

Pierre Bonnard's World: A Symbolist Perspective

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Abstract: The French artist Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) started his career with a group of like-minded painters like Edouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Paul Serusier, Gabriel Ibels, Paul Ranson and Ker-Xavier Roussel among others who formed a secret group called *The Nabis* in 1888 who based their developing style on the tenets of symbolism earning the nickname, 'pictorial symbolists'. The Nabis may have disbanded in 1900 with each member developing his own aesthetic style but their association left a lasting impact on their work. However, the enduring influence of this artistic society and by association, of symbolism, as seen in Pierre Bonnard's later work (1920-1947) has been largely unnoticed or hardly given any due credit. This paper seeks to demonstrate how symbolist themes like the exploration of inner experience, dreams and the role of imagination in the quest for the Absolute recur in his later work. This symbolist aesthetic informed his style as he sought to shift from pure representation to abstraction. This paper seeks to establish how Bonnard's later intimist work which was produced in Normandy and Le Cannet is imbued with deeply personal metaphors as he creates an oneiric world. Given the early Nabi influence in Bonnard's work, a symbolist approach shall be applied to study his later paintings created between 1920 and 1947 to establish that the Nabi period had been a major force in the development of his later intimist style.

Index Terms: Bonnard, Nabis, Symbolism, Intimism, 20th century.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) was a well-known figure in the world of visual arts who often introduced decorative elements in his work. In his prolific career, he created decorative posters, screens, lithographs, illustrations, paintings and even developed an enthusiasm for photography. As a painter, he represented urban scenes, still lifes, landscapes, nudes and portraits. His early art is also a testament to urban life where fashionable Parisians are found walking the streets of Paris, merrymaking and frolicking. Bonnard also captured the Terrasse family members both with paint and with a camera. His landscapes are rather raw and rustic with a certain country charm while screens can be celebrated as decorative marvels bringing together the east and the west but he is best known for painting cozy domestic scenes from his own life that led his acknowledgment as a herald of intimist painting.

His later work assumes a calmer quality as he retreats to the country as he takes solace in the isolation and comfort of his dwellings in Normandy and later, Côte d'Azur. The personal elements do form an integral part of intimist work but Bonnard's work also seems to exude a certain ambiguity as his painting seems to take on more than just everyday concerns. His intimist work truly reaches paroxysm in his reclusive environments as he paints rooms, gardens, nudes and still lifes with the determination and simplicity of an ascetic without the bareness of one. The forms may be simple but the content is rife with ambiguous narratives.

The intimist nature of these paintings forms the basis of this study. Most of these paintings were created when the artist had withdrawn from the fast-paced urban lifestyle that characterized the turn-of-the-century Paris to give form to his creative awakening away from the bustle of the contemporary urban living in Vernonnet and Le Cannet where he lived in the houses called *Ma Roulotte* and *Le Bosquet* respectively. The rooms from these houses feature prominently in his later work until the artist's death. Raymond Cogniat notes that Bonnard was never one to submit to external pressures [1]. His response to the changes around him were measured and subtle as he transformed familiar motifs to become vehicles of inner experience, immaterial reality and oneiric existence. Bonnard's intimist approach has been studied in the development of a style that was leaning increasingly towards abstraction but little has been said about the influence of his Nabi association on his later style. It is this lacuna that this paper seeks to address by examining Bonnard's later work in the light of a symbolist approach.

II. THE NABIS

Bonnard was born in 1867 in the Parisian suburb of Fontenay-aux-Roses. Unlike his absentee mentor, Paul Gauguin [2], he demonstrated his artistic leanings early in life but was encouraged to study law by his father. He started attending art classes at Académie Julian while pursuing his law degree. Académie Julian represented an eclectic center for the burgeoning Parisian avant-garde since most of the aspiring artists who could not enter the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts or conform to its neoclassical rigors found a haven to pursue the seldom-trod paths with its more liberal, indulgent and experimental approach to teaching artistic techniques [3]. Bonnard was soon drawn to his classmates Paul Serusier, Maurice Denis, Gabriel Ibels and Paul Ranson at Académie Julian. The young men with similar social backgrounds and an openness to the contemporary artistic and literary trends banded together with ease. A year later, Bonnard had left his law career behind to pursue art full-time when he also enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. This was a fortuitous event in his life since it allowed him to make the acquaintance of Édouard Vuillard who shall remain his lifelong friend and Ker-Xavier Roussel. These painters along with Bonnard's friends from Academy Julian were also joined by Paul Ranson, René Piot, Felix Vallotton, Aristide Maillol, Georges Lacombe and Jozsef Rippl-Ronai. This group of artists had similar aesthetic values with a flair for the decorative elements such as arabesques and undulating lines which featured often in their work. In 1888, they decided to work together as a group called the 'Nabis' (meaning 'prophet' in Hebrew) [4] - an epithet suggested by the linguist Auguste Cazalis who was a student of Hebrew.

