

EN

“Vivre notre temps!”

Bonnard, Vallotton, and
the Nabis

13.5. — 16.10.22

KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM

Mardi **24 mai 2022**, 19:00 – 20:00

Fin de Siècle et les nouvelles formes d'art

Visite de l'exposition en dialogue avec Victoria Mühlig, conservatrice au Musée d'art de Pully, axée sur des supports populaires, tels que les revues, les affiches et les estampes

Sonntag, **3. Juli 2022**, 11:00 – 12:00

Die Sehnsucht nach «Vivre notre temps!»

Ausstellungsrundgang im Gespräch mit Bettina Hahnloser, Journalistin und Autorin sowie Urenkelin von Hedy und Arthur Hahnloser, über das Sammlerpaar und dessen Freundschaft zu «ihren» Nabis-Künstlern

Dimanche, **4 septembre 2022**, 11:00–12:00

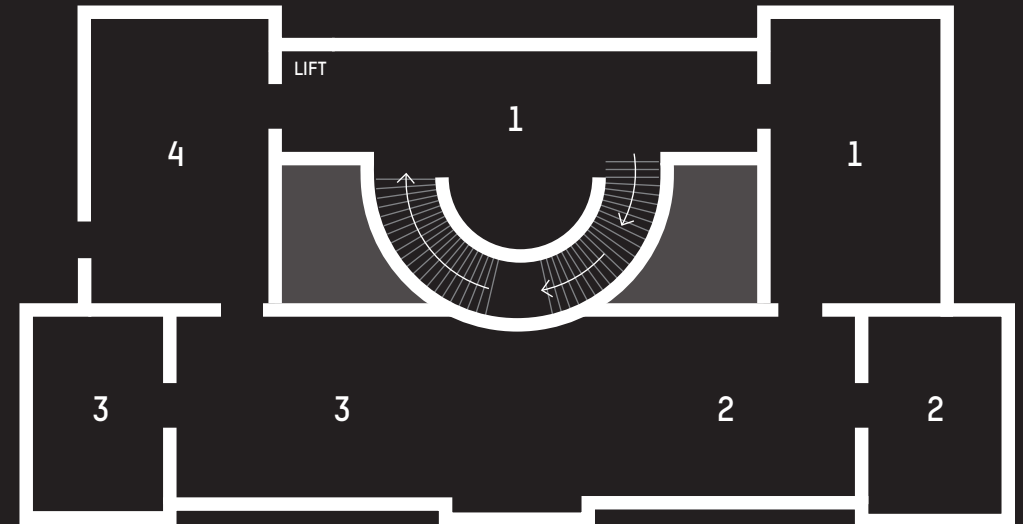
Félix Vallotton: le «Nabi étranger»

Visite de l'exposition en dialogue avec Katia Poletti, conservatrice de la Fondation Félix Vallotton, Lausanne, sur le Nabi franco-suisse



Floorplan

Upper floor



Rooms

- | | | | |
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1 “Vivre notre temps!” Bonnard, Vallotton, and the Nabis

Founded in 1888, the Nabis group, around Pierre Bonnard Maurice Denis, Félix Vallotton and Édouard Vuillard, is emblematic of the disintegration of Impressionism and the beginnings of modern art. The farewell exhibition of the Hahnloser/Jaeggli Collection at Kunstmuseum Bern presents its most prominent works by painters belonging to this audacious movement.

The name of the group comes from *nebiim* which stands for “prophet” or “initiated” in Hebrew, corresponding to the function assigned to these artists by Paul Gauguin. His eleven zincographies of scenes from Brittany, Martinique, and Pont-Aven exhibited at Café Volpini in 1889, assisted Denis in formulating his famous proposition: “It is well to remember that a painting, before it is a battle horse, a naked woman, or some anecdote or other, is essentially a flat surface spread with colors put there in a certain order”. Although there was no unified style and the significance and exploitation of the tension between surface and subject matter varies for each member of the group, it is intriguing to recognize their double origins, in Gauguin and, more subtly, Odilon Redon.

