

Bonnard's Worlds

This exhibition explores the art of Pierre Bonnard, one of the most esteemed painters of the twentieth century. Born near Paris in 1867, he grew up between the capital and his family's house in southeast France. As an adult, he lived in Paris, Normandy, and the South of France, near the Mediterranean, in the town of Le Cannet, where he died in 1947.

Bonnard first became known around 1890 for witty and stylized paintings and graphics before coming under the influence of Impressionists like Edgar Degas and Claude Monet. Bonnard's work is now recognized for its very personal brand of modernism, balancing sophisticated compositions with inspired treatment of color and light—rivaling, though not resembling, the innovations of his close friend Henri Matisse.

In 1893, Bonnard met Marthe de Méligny, with whom he was to live for fifty years. She became his model and muse and is often portrayed in his paintings. The entirety of Bonnard's work, without trying to be autobiographical, nonetheless both chronicles and exposes his life, because almost every work of art he ever made was in large part inspired by the world in which he lived. This consistency of his transcriptions of experience—the confluence of the concrete, the visual, and the emotional—is one of the most striking features of his art.

In the exhibition, you will see works from all periods of Bonnard's long career, painted in all the places he most loved and treating all the genres in which he excelled, including landscape, still life, and figure painting. Together, they tell the story of the worlds of the artist and his imagination.

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About the Exhibition

Understanding that Bonnard's work has its origins in his personal experience, this exhibition examines the central themes of the artist's paintings across a career of more than fifty years, themes that embody what we call the painter's "worlds."

Beyond simply considering Bonnard's subject matter, the exhibition's selection and its arrangement seek to lead the visitor through the artist's life and work by offering paintings that, at each stage, in juxtaposition, present the themes—or situations, or environments—most common to Bonnard, in order of increasing intimacy.

To explore the succession of the worlds underlying Bonnard's art, our account proceeds in stages. Opening with views of Paris or the countryside, the exhibition moves to depictions of private gardens and terraces. Crossing the threshold to the interior, the viewer's attention is divided, in part considering the nature of indoor space, in part still aware of the world outside, perceived through open windows or doors.

Images of the common interior spaces and furnishings of domestic life—dining rooms and sitting rooms, chairs, tables, baskets, vases—give way to paintings that show more private environments—the bedroom, dressing room, and bath. At the end of the exhibition, Bonnard's renowned depictions of his wife bathing are followed by the most private images of all, the artist's portraits of himself, as seen within a most private world, that of the mirror that reflects his image.

Paris Boulevard at Night

1900

Oil on paperboard

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Bequest of John T. Spaulding

This painting shows the view from Bonnard's apartment at 65, rue de Douai, close to the corner of the Boulevard de Clichy, at the foot of Montmartre. For most of Bonnard's adult life, this part of Paris was his quartier; it was the artist's Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec and Vincent van Gogh, but more to the point it was an ordinary, working-class neighborhood bustling with life.



The Outer Boulevard

1904

Oil on canvas

Nahmad Collection

By day, and at a time of year when the trees are leafless, the view Bonnard had painted at night— exhibited nearby—is transformed. Below him, the artist observes a panoply of his fellow residents, recording each with a few flicks of his brush. He captures many modes of transport: a horse drawn omnibus at lower right; a bright white pushcart; a cyclist; a buggy with a prancing white horse; a Hansom cab at far left, and on the boulevard—with a boy bringing chase—an automobile.



Place Clichy (The Green Tram)

1906

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Bonnard's apartment was near the Place de Clichy— colloquially known simply as “Place Clichy”—a carrefour where many streets came together. A busy center of commerce, the Place was also a center for street traffic and transportation, as streetcar and omnibus lines met and crossed there. In the background of this street view, Bonnard shows a motorized tram entering the composition from the left, while at right an omnibus approaches, drawn by three white horses. The woman holding a blossom in the foreground might be the artist's lover, Marthe de Méligny, who once had worked making artificial flowers.



Landscape at Le Cannet

1928

Oil on canvas

Kimbell Art Museum

Acquired in 2018, in honor of Kay Fortson, President of the Kimbell Art Foundation, 1975–2017

The landscape shown here is the one that Bonnard saw from a vantage point just above his house, Le Bosquet, shown beneath a tree at center. With the village below and mountains in the distance, the painting is like a Renaissance “world view,” in which the particular is given a place of honor within the universal. At right is Bonnard himself, presiding over the world in which he had come to live, at last owning his own home in the south of France. By placing himself and his own property so prominently in the landscape, he creates what, for all its expansiveness, is a highly personal work of art.