The Nabis or prophets of modern art took to their new vocation with ease. As acolytes of Gauguin, the Nabis sought to internalize the symbolist aesthetic through Paul Serusier's work, *The Talisman* (1888) which he had painted in Pont-Aven under Gauguin's instruction [5]. The Nabis looked upon this painting as a paragon of their ideal artistic principles with its pure and flat areas of color and an overall visual quality that depends heavily on the visual sensation of the painter. Indeed, the early Nabi work was characterized by simplified forms, flat perspective and decorative elements. The Nabis gave each other nicknames which characterized their jocular dispositions. For example, Bonnard became the 'highly Nipponized Nabi'. His predilection to introduce elements from Japanese art can be ascribed to an exhibition of Japanese prints at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1888 when he was a student there. It led to an awakening in the young artist who had never seen simplicity transforming the canvas quite like any other art form did. He strove to simplify his motifs along the lines of Japanese prints. The colors were muted but not dull while his subject matter reflects the essence of the artist's perception of all that he saw. Bonnard decluttered and cleansed his composition but it never quite acquired an ascetic aesthetic.

Japonisme and the pictorial symbolism from the Nabi influence became the cornerstone of Bonnard's art. The fact that the Nabis sought to convey their subjective perception of their inner experience is particularly true of Bonnard who was a 'painter of memory'. In fact, this Japanese influence was the defining characteristic of Bonnard's symbolist aesthetic that helped him express "greater truths" that all symbolists sought to convey. David Gliem states that, "To Bonnard and his fellow Symbolists, *Japonisme* introduced much more than a new way of seeing—which had fascinated the Impressionist so much—it also introduced them to a new way of understanding and examining the world about them." [6] This new way of seeing, understanding and examining the familiar world is seen repeatedly on the canvas of Bonnard where he recreates another world upon the foundation of familiar motifs. Gliem further points out that "For the Symbolists, Japanese art represented a break from the material representation and interpretation of the world (whether the represented world be material or spiritual) to a more spiritual interpretation and understanding of the world." [6] In Bonnard, Japanese art and symbolism are inextricably linked where one is the means through which the other manifests itself.

III. ORIGINS OF SYMBOLISM

The Symbolist movement emerged in the 19th century as a poetic movement. The critic Jean Moréas wrote the "Symbolist Manifesto" which was published in *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1886. He lauds Charles Baudelaire as the true precursor of symbolism. [7] It was Baudelaire's sonnet, "Correspondances" which laid down the symbolist principles. As Henri Dorra has noted, Baudelaire gave credence to the idea that the gifted poet has the true gift to link the tangible with the intangible through hints provided by nature. [8] This idea of linking the material and the spiritual refers to vertical correspondence. Symbolist poetics and aesthetics also relies on sensory evocation through stimuli like perfumes, colors and sounds where the experience of one particular sensory stimulus is enough to evoke the other linked to synesthesia is drawn from horizontal correspondence. Other poets like Stephane Mallarme, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine incorporated symbolist doctrine in their works. Verlaine in particular explored the domain of the "indescribable that one hears and observes pass, an enchantment of the soul when one oscillates between wakefulness and somnolence." [9] This oneiric character of the poetry was similarly assimilated in the symbolist visual art to blur the lines between reality and dreams. Primacy is also given to the expression of inner experience, emotions and subjective ideas over realistic portrayal. It covers a wide range of subject matter including but not limited to the occult, the morbid, dreams and melancholy. Perhaps the most important aspect of the symbolist aesthetic is the fact that it is suggestive rather than explicit and is imbued with personal, obscure references. To sum up, symbolism in the arts is associated with a metaphor albeit a visual one invented for a visual code.