Gauguin and Redon probably met in 1886 when they both took part in the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition. The inclusion of them was symptomatic of the crisis and break up of Impressionism. Gauguin denounced the Impressionist’s “parasitism” upon the object and praised Redon for the way he sustained “ambiguity”. In a letter to Emile Schuffenecker from Pont-Aven in 1888 he wrote: “A word of advice: don’t paint too much from life. Art is in an abstraction: remove it from nature by meditating on her; give your attention to the creation that will result from it”. The Nabis can be precisely situated in such a collision between old forms of representation and the notions regarding a new artistic idiom that was just being born.

The exhibition “*Vivre notre temps!*” *Bonnard, Vallotton, and the Nabis* demonstrates how artists still working with the medium of representation were slowly turning towards abstraction. Their curious and experimental attitude towards tradition is expressed by the title of the exhibition which originates in Hedy Hahnloser’s note from 1940 where she stated that a generation’s significance and objectives could be better understood only through an exchange with artistic and creative contemporaries. She was convinced that such an understanding was necessary in making a mark in their own times.

Torn between the old and the new, between visible and invisible, between mimesis and experimentation, and inspired by Gauguin and Redon, the ideas of the Nabis – the *prophets* – helped to pave the way for the early 20th century development of abstract and non-representational art.

Maurice Denis,
Mais c'est le cœur qui bat trop vite, 1899

In addition to the artists being shown in the exhibition, namely Maurice Denis (1870–1943), Pierre Bonnard, Félix Vallotton, and Édouard Vuillard, there were also a number of other artists belonging to the Nabis group. The most significant were Paul Sérusier, Paul Ranson, Aristide Maillol, and Ker-Xavier Roussel. They joined forces while studying art at the Académie Julian in Paris to distinguish themselves from other studios. According to Denis, the name Nabis made members kind of “initiates,” uniting them in a “mystical secret society.” As a consequence of Denis’ fascination with ecclesiastical liturgy and rites, as well as his writings on art theory, he became known as both the “Nabi of beautiful icons” and the group’s own theorist.

Denis cited the reductiveness observable in Paul Gauguin and Sérusier as a source of inspiration, enabling him to express sensibilities and states of mind in his art. His work, initially related to Symbolism and Synthetism, increasingly began to address classical art around the turn of the century. In terms of content, the works are typified by Christian subject matter, family scenes, and landscapes. According to the artist, his early work which also included the lithographs on display, was “filled with love, a delight in the sight of the beauty of women and children,” in which he was striving “solely [for] the expression of sincere feelings.” The prints on display accordingly involve intimate and religiously charged scenes of mothers and children. Many of the titles such as *Mais c'est le cœur qui bat trop vite* (1899), invite a contemplative viewing of his religious art. They are denoted by the broad areas of color typical of the Nabis artists, a synthesis and stylization of form, and the decorative designs of fabrics, generating harmonies in pale colors.

Édouard Vuillard,
Roses rouges et étoffes sur une table, 1900/1901

From an early age Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) encountered a wide variety of fabrics and how they could be used through his mother, a tailor whose workshop was at home. He later became interested in Parisian haute couture, developing a unique sensibility for materials and textures as well as domestic genre imagery featuring families. Maurice Denis said of Vuillard’s rendering of interiors: “The painterly intimacy of our era’s interiors was already being expressed in his imagery; meanwhile, we have been able to witness his well-developed abilities in furnishing them, and with what imagination and mastery he succeeds in creating distemper walls as magnificent as medieval tapestries.”

Around the turn of the century, nude figures began to appear in his interiors. In contrast to his artist friends Pierre Bonnard and Félix Vallotton, who were intensely involved in painting the nude, Vuillard’s work comprised just a few private studies. These artistic experiments should not be underestimated, however, as they culminated in Vuillard’s play with extreme perspectives and virtuoso rendering of fabrics. Vuillard’s nudes function like figurative still lifes, in which the model enters into a painterly interconnection with both household and textile accessories, figure and space appearing to merge. The figure can also be altogether absent, as in the painting *Roses rouges et étoffes sur une table* (1900/1901). The fabrics, which the nude model would normally wrap loosely around herself, have become the central subject of the image and substitute for the body.