Autumn Morning (The Large View of Vernon)

c. 1922

Oil on canvas

Private collection

In Autumn Morning, Bonnard positions the viewer at the crest of a hill to survey the landscape around Vernonnet, in Normandy, where he spent summers from 1910 until 1938. His viewpoint encompassed the rooftops of his own house, called Ma Roulotte (My Caravan), and nearby homes. The foreground is very near—a cottontail bunny establishes the scale—while the smokestack of a toylike boat at upper right gives a sense of the distance to the opposite bank of the River Seine. A road leads into the landscape, towards the home of Bonnard's friend Claude Monet, in nearby Giverny.



Earthly Paradise

1916–20

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago

Estate of Joanne Toor Cummings; Bette and Neison Harris and Searle Family Trust endowments; through prior gifts of Mrs. Henry C. Woods

The view from Bonnard's garden at Ma Roulotte served as the inspiration for the background of Earthly Paradise, painted some six years after he had come to live on the banks of the Seine at Vernonnet, in Normandy. The painting alludes to the story of Adam and Eve—casting Bonnard, slender and erect beside a tree at left, as the first man and Marthe, at lower right, as a voluptuous first woman.



The Riviera

c. 1923

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1928

The view that the painter records in Riviera is one that he would paint many times. Working at Le Cannet several years before purchasing Le Bosquet and settling there, he walked the hills above the village. From above, he observed the view of the Esterel Mountains and the Bay of Cannes that would, in a subsequent generation, become postcard-famous. For the artist, however, the familiarity of the view never lessened its impact.



Steep Path at Le Cannet

1945

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Every morning before breakfast, Bonnard went out for a walk. It was from the paths above Le Bosquet that Bonnard could observe the great panorama recorded in Landscape at Le Cannet in 1928, the large painting exhibited at the center of this gallery. Nearly two decades later, in Steep Path at Le Cannet, he was inspired by the last steps of the walk, as he neared the back of his house, its windows and red roof seen at left, partially obscured by trees.



Women with a Dog

1891

Oil and ink on canvas

Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

Acquired by the Clark, 1979

In works like Women with a Dog, Bonnard establishes the garden as a setting for domestic harmony, as indeed it must have been for him in his youth. A degree more private than the landscape, gardens are the purlieus of family and friends, their children and their menageries: cats, rabbits, hens and roosters, but above all, dogs. The shaggy hound shown so affectionately in Women with a Dog was Ravageau, his sister Andrée's pet.



Twilight (The Game of Croquet)

1892

Oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of Daniel Wildenstein through the Société des amis du Musée d'Orsay, 1985

In this painting, Bonnard welcomes us to his family's world—specifically the garden of Le Clos, the Bonnards' country house in southeast France, where he spent much of his childhood. His sister Andrée prepares to strike a croquet ball with her mallet, accompanied by their father, in a straw hat, and another woman—perhaps their cousin, Berthe Schaedlin. Andrée's husband, Claude Terrasse, stands further back. The decorative shapes and flattened patterns the artist uses here were inspired by the Japanese woodblock prints he loved.



Early Spring

1908

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1925

Early Spring is set in the garden surrounding a house in the country not far from Paris, near where the Impressionists had lived a generation earlier. “When my friends and I decided to pick up the research of the Impressionists and try to take it further, we wanted to outshine them in their naturalistic impressions of color,” Bonnard said. Here, fresh green colors and passages of light alternating with shadow are inspired by Monet or Camille Pissarro, while the arrangement of horizontal bands reflects Bonnard’s claim that he and his friends “were stricter in composition.”



The Family in the Garden

1901

Oil on canvas

Kunsthaus Zürich

Acquired 1985

Bonnard's first garden was the one surrounding Le Clos, where he played as a little boy, the setting of the 1892 Twilight, exhibited nearby. Almost a decade later, in this painting, he revisited the world of his childhood. From a window, he invites us to look down on his mother, carrying a basket of fruits that she has picked on the property. In the distance, a man is seated on a garden chair at the edge of a gravel path, while eight children—some of them his nieces and nephews—are scattered across the foreground and into the background of the composition.



Garden with a Small Bridge

1937

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California

Bequest of Wright S. Ludington

Garden with a Small Bridge might be a reinterpretation of Family in the Garden, hanging at left. In both paintings, Bonnard uses a palette of hues running from deep blue-green to bright yellow, with the yellow used in irregular patches, to contrast with the surrounding leafy greens. Many of the motifs that they show are the same. A grayish pathway wends its way through both compositions. Madame Bonnard and the little girl in the earlier painting find their equivalent in the mother and child in the later one. And the girl playing with a ball in the first is matched in the second painting by the frolicking pair of children with upraised arms.