IV. PICTORIAL SYMBOLISM IN BONNARD'S WORK

It has been noted that symbolist artists were known for introducing personal and often ambiguous references in their work which covered a diverse range of subject matter. [10] It is strange that Bonnard's work was hardly, if ever considered through the symbolist lens since he was known to introduce motifs and themes in his work that represented seemingly ordinary and everyday motifs but had psychological undercurrents. He often used colors to emphasize moods surrounding his work and was known to introduce personal references in his work that could only be discernable to those who understood his background and influences. One reason for this may have been the rather covert nature of symbolist themes that can only be understood in the light of deeper contemplation of his paintings. His bathtub series is a complex œuvre that portrays his emotional turmoil.

Bonnard is also remembered as a painter of memory which was at the center of his symbolism. Moreover, his intimism sprung from an emotional rather than a visual truth. [11] His intimate but psychologically-charged rendering of the interiors [12] is particularly true of his later work and a visual testament of his appropriation of the symbolist aesthetic. Bonnard scholars and historians have hardly considered this manifestation of symbolism in Bonnard's later work. Helen Giambriuni has even noted that he was considered to be impervious to symbolist aesthetic values. [11] But a closer look reveals that what he practiced was a more subtle form of symbolism camouflaged by ordinary everyday scenes. Bonnard was adept at using a wide range of colors. His creativity lies in the experimental use of palette to give emotional undertones to his art. Thomas Campbell, the former Director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art has even noted that "his late paintings, far from simple interiors imparting some prosaic narrative, are often disquieting in their use of color as a metaphor for a spectrum of sensations." [13] This color-based synesthesia is the answer to the horizontal correspondances that form the basis of symbolist aesthetic theory.

Bonnard never restrained himself as his canvas suggests. He was a deliberate painter who used both color and compositional elements to attain the desired effect. It is this technique of giving form to the verbally ineffable that underscores his art. This paper aims to highlight how Bonnard draws from the Symbolist aesthetic, appropriates it into his work and gives it a new form. Pierre Bonnard with the reminiscent nature of his work relying on memory is an apt candidate who provides ample opportunity to study the pictorial aspect of symbolism. Presented below are examples from his later work that correspond to the concept closely.

Before Dinner (1942)

Before Dinner (Figure 1) represents the dining room of Bonnard's country home, *Ma Roulotte*, situated in Vernon, Normandy. He frequented and later inhabited this house for long durations with his muse, constant companion and wife, Marthe de Meligny who is seen seated on the left in the composition with an evident lack of interest in her surroundings as she seems to brood in her corner. It is a scene that subverts the typical convivial atmosphere in a family home when dinner is about to be served because of its withdrawn and almost still occupants, with one or more of the diners missing from the scene. It is a moment suspended in time as the two persons (Marthe and very likely, the servant) are still, both lost in their thoughts even as the servant has to stand vigil in anticipation of a dinner that may never start. The faces of both the figures are not clearly seen since we only see Marthe's profile while the servant's facial features are blurred, lending further opacity to the work. Bonnard was a painter of stillness, he seeks to slow down or even stop time. [14] The suspension of this seemingly insignificant moment seems charged with a certain tension. The dinner is served and two set places can be seen and yet Marthe takes no interest. She almost seems distant as though she is not part of the scene. Mental wandering aside, even her body language suggests that she seems to have turned her back on the goings-on in the room as though the dinner has nothing to do with her. It makes one wonder if she is indeed the person who is expected to dine at the table. When this painting was made, Bonnard was not just living with Marthe. He also had a liaison with Renée Monchaty. [15] One explanation for this picture could be that Monchaty was the one who was expected to come to dinner as Marthe remains sidelined. The dour ambience and the stillness that pervades the scene seems to indicate that the artist is reconciling the absence of his lover and the presence of his muse. It cannot be denied that the painting is charged with personal references that depict the psychological underpinnings of the players on display as well as those who are absent. The emphasis on the emotional undertones transforms an otherwise ordinary interior scene into a visual metaphor that seeks to explore the inner worlds, temperaments and suppressed urges of the inhabitants which gives it symbolist connotations.



