

Place Saint-Augustin (1912-13) by Jean Edouard Vuillard (1868 - 1940)
Painting Aqueous paste on brown paper/ Distemper on brown paper (61.26.18).
French. G355.

In describing the 2003 exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Curator Kimberly Jones says, Vuillard is best known for his intimate, indoor paintings that show people at home. "You can almost feel the walls closing in in some cases and that very much intentional. This is the world behind closed doors, an intimate private world that we live, but we don't get to see. So we become a voyeur."
"I don't paint portraits," Vuillard said. "I paint people at home."

But Vuillard did not only paint his subjects indoors. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts 1912-13 painting of Place du St-Augustin is an example of an outdoor painting. It is one of a pair of paintings which were commissioned by his friend, Dr. Henri Vaquez. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts owns the one intended to be the right hand painting, and the left hand painting of Place of St. Augustin is in a private collection in Paris. The paintings are similar, but with a slightly different perspective. The MIA painting has a view of the square at Boulevards Haussmann and Malesherbes at the Place St. Augustin in Paris as seen from a cafe at the rue del la Peiniere. This outdoor painting encouraged Vuillard to open and flatten his space. It presents a cityscape and fits well in our theme, Landscapes, Cityscapes and Escapes.

Vuillard enhanced his decorative purpose in painting the Place St. Augustin by using a large canvas. Although he saw the scene with a startlingly intimate eye, Vuillard seems to have been withdrawn, curiously uninvolved in the world around him.. The world of Vuillard is safe and sure, nothing violent or upsetting occurs, most everything is a static and permanent as the building or trees....The artist invoked an era that was about to end. There is nothing of the tumult that was about to burst on the world in this mise-en-scene of the everyday, undramatic incidents of a Parisian square.

Description of the Painting Place St. Augustin

In this painting, Vuillard used his own particular technique of distemper (also known as aqueous paste, on brown paper. The medium requires that glue, rather than oil, is used to bind the pigments. This binding material was sometimes egg yolks. The result is clear color, less likely to darken, and a matte texture. Even when Vuillard consented to work in oils, he preferred to retain the flattened harmonies of distemper. Distemper is defined as a mix of colors or pigments with water and egg yolks or some other binding medium. The proportion of the mixture can vary. This painting is on brown paper on canvas.

This painting's provenance is short. It was obtained from Edouard Vuillard by Rosenburg and Stebel of New York before being purchased by Putnam Dana McMillan, who later bequeathed the painting to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Its accession was on November 15,1961.

Edouard Vuillard, Self Portrait - 1889

Biography

Jean Edouard Vuillard was born in Cuiseax, France, near the Jura Mountains in 1868. His father was an army officer, and when he retired, the family had modest finances. They moved to Paris in the early 1880's.

His father died about six years later. After the death of his father, Edouard's mother opened a dressmakers shop to support herself and her son. Edouard spent a great deal of time with his mother. He made an attempt at a military career following in the footsteps of his father, but he gave it up, because he was strongly attracted to the world of art.

Vuillard was given a scholarship to study art, and attended The Academie Julian between 1888 and 1890, where he met other students including Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard. They become life long friends. The Academie Julian specialized in preparing students for the entrance examinations of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Vuillard passed the rigorous exams for entrance, but he and his friends were not interested in realism as taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. They wanted to express their own feelings and emotions. They formed a group which they called Nabis. (see description below.)

Aside from some trips, Vuillard lived in Paris the rest of his life. Vuillard loved Paris and his love of it showed through in his paintings. Work was steady through gallery showings and the commissions Vuillard began to receive. In 1912 he received his first commission for a public building - theatrical themes to ornament the foyer of the Comedie des Champs-Elysees. He was able to earn his living through his art work.

Portraiture became an increasingly dominant aspect of Vuillard's work. Between 1923 - 1937 he gained recognition for portraits of our artist's friends - Roussel, Denis, Bonnard and Maillol. He was elected to the Institut de France in 1937, a mark of his country's esteem.

Between 1914 until his death he devoted himself almost entirely to the subtly harmonious, decorative, and nostalgic domestic scenes of the intimist style with which his name is most closely associated.

Vuillard presents a world in which no outside disturbance penetrates the peaceful continuity of an interior life. Even though the Place St. Augustin was outdoors in a public square, it still retains an intimate feeling. This atmosphere vanished at the outbreak of World War II. He fled Paris, but died just after the war began. He died in La Baule, near Saint-Nazaire on June 21, 1940.