2 Intimate Spaces I

Private surroundings and everyday life would seem to be a primary source of inspiration for the Nabis artists. Their figures most often appear in intimate domestic situations: be it an undisturbed moment in the dressing room, in drawing rooms, bedrooms, dining rooms, on balconies or verandas, or in backyard gardens. These spaces constitute the starting point of their formal experiments.

In his mirror paintings, Pierre Bonnard uses his subjects as a compositional tool. In *Effet de glace ou Le tub* (1909), the mirror serves both as a barrier to and extension of the space. In looking carefully at his painting, the viewer can see that only the brush and two flacons on the shelf in front of the mirror in the lower left corner are in "real space" – the pictorial reality and not the reflection. By multiplying the planes, Bonnard seems not only to be dissolving the boundary between image and reality but also be playing with the viewer's gaze. Are they looking at the painting or at the mirror in the painting? It would appear the artist had found a way to painterly describe the complexity of human perception.

The close-ups of nudes or women in hats from Félix Vallotton, even if painted in a figurative manner, seem completely unrealistic. The frequently monochromatic backgrounds make them look frozen, unemotional, and somewhat abstract. Moreover, based on photographs and extracted from any context, his paintings would appear to be blurring the boundary between portrait and still life. Another interesting aspect of such a strategy can be seen in Bonnard's *La carafe provençale (Marthe Bonnard et son chien Ubu)* (1915) in which the woman and the dog are frozen in their poses, seeming to become part of the arrangement of vessels on the table. Rather than playing a central role in the composition, they instead play a somewhat technical one, marking the painterly negated perspective and indicating the distinction between foreground and background. Instead of telling a story, the artist is playing with correspondences of colors. Despite the figurative content, his work can be situated on the border of abstraction.

Interiors featuring familial subjects are likewise favored by Édouard Vuillard and are a recurring motif. His small scale works exemplify the introspective, subtly disquieting mood that the artist achieved by allowing flattened and compressed space to nearly overwhelm the figures in his compositions. It is obvious that instead of realistic description, he is interested in the autonomy of the pictorial surface. His figures rather than occupying the space merge with it to form a unity of color and planar composition. The bodies (for instance in *Nu dans le salon rayé*, 1905) instead of providing a starting point would appear to be more a result of the sweeping surfaces and scratched lines. "I don't do portraits," Vuillard used to say, "I paint people in their surroundings". Exactly like Odilon Redon, he delighted in things remaining veiled, blurred, and enigmatic.

Félix Vallotton,
Femme nue couchée dormant, 1913

Félix Vallotton (1865–1925) described himself as a painter of the nude, the genre consequently forming his largest group of works. The figure in *Femme nue couchée dormant* (1913) is distinguished by stylized lines describing a body that would almost seem to float in front of the monochrome background. Such radical reductiveness makes for an almost surreally dreamlike scene. It cannot be classified either spatially or temporally, any narrative elements being eschewed. The sleeping woman turns her upper body towards the viewer, her closed eyelids contradicting any openness to the external world. Instead, she appears to be absorbed in herself; her thoughts turned inwards. This would correspond to one of Vallotton's preferred ways of staging the nude, her evident introversion causing protests at the time.

For Hedy Hahnloser detaching nudity from any literary context, in particular, meant breaking a taboo, as she wrote in a letter to Richard Bühler in 1916: "Since Vallotton does not force the object into, or artificially generate, a personally emotional mood [...], there's nothing left for people addicted to mood [...]. There only remains either to love or to hate." She goes on to describe the "becoming empty" of the models as an "act of abstraction," since it was only through the dissolution of the object that they could appear in the "new form desired." The flatness of the body and space is formally reminiscent of works by Paul Gauguin, leading to a tension between object and abstraction, which is what also fascinated Vallotton and other Nabis artists about Odilon Redon's dream worlds. Nudity in Vallotton's depictions therefore remains rather neutral, in a certain sense, enabling it to offer scope for new interpretations, even today.