Figure 1 *Before Dinner* (1924) by Pierre Bonnard, Oil on Canvas, Robert Lehman Collection, New York

Nude in the Bath (1925)

Bonnard painted a series of paintings featuring female nudes in bathtubs which are modeled after his wife, Marthe. *Nude in the Bath* (Figure 2) from the Tate is one of the better known works in the series which is a popular subject among Bonnard's scholars. The portrayal of this particular nude is rather peculiar. The nude is not fully seen. We only see the pale skin of her legs and part of her torso floating in the bathtub. The eerie depiction with its parallels to a drowned Ophelia was widely noted. [16] The morbid undertones take on a deeper significance when one considers Renée Mochaty's suicide following Bonnard's marriage to Marthe in 1925. In this work, the woman's figure seems lifeless as she floats in the water with her legs splayed in a somewhat awkward pose. Her skin seems drained of blood and the passivity of her pose brings to mind a lifeless corpse floating in a watery grave. The bather in the bathtub was one of Bonnard's preferred motifs along with portrayals of Marthe's constant ablutions attributed to a respiratory

disease she picked up during her youth due to her occupation as a maker of artificial flowers. This may have contributed to her pale, clammy skin as seen in the bathtub. [17] The underlying morbid tones associated with this work may perhaps be another attempt of the artist to depict Marthe's silent endurance of the disease that weakened her. The reference to Ophelia, Monchaty's suicide and Marthe's physical weakness seems to blend into a single human figure shown in the composition.

Another headless figure is seen to the side, who is most likely, the artist himself. [18] The strange decapitated figures do not allow for any particular identification of the humans they are meant to portray which makes a case for alienation or a deliberate distancing. The fact that none of the faces are visible lends a cold mystery and a clinical air to an otherwise emotionally haunting scene. The artist explores the notion of sickness, morbidity and death, themes that were closely associated with symbolism in this picture. The headless figures may be an attempt to distance the self and the near ones from the dreary fate of death.



Figure 2 *Nude in the Bath* (1925) by Pierre Bonnard, Oil on Canvas, The Tate Gallery, London

Dining Room on the Garden (1934-35)

Dining Room on the Garden is a depiction of the artist's dining room in "Le Bosquet", his home in Le Cannet. Bonnard opts for a darker palette with kaleidoscopic hues as he depicts his house in the French Riviera. The blues, greens, mauves and ochres dominate the scene and yet the effect of these dark colors placed so close to each other is not jarring as he makes ample use of spaces like tables, walls and the outside view as holders of different hues. The expanse of colors in this painting are reminiscent of Paul Gauguin's instructions to Serusier as he painted *The Talisman* (Figure 4) which the Nabis took to be the defining work that would inform their own principles. *The Talisman* combined all the principles that the Nabis had hoped to emulate in their artistic evolution: "exaltation of color, simplification of form, extreme tension between imitation and disappearance of the subject." [19] Indeed, the emphasis on the color and the simplification of forms in the *Dining Room on the Garden* seems more emotionally driven rather than a representational attempt as Bonnard seeks to highlight the interiors with a Mediterranean view. We nearly miss the figure of Marthe on the right who seems to be surreptitiously rendered as though she is but a part of the furnishings of the room. This subtle introduction of Marthe in Bonnard's work is so common that it is akin to the artist's signature as he represents the

interiors of his house. It is as though Marthe is present everywhere; she *needs* to be there as she seeps into the artist's quotidian and his work. So closely is she enmeshed in his later work that it is almost impossible to imagine a Bonnard painting without her.

