnard, VEGAP,
Madrid, 2015 / Musée d'Orsay,
Dist. Rmn-Grand Palais / Patrice
Schmidt

WEB

With a view to expanding the content of the exhibition and promote access to a wider public, FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE has posted the content of the exhibition on the dedicated webpage:

<http://exposiciones.fundacionmapfre.org/exposiciones/es/pierrebonnard>