Pierre Bonnard,
*La Nappe à carreaux rouges ou
Le Déjeuner du chien, 1910*

Shortly before the turn of the century, Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) was increasingly experimenting with an impressionist style of painting, but also with the relationship between figure and space, as well as unusual perspectives. Around 1910 the motif of the domestic interior became more frequent, with Bonnard favoring depictions of people close to him in familiar surroundings. In creating the scenes, he repeatedly employed the same pictorial elements, such as a table laid with a variety of objects and surroundings that were merely sketched in. The objects being depicted are frequently cropped by the painting's boundaries. In Bonnard's case, these fragmentary qualities are a result of his interest in photography and Japanese woodcuts.

An example of a domestic interior would be the painting *La Nappe à carreaux rouges ou Le Déjeuner du chien* (1910). The laid table dominates the painting, dividing it into top and bottom. It stands vertically and is extended by the plane of the white wall. It seems as if the central figures – Marthe Bonnard and the dog – serve the artist only to build the foreground and background. Despite all the irregularities of the perspective, a spatial depth nevertheless emerges. In doing so, Bonnard was following one of his fundamental tenets, one he was only able to verbally formulate in the 1930s: "It is always said that one has to submit to nature. Sometimes you have to submit to the painting." Near the upper edge of the painting, his wife Marthe, who he repeatedly portrayed, sits in a quiet, withdrawn pose. Her expression provides the painting with a kind of timelessness. An impression Bonnard recorded in writing in 1936: "The work of art: a halting of time."

3 Intimate Spaces II

The Nabis conceived painting and the applied arts as essentially interrelated. In addition to paintings, they produced prints, book illustrations, furniture, sculpture, wallpaper, stained glass windows, and tapestries. All of them display at least some of the formal principles that the artists had elaborated in their paintings: ornamental language and two dimensionality in Maurice Denis, and formal innovation grounded in the materiality of the medium in Édouard Vuillard. The latter saw in tapestries a model of how to proceed: the “expression of an intimate emotion on a larger surface”.

The Nabis, unlike the Impressionists, were not interested in depicting the sparkling life of the city with its important urban centers, crowded boulevards, vivid squares, and parks. Rather, they looked to neighborhoods in a search for the local, projecting an intimate sensibility onto public environments. It would appear that they identified the home as a site of authenticity and sought to transform the public sphere in its image. In this sense, their retreat to the domestic sphere was not absolute, but tactical, believing that painting enabled new forms of intersubjectivity that could generate a new and revitalized public culture.

The scenes set in gardens as well as in the city show dimensions of the intimate. They are views from windows (like snapshots taken from an interior), they zoom in on family members playing checkers in the backyard, interactions at the corner table in a café or streets, where the artist friends meet. The façade of the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, and Eiffel Tower appear somewhat rarely and when they do, they remain visible only at a distance.

The views of Paris are not the only landscapes that the artists created; there are also several paintings from their later stays together in Normandy. These paintings were only rarely painted *plein air* and in front of the motif, but were instead produced only after the artists had returned to the studio. They are collections of fragments and memories. Bonnard’s *Dans un jardin méridional (La Sieste)* (1914) is symptomatic of such an assemblage of impressions, in which elements – as in abstract painting – are brought together and juxtaposed to form a sort of a montage with no perspective, no linear narrative. Again, Bonnard seems to be approaching abstraction despite the purely figurative content of the painting. The same fragmentation and “photographic eye” organizes Vuillard’s series *Paysage et intérieur* (1899) in which he rendered the life in the streets of Paris, its interiors, and surroundings. The cropped, frequently decentralized views, pictorial compositions employing differing vantage points and zooms in and out, would seem to be the only way of providing an account of impressions of modern life, the fullness of which cannot be captured in any other way than fragmentarily.

Pierre Bonnard, *Dans un jardin méridional (La Sieste)*, 1914

Landscapes and especially the gardens of his changing places of residence provided central motifs for Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) from the very beginning. From 1909 onwards he traveled regularly to the South of France. The landscape and the light of the Mediterranean south inspired him in his anti-naturalistic color experiments. In 1912 he bought a house in Normandy, whose garden was probably the inspiration for *Dans un jardin méridional (La Sieste)* (1914), although the title suggests a different location, one in the south. His approach to color and light also points to his experiences in the Mediterranean south; Marthe Bonnard is taking her siesta in the midst of a lush, bright carpet of color. Despite the shift from interior to exterior, the garden remains a place of retreat, of intimacy, and can be regarded as an extension of Bonnard's use of the domestic interior as a motif. The garden is depicted as an arcadia in which figures merge with nature and the impressions it imparts of light and color.