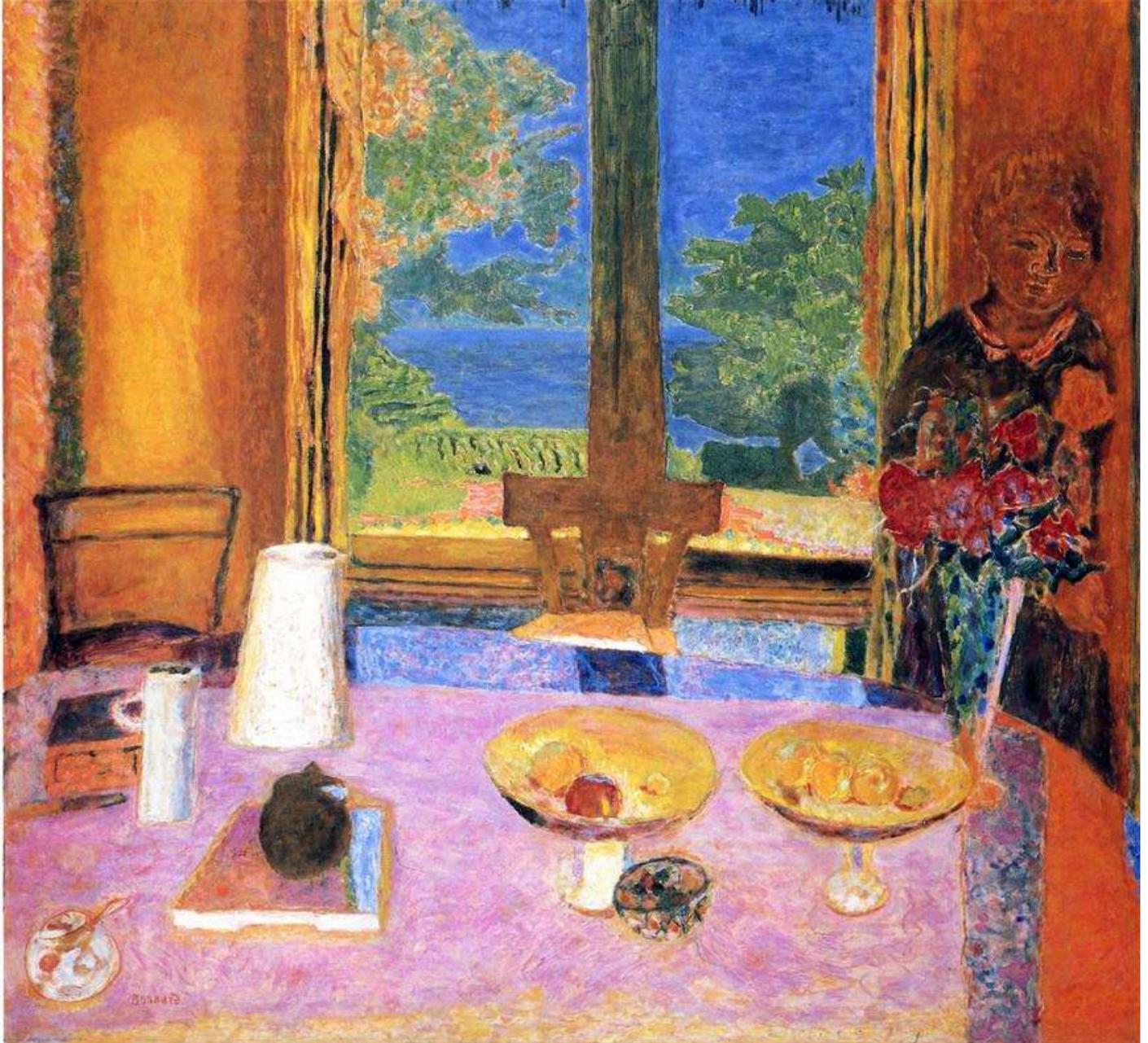


Figure 3 *Dining Room on the Garden* (1934-35), Oil on Canvas, Guggenheim Museum, New York

This painting can be considered a strong contender for a symbolist work due to its specific tonal use to overpower the everyday objects to create a strong composition based on darker colors introduced side by side. This seems to create a strong polychromatic effect where the first thing that a spectator notices are the vivid colors before associating with objects. The vision is overcome with the color which shows the artist's ample imagination in using colors to plunge the viewer into his dream world. This tendency is strongly associated with symbolist principles in painting.