The Nabis

Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, and Pierre Bonnard formed a short lived group called The Nabis (from Hebrew word navi, which means prophet or seer). Karl-Xavier Roussel joined later and other artists such as Jan Verkade and Aristide Maillol took part in the organization.

Pierre Bonnard (1867 - 1947)

Friend of Edouard Vuillard and one of the founders of the Nabis. Since they are in the same gallery - you might call attention to it.

Although Gauguin was the first guide for the Nabis, he was not the only one to influence them. Of particular interest to them were the Italian primitives. They discovered the work of Cezanne as well as van Gogh. They were also influenced by Japanese block prints and French Symbolist art. A technique of flat color areas became their trademark.

Symbolism is a concept which emerged in the late 19th century in France and implied an individual approach. Local and national traditions, as well as individual settings, therefore could stand side by side, and from the very beginning a broad variety of artists practicing some kind of symbolic imagery, ranged between extreme positions: The Nabis for example united to find synthesis of tradition and brand new form, while others kept to traditional, more or less academic forms, when they were looking for fresh contents: Symbolism is therefore often linked to fantastic, esoteric, erotic and other non-realist subject matter.

Vuillard experimented with the other painters and they developed some success in their new art. The Nabis including Vuillard exhibited small-scale works at the Le Barc De Boutteville gallery. Later in the 1890's he showed work at Ambrose Vollard's studios.

Influences on the painting, Place St. Augustin, are many. This is a good example of the elements essential to the work of the Nabis. Its use in defining space and light is from the Nabis. The view of the square is cropped in fashion similar to Japanese woodcuts. The surface is a pattern of large areas of flat color, reminiscent both of the Nabis and the

textile patterns of his mother's dressmaker shop. The dappled areas of sunlight are closely related to the Impressionist work of Monet.

For more information please see the article, "The Nabis and their Circle: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin.

Defining Post Impressionism

John Rewald, one of the first professional art historians to focus on the the birth of early modern art limited the scope to the years between 1886 and 1892 in his publication on Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin (1956). In his introduction to Post-Impressionism, John Rewald opted for a second volume featuring Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri Rousseau "le Douanier", Les Nabis and Cézanne as well as the Fauves. The young Picasso and Gauguin's last trip to the South-Sea are also sited. Later authorities expanded the period of Post-Impressionism to cover at least into the first decade of the 20th century. Rewald's second volume remained unfinished. Later adjustments to his work indicated that the term Post-Impressionism was not a precise term.

The connotations of the term 'Post-Impressionism' were challenged: Alan Bowness and his collaborators expanded the period covered to 1914, but limited their approach widely on the 1890s to France. Other European countries are pushed back to standard connotations, and Eastern Europe is completely excluded.

So, while a split may be seen between classical 'Impressionism' and 'Post-Impressionism' in 1886, the end and the extent of 'Post-Impressionism' remains under discussion. For Bowness and his contributors as well as for Rewald, 'Cubism' was an absolutely fresh start, and so Cubism has been seen in France as a beginning of modern art.

Key Questions

What is happening in this picture? What in the scene is most striking to you?

What do you notice about the light and colors?

How is this painting different from the Impressionists.

How would you describe the buildings and city scape?

How do you feel about the painting?

Key Points

Discuss how nurturing by his mother and his presence in her dressmakers shop might have affected Vuillard work.

Vuillard painted over 3,000 paintings in his life time.

Vuillard was attracted by the art world from early years.

Describe the Nabis group of painters and their influences. (see above)

Explain how these paintings are different from the Impressionists.

Vuillard was educated in art institutes of France and he traveled to Italy. However, he rejected realism and was an innovator.

Resources

Susan Stamberg, Edouard Vuillard: Behind Closed Doors New Exhibit Highlights French Artist's Interior View. Exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, January 23, 2003.

Belinda Thomson, Vuillard, Edouard: The Grove Dictionary of Art Online, ed. L Macy

Wynne Easton. The Intimate Interiors of Vuillard. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1989.

John Rewald: Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin, revised edition: Secker & Warburg, London 1978

Bowness, Alan, et al.: Post-Impressionism. Cross-Currents in European Painting, Royal Academy of Arts & Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1979 ISBN 0-297-77713-0

Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, Vuillard, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1954, p. 22.

The Nabis and Their Circle: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin.

Catalogue: Jean Edouard Vuillard's Place St. Augustin. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin.

Department of Paintings file: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.