The Garden

c. 1936–37

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art moderne de Paris

Purchased from the artist, 1937

The Garden is one of the most spectacular views of the plantings surrounding Le Bosquet, Bonnard's Riviera home. The depiction of a collapsing space composed of a series of large patches that assert their presence as flattened forms, hinted at in Family in the Garden, might reach its apogee in this lush and complex work. Bonnard defies the principles of classical composition, showing a flattened space in which a pathway seems to move into the distance, but instead moves across the canvas itself "without so much as scratching it," as one critic observed.



Woods in Summer

1927

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1927

We know that Bonnard painted in the studio, working from minimal sketches, his memory, and imagination. But many of his landscapes, like Woods in Summer, give the impression of having been painted outdoors, following the procedures of Monet or Cézanne—both of whom depended on direct observation of the landscape. Bonnard's powerful memory can be witnessed in the sunstruck surfaces of trees, bushes, grass, or flowers, or the back-lit clouds in the sky, all of which appear faithful to directly observed phenomena, as do the spaces where there is nothing—the spots between tree branches and foliage at left, for example.



Reader and Woman with a Dog

1909

Oil on canvas

The Robert H. Dedman Family

Bonnard's paintings of gardens and terraces invite the viewer to witness moments of family life, whether boisterous or quiet. The setting for his 1909 Reader and Woman with a Dog has not been securely identified. In the woman reaching down to pet a sleeping dog, however, we can recognize the features of the painter's companion, Marthe de Méligny, and the couple's pet dog, named Black.



The Terrasse Family

c. 1902

Oil on canvas

Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany

Acquired in 1959

On the lawn beside his family's country house, Bonnard shows his sister, Andrée Bonnard Terrasse, in pink and white, at right. Her husband Claude reclines on a sofa at left beside their son Jean. The painter's mother appears in a doorway beyond them. Scattered around the lawn close to the house are a host of children and pets. For all the seeming informality of the scene, it is carefully arranged, the figures aligned full-face or in profile, in planes that parallel the background building. Though slightly comic, The Terrasse Family is a tender portrayal of the society that gave birth to the painter himself and of the chaotic domestic life in which his sister and brother-in-law found themselves by the first years of the new century.



The Terrace

1918

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1935

This scene is set on the terrace above the garden at Ma Roulotte. Bonnard enjoys the resemblance between the irregular geometric patterns created by the boards of the white wooden railing and those created by the bands on the cloth. In contrast, a riot of brushwork describes the overlapping masses of undulating leaves in the background. Leaving the garden, our eye is allowed to travel across the river to distant fields, a line of blue hills at the horizon, and a sky filled with scuttling clouds.



Southern Landscape with Two Children

1916–18

Oil on canvas

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Gift of Sam and Ayala Zacks, 1970

Southern Landscape with Two Children may have been begun at Grasse, a hill town in the South of France. Exuberant foliage is suffused with turquoise, yellow, and orange, suggesting the intense light that made Bonnard feel, on his first encounters with the Mediterranean, “As if I were in the palace of A Thousand and One Nights,” enchanted by “the sea, the yellow walls, reflections as colorful as the lights themselves.”



Young Women in the Garden

1921–22/1945–46

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Marthe Bonnard appears in the corner at right, almost unnoticed, while a much younger woman, Renée Monchaty, turns her smile to the viewer (and to the painter). Marthe's sorrow and anger over Bonnard's relationship with Renée was likely the decisive factor leading to the couple's marriage in August 1925, more than thirty years after they first started living together. In turn, it is thought that Renée's death a few weeks later must have been a suicide. When the painting was begun, it probably showed the terrace of Ma Roulotte, but when it was finished—after Marthe's death, when Bonnard could bring the painting out once more to be retouched, from memory—it became suffused with the light that fell on the terrace at Le Bosquet: yellow, white, pink, and blue.



Before Noon

1946 (begun 1940)

Oil on canvas

Private collection

In Before Noon, Bonnard uses color at maximum intensity. The view is from inside Le Bosquet, through the doorway leading onto the gravel terrace. The stripe of hot pink at left is the doorjamb, and a handle on the irregular brown stripe at right indicates the door itself. Bonnard attempts to render the garden light as if it were a tangible, physical thing, through patches of paint, yellow and white layered with blue, green, and pink. This shimmering cloud almost absorbs the shapes it encounters—the back of a garden chair or the figure entering the composition from behind the doorjamb at left.