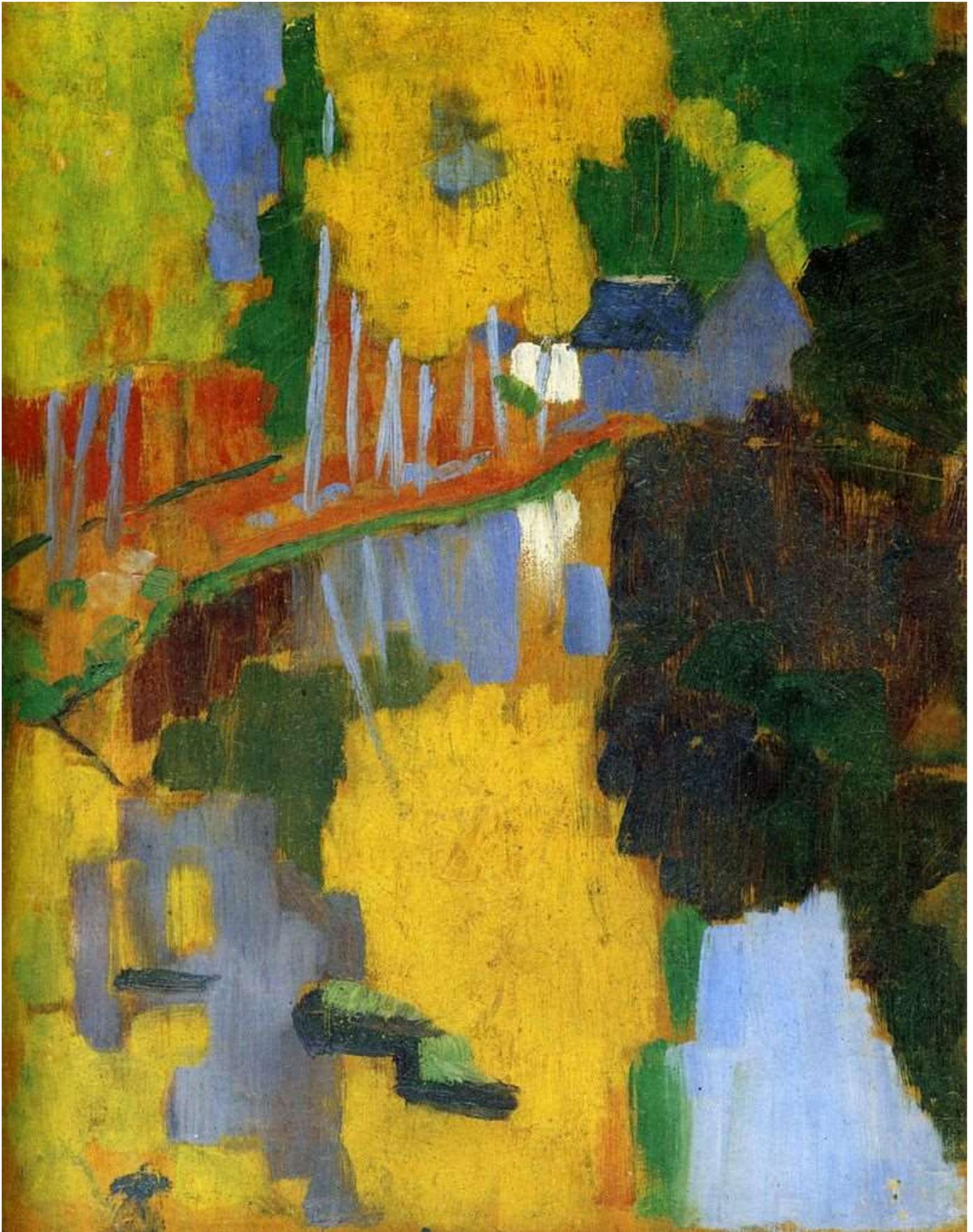


Figure 4 *The Talisman* (1888) by Paul Serusier, Oil on Wood, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The Garden (1936)

The exploration of Bonnard's intimist work is incomplete without including his gardens. Far from Edenic, they seem to have a wild beauty. In *The Garden* (1936) (Figure 5), Bonnard abandons perspective as the painting does not engage in any illusion of depth. No one point in particular draws the viewer's gaze. The spectateur is overwhelmed with various verdant hues depicting unmanaged plants and underbrush or as Sarah Whitfield terms it: a "riotous disorder of an overgrown garden." [20] The plants seen

here seem to be a milder extension of the wilds: uncontrolled and dense yet still a part of Bonnard's garden. The narrow trail lining the bushes is abruptly cut off which gives the impression that the viewer is part of the scene where nature unfolds and yet the openness associated with gardens is missing as the path forward seems to be blocked and the dense foliage overwhelms the viewer yet at the same time, as the vision becomes accustomed to the cornucopia of the colors, one starts to notice details like small birds scattered over the garden. This brings to mind the freedom accorded to nature to take its own course which is an unexpected characteristic of a garden that is generally modeled after the tastes of its owner. But Bonnard's garden is less of a garden and more of an unrestrained sylvan landscape that invites the viewer to step away from his reality as symbolists often attempted to do by portraying transfigured motifs.