Shortly before the First World War, the Nabis friends increasingly retreated to remote, rural areas on the Mediterranean coast. They rented villas near Saint-Tropez, Cannes, and Antibes, where artists associated with the Fauves were already living and working, a close dialogue developing between Bonnard and Henri Matisse. It was the artistic experiments that Bonnard undertook in the south that shaped his paintings and about which he later stated: "Certainly, the color seized me. I sacrificed form to it, and did so almost unconsciously." In 1918 he wrote to Hedy and Arthur Hahnloser: "I'm thinking of spending part of the winter in Antibes, my wife is in need of the southern sun, and it's important for me to stay in the same place if I want to work." A few years later, the collector couple bought a villa in Cannes with access to the sea, brokered by Bonnard, where they were able, thereafter to meet.

Félix Vallotton, *Place Clichy*, 1901

The painting *Place Clichy* (1901) belongs to a group of works that Félix Vallotton (1865-1925) painted in the summer of 1901 and titled "bords de Seine, peinture" in his catalogue raisonné. It was not until a few years later that the painting entered the Hahnloser collection. The artist, born in Lausanne but who had lived in Paris since he was 17, evidently meant the title to refer to the banks of the Seine in Paris. *Place Clichy* (1901) is the only work in this series displaying an urban motif without the Seine.

The square, which lies in the north of the city and at the foot of the Montmartre district, played a central role in the artist's biography. His artist friends from the Nabis group, Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, were both living and working there. The square functions as his "intimate space". Surrounded by cafés and studios, this was the center of Parisian nightlife and the European avant-garde at the turn of the century. The meeting place, as a source of inspiration, was likewise immortalized in works by Pierre Bonnard as well as other artists.

It is then all the more astonishing that a strange emptiness pervades the foreground of Vallotton's painting, instead of the expected crowds and the imposing war memorial that dominates the square and which appeared on numerous postcards and in Impressionist depictions at the time. Described by the group as the "foreign Nabi," Vallotton focused on the mundane and unspectacular in the vibrant "capital of the 19th century."

4 Correspondences

At the turn of the century the idea of a correspondence between the arts and the ideal of “uniting” them encouraged all sorts of exchanges between various disciplines. In 1923, while making some preparatory notes for a lecture that was to rehabilitate the role of religious art, Maurice Denis noted: “I was reproached with Symbolism. The picture of my youth: [Henri] Bergson and [Claude] Debussy, [Stéphane] Mallarmé, O.[dilon] Redon.” The order in which the names are listed is not without significance: music is ranked directly after philosophy and before the other arts. This corresponds not only to the prestige that music enjoyed among Nabis painters, but also to its general function as a model of an open-ended artistic communication that appeals mainly to the sensibility and imagination.

It was not only music, however, that was on the Nabis radar. In 1890 Édouard Vuillard was sharing a studio with Pierre Bonnard, his closest peer, and others, including the actor and theater director Aurélien Lugné-Poe. In 1893, Vuillard produced stage sets and theater programs for the Théâtre de l'Œuvre and became its close collaborator. In addition, the decisive role of literary men in art criticism at the end of the century in France resulted in extremely intense interconnections with poetry and literature. Founded in 1889, *La Revue blanche* disseminated work by avant-garde writers, critics, and artists and served as a means of discussing social and political issues of the day. According to Symbolist writer André Gide, *La Revue blanche* was the “gathering spot open to every point of view.” The artists from the Nabis group were regularly invited to contribute artwork.

In 1894, Bonnard created his famous poster for the review. The treatment of the silhouetted forms and the flattened colors are a clear statement that this image is above all “a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” The entire composition works as *image-devinette* without instructions. By confusing objects, planes, and the nature of signs, Bonnard would seem to be playing hide-and-seek with his viewers and the proliferating paradoxes. Also, in focusing the image on the central figure and suppressing any décor, he did not eliminate its psychological elements but rather he abstracted and incorporated them in the figure itself.