The Palm

1926

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1928

Painted in 1926, the year in which Pierre and Marthe Bonnard purchased Le Bosquet, The Palm states the painter's ownership of and engagement with the view of Le Cannet and all that it encompasses. The masses of foliage above and below frame the rooftops of the town, brought near us, their sundrenched tiles rendered in tones of orange and pink against patches of blue and violet shadow. These colors define the lone figure in the composition, a woman—Marthe—who faces us and holds what seems to be an apple in her outstretched hand, like Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruits and orchards.



Dining Room in the Country

1913

Oil on canvas

Minneapolis Institute of Art

The John R. Van Derlip Fund

For Bonnard, an open window signifies the exchange between the bright disarray of the natural and the shadowed organization of the man-made. The opening through which light enters the dark, it marks the transition from a more public to a more private world and gives definition to the longing for nature that only arises indoors. At the intersection of two worlds, Dining Room in the Country is one of the artist's greatest compositions. Window and door are open wide, but light enters only gradually, playing across the doorframe, a lace curtain, or a linen tablecloth. Giving the room a sense of openness, even grandeur, are three living beings, slightly diminished in scale: Marthe leans on the windowsill, while two small cats are perched on chairs at left and right.



The Open Window

1921

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1930

Though the open window of the painting's title occupies only one quarter of the pictorial surface, it is the impetus, the idea, as Bonnard would say, that sets the action of the painting in motion. With the window, Bonnard contrasts the exterior world, painted in tones of green, blue, and violet, with the world indoors, painted in shades of yellow, orange, red, and violet (once more). The painting's almost intoxicating palette is reinforced by its considered compositional structure. Bonnard uses the window's four-sided opening to spark a lively play of rectangles and parallelograms of varying colors. These are light-struck or in luminous shadow; their shapes are never exact but quiver slightly with the color and light they contain.



The French Window with a Dog

1927

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Dallas

The three paintings grouped here show the upstairs sitting room at Le Bosquet and its large window. What Bonnard selects to show us through the window is different in each case. In this painting, we spy the red tile rooftops of nearby houses through the branches of the palm tree. Their zig-zagging forms are confined within a rectangle at the upper center of the composition, one of several geometric shapes made from the door frames, their mullioned windows, the outside balcony, and its balusters—a geometrical contrivance as calculated as an abstraction by Piet Mondrian.



The French Window (Morning at Le Cannet)

1932

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Through the glass of the closed window, Bonnard shows a distant view of the Esterel Mountains and the Bay of Cannes. He shows us less of the room to concentrate on the image of Marthe. Her blue dress echoes the colors of the landscape, while her hair is suffused with gold. Morning light enters the composition from the left, perhaps through the open door of the east-facing bathroom, and bounces onto the back of Marthe's chair, which we see reflected in the mirror behind her, along with the painter's face.



Breakfast at Le Cannet, or Breakfast, Radiator

1930

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Here the open window reveals a blue and green landscape, with only a few buildings visible in the hazy distance. Marthe Bonnard is seated in the foreground. Behind her, the outside wall of the room is bracketed at left and right by white borders that represent the doors to her bathroom and bedroom. At right, in parallel with the landscape view, is a mirror, which reflects the opposite wall of the room. In it we see a slice of the frame around the opposite door, Marthe's back, and Bonnard himself. In the other paintings hanging here, the painter "conceals" the borders of the mirror, as if to test our ability to recognize that part of the painting as a reflection.



Dining Room on the Garden

1935

Oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, By gift

In this painting, almost square, nearly every effect of atmospheric light and shadow has been eliminated. Objects—even footed dishes of fruit and the cylinders of jug and pitcher—deny their volumes and become tinted silhouettes. Colors are applied at maximum intensity, virtually without shading. Only one detail—the reflection of the window frame and blue sky in the sliver of tabletop not covered by a cloth—suggests the action of the exterior on the interior.



The Bowl of Milk

1919

Oil on canvas

Tate, London

Bequeathed by Edward Le Bas, 1967

This painting shows the room in a hotel overlooking the sea in Antibes, where Pierre and Marthe stayed in the months after the end of the First World War. Bonnard concentrates on an effect of sunlight entering a room by looking towards the window. The resulting geometries of light and shade give way, finally, to the presiding shape of a woman at right. Her hair, face, and hand, as well as the edge of her pink dress, are brightly lit in contrast to the rest of her body. The black cat that emerges from the luminous darkness beneath the table might be a playful embodiment of the very idea of shadow.