Figure 5 *The Garden* (1936) by Pierre Bonnard, Oil on Canvas, Musée du petit palais, Paris

Marthe Entering the Room (1942)

This little-known gouache (Figure 6) by Bonnard represents a room of the artist's house. Unlike *Before Dinner*, it is a fleeting glimpse of a moment that passes too quickly in the daily life of the artist. Besides the radiator and the door, there is a chair in the foreground which is abruptly cut off in the perspective. There is no single focal point like many of Bonnard's artworks. It is easy to miss Marthe as she enters the room, teacup in hand if the title of the painting had not alerted us to her presence. She seems to appear suddenly, surprising the artist and the viewer. Dita Amory states that "Bonnard crafted understated peripheries to evoke the haphazard, the uncontrollable, the evanescent in daily life" as she refers to this picture. [21] Indeed, the artist takes the movement of Marthe and turns it into a moment of pensive contemplation as she remains suspended on the threshold, not yet a part of the scene and yet contributing to it. Amory further states that such a presence "blurs distinctions between stilled objects and those in

motion, between presence and absence, between arriving and leaving”. [21] And these sudden occurrences, surprises and vagaries of everyday happening is what transforms the scene from a banal scene to a reminder of the unpredictability of the quotidian waiting to surprise us at unexpected moments. Timothy Hyman too takes notes of this characteristic wherein “one experience remains constant throughout Bonnard’s art: a sudden revelatory moment of seeing, opening out of a familiar everyday life.” [22] This is what Bonnard makes of this gouache which in an ordinary setting reveals the sudden opening: the revelation of Marthe. Taking the unexpected to transform the ordinary is what underlies Bonnard’s symbolist aesthetic.