Although the Nabis’ lithographic and poster making activities have conventionally been viewed as distinct from their painterly achievements, there is no doubt that their engagement with both media originated in a shared preoccupation with decoration. Nabis premised their practice of the decorative on a dream of a public art. What was new and exciting about the poster in the 1880s was not only its innovative formal vocabulary, but also its accessibility and public visibility, which seemed to afford a much broader aesthetic experience. In negotiating a new relationship between public and private spheres, low and high art, the Nabis participated in Modernism’s dynamics.

Pierre Bonnard, *La Passante*, 1894

Between 1894 and 1900, Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) was particularly interested in depicting the streets of Paris. Similarly to the literary figure of the flâneur, each morning he strolled through the anonymous crowds of the Parisian streets. He reflected the observations he made of everyday life during his walks, in his art, occasionally presenting an anonymous city dweller in close-up, creating an ambivalent intimacy. He was particularly interested in depicting the female equivalent of the flâneur, the “passante,” that became the main motif in such works as *La Passante* (1894), *Femme au parapluie* (1895), and *Le fiacre* (1894).

1867, the year of Bonnard’s birth coincided with the death of Charles Baudelaire, one of France’s most important poets. He became famous for his volume of poems *Les fleurs du mal* published in 1857, which resulted in a scandal. Many artists were and still are inspired by his texts, as most patently evidenced by Odilon Redon’s *Les fleurs du mal* (1890), as well as more subtly by Bonnard’s *La Passante* (1894). In his volume of poetry, Baudelaire addresses the emerging phenomenon of the city and the accompanying feelings of alienation. He dedicated his poem *A une passante* to an unknown Parisian woman: “Around me roared the nearly deafening street. [...] A woman passed me [...] Sweet fugitive Whose glance has made me suddenly reborn, Will we not meet again this side of death? Far from this place! Too late! never perhaps! Neither one knowing where the other goes”. The author is implying the (im)possibility of encountering others in an urban environment. Despite being a close-up, Bonnard’s “passante” also seems distant and alien, her head lowered, avoiding the viewer’s gaze. The rapid brushstrokes reinforce the dynamics of the scene and, as described by Baudelaire and other writers, she remains a moving figure that eludes being properly apprehended.

La Revue blanche, 1889 – 1903

The Nabis artists are among the painters associated with *La Revue blanche*, one of the most well-known art magazines of the era. Founded in 1889 by the brothers Thadée, Alexandre, and Alfred Natanson, the magazine was “against everything that was *for* and everything that was *against*.” Friendship and diversity created ties between the Nabis and *La Revue blanche*. White as the synthesis of all the colors engendered both the magazine’s name and program, which could be expanded to also include the Nabis notion of an interconnection between art and life. Transcending the boundaries of poetry, painting, and music, it soon became a rallying point for the intellectual avant-garde. Thadée Natanson in particular became a friend and supporter of the Nabis, publishing lithographs by Maurice Denis, Édouard Vuillard, and Pierre Bonnard.

One of the most important illustrators for *La Revue blanche* was Félix Vallotton, who said of himself: “What characterizes me is the need to express myself through form, contour, line, and volume.” To live up to such a claim, he experimented with the woodcut medium, one rarely exploited at the time. Shortly before the turn of the century he was able to celebrate the success of his crisply contoured and starkly two-dimensional woodcuts, not only in France but also beyond. The importance of diversity in human and artistic dialogues and expressive media is also reflected in Vallotton’s woodcut series featuring the period’s well-known artists and intellectuals, including Paul Verlaine, who also wrote for *La Revue blanche*.

THE EXHIBITION

Dates of the exhibition	13.5. – 16.10.22			
Admission	CHF 10/red. CHF 7 Students: CHF 5 Children up to 16 years: free admission			
Opening times	Tuesdays: 10:00 am – 21:00 pm Wednesdays to Sundays: 10:00 am – 17:00 pm			
Public holidays	Open on all public holidays 10:00 am – 17:00 pm Open on Whit Monday, 6.6.22 Closed on National Day, 1.8.22			
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Media partner	SonntagsZeitung			

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