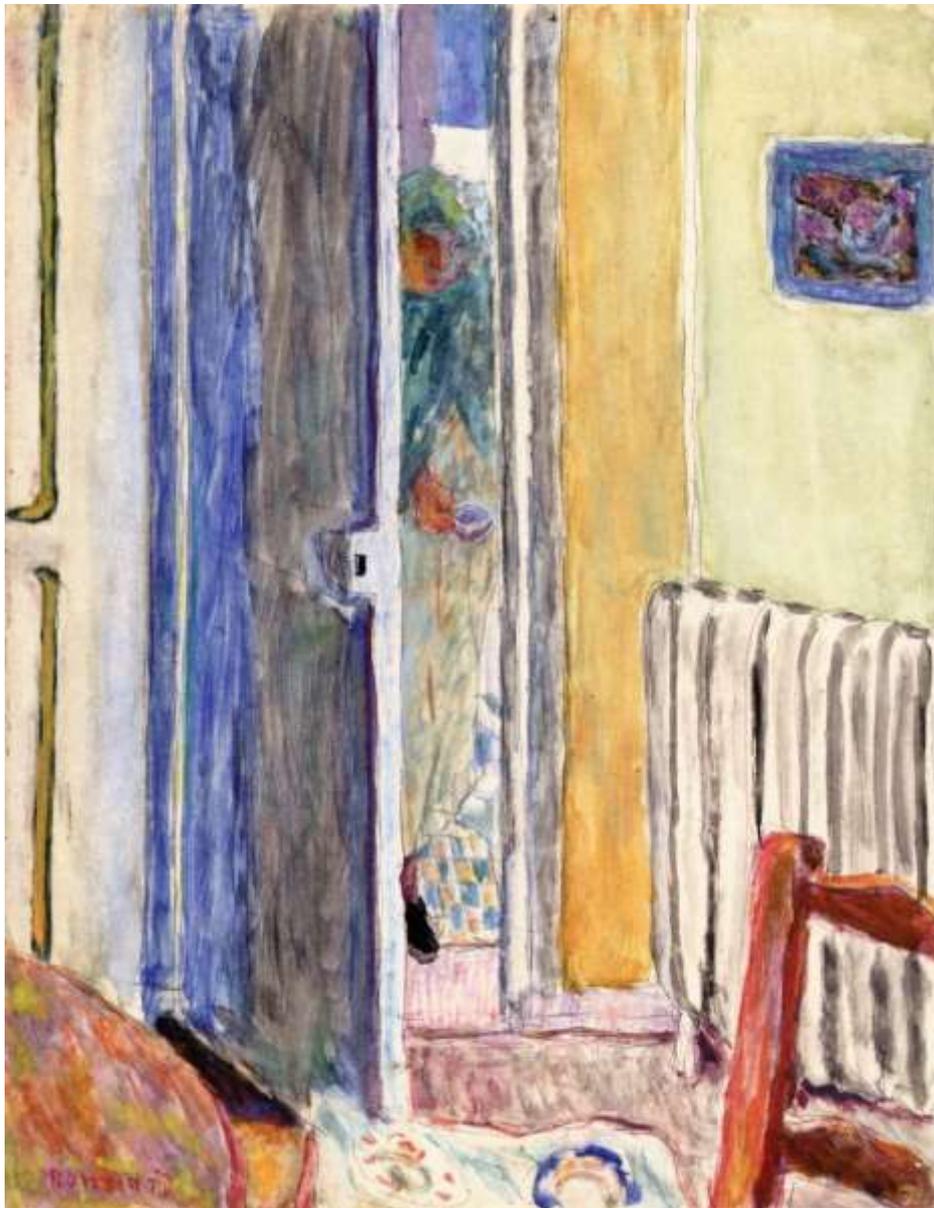


Figure 6 *Marthe Entering the Room* (1942) by Pierre Bonnard, Gouache and pencil on paper, Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock

Marthe usually constitutes a never-aging figure in his work but this gouache shows her as a wispy, blink-and-you-miss-her presence. There is almost something ethereal about her as though she has appeared out of nowhere and might disappear before one can take the form to properly perceive her form. Françoise Cloarec in an attempt to describe their first meeting has noted the same ethereal quality: “To Pierre, she represented an apparition, a bedazzlement.” [23] Since she passed away in 1942, this may be one of the last times that Bonnard paints her when she is alive. It is as though she is slipping away, visible but never quite tangible as she haunts his interiors like a specter. This exploration of the tangible and the intangible and the blurring of the material and spiritual aspects of existence also constitutes a strong symbolist metaphor.

Young Women in the Garden (Renée Monchaty and Marthe Bonnard), (1921-1946)

Young Women in the Garden (Figure 7) portrays Bonnard’s lovers, the light-haired Renée Monchaty who committed suicide in 1925 after he married his long-time muse, Marthe, seen in *profil perdu* on the right. The contrast between the two could not be more apparent as Monchaty occupies the center of the composition while Marthe barely finds a foothold. The light-haired woman draws the eye as she takes the support of the elbow engrossed in the conversation the two women are engaging in. She seems young, attractive and full of life while Marthe seems to have been added as an afterthought to the side of the composition. Her countenance can not be seen but she lends a more somber air to the work as compared to her light-haired interlocutor. Both women were deceased by the time Bonnard put finishing touches to this painting. [15] He started this work in 1921 when they were alive. They were evidently acquainted with each other. Here, he depicts them in a bright sun-kissed garden enjoying each other’s company. This

composition suggests both nostalgia and a vivid remembrance of the two most important figures of his youth. They seem to come alive on his canvas - a proof that their memory remained vivid in his mind long after they were gone. This rawness of emotion is another aspect of symbolism that Bonnard explores in his work.



Figure 7 *Young Women in the Garden* (1921-46) by Pierre Bonnard, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection

V. CONCLUSION

These are some of the examples of Bonnard's intimist paintings that reveal his early Nabi influence in the form of symbolist aesthetics. Bonnard appropriates the symbolist principles in his work to give it a new intimist form. The interiors of his various dwellings take up the majority of his later work and the subtle underpinnings of symbolist tendencies at play are demonstrated through the use of color to evoke sensations or emotions in a harmonious yet disquieting ensemble. His art comes rife with personal references that are not so obvious on the surface as he portrays his complex relationships through his palette. Thus, Nabi influence or symbolism had a much greater influence on Bonnard's later works than is given due credit. The painter of memory freely exercised his imagination to give form to his inner perceptions of external sensorial (visual) experiences through a color-based synesthesia as he explores themes like melancholy, absence, nostalgia and even death to recreate his inner world.

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