The Breakfast Room (Dining Room Overlooking the Garden)

1930–31

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Given anonymously, 1941

Echoing the theme that he had explored in [The Bowl of Milk](#), hanging nearby, Bonnard studies the way light comes into a room, falling on a tabletop and casting deep shadows beneath the objects placed there. Through the glass, across the balustrade of a terrace, we see a verdant lawn, flanked by sun-struck trees. On either side of the window, patterned wallpaper is thrown into shadow; Marthe is there at left, her image cropped by the painting's edge.



Studio with Mimosa, Le Cannet

1946 (begun 1939)

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne—
Centre de création industrielle

Purchased from Charles Terrasse, 1979

The window between the world inside and the world outside was a subject Bonnard turned to frequently and with mastery, exploring its literal and metaphorical dimensions. *Studio with Mimosa* is one of his greatest paintings of the theme, showing mimosa trees in bloom outside his studio at Le Bosquet. The enormous window almost fills the canvas; a band of pink at left represents the wall where Bonnard tacked his canvases to paint. Begun around 1939, the painting was only finished in the last months of the artist's life.



The Lamp

c. 1899

Oil on academy board mounted on panel

Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan

Gift of The Whiting Foundation and Mr. and Mrs.

Donald E. Johnson

Bonnard had what he called “the taste for everyday spectacle, the faculty for drawing emotion out of the most modest acts of life.” In this painting, he uses an everyday object to intrigue and perhaps disturb the viewer. Drawn close to the table, the shiny brass lamp blocks our view of the other diners. In its central sphere we see our own distorted reflection, distant and diminished.



The Artist's Studio

1900

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Bonnard often used windows, doors, and mirrors to frame and call attention to elements within a composition, sometimes composing “pictures within pictures.” In this studio view, the scale of the window and the imaginary picture within its frame is more in keeping with the large easel than that of the tiny painting resting there.



The Children's Meal

1895

Oil on cardboard, mounted on wood

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gift of David Allen Devrishian, 1999

In the 1890s, Bonnard painted dozens of small pictures devoted to the intimate world of his own family. He often chose the most mundane family rituals as the subjects of these paintings; one of his favorites was the gathering of family members around a table for a meal. Here, Bonnard's mother shares the table with his sister, Andrée, and two of her sons, the baby, Charles, and the self-confident toddler, Jean.



The Lessons

1898

Oil on canvas

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina

The Lessons seems to show, through a doorway, the room seen in The Children's Meal, hanging nearby, traditionally identified as the dining room at the Bonnard family's country house. In the doorway, a small boy engages the painter and the viewer with a quizzical, wondering look.



Coffee

1915

Oil on canvas

Tate, London

Presented by Sir Michael Sadler through the Art Fund, 1941

The dachshund was the favored dog of Pierre and Marthe. Over several decades, they had six of these small dogs, each of whom bore the same name: Poucette. Here, the dog is a focus of attention, placed at the edge of the table, aligned with the border of the checkered cloth and the border of the hanging on the wall behind Marthe and her housemaid. A second coffee cup suggests Bonnard's presence at the table.



Woman with Dog

1922

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Acquired 1925

Woman with Dog is the first work by the artist acquired by Duncan Phillips, who went on to form the greatest collection of Bonnard's paintings in the United States. A beautiful "double portrait," it shows Bonnard's great sensitivity to mood. In painting this tender image of Marthe, his companion of almost thirty years, with their cherished pet cradled in her arms, he was able to convey the gentle, tenderhearted expression of maternity.



Cooking Utensils

1946

Oil on canvas

Collection Sylvie Baltazart-Eon

While Bonnard devoted dozens of paintings to the world of his Le Cannel dining room, only one painting evokes the nearby room where food was actually prepared. This unusual painting of kitchen implements, painted near the end of the artist's life and several years after Marthe's death, blends the genres of interior, still life, and portrait. To enter a room and to look up at objects that were not really his, but Marthe's—as Bonnard shows himself doing in Cooking Utensils—must have roused a poignant melancholy. But it could also give him the idea to find memories, and beauty, in the commonplace.



The Red Cupboard

1933

Oil on canvas

Private collection

This is a view inside the left-hand cupboard shown open in the large painting hanging to the right. The foreshortened cupboard door projects into our space and casts its shadow onto the interior, where pieces of fruit are placed on the shelves.

Bonnard also peers obliquely and to the right into the much deeper center cabinet, where, on corresponding shelves, even more objects are arranged. Under artificial light, the brilliant red color suffuses the composition, changing even the white interior of the projecting door to deep mauve.



The White Cupboard

1931

Oil on canvas

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch

When the Bonnards acquired Le Bosquet in 1926, there were alterations and renovations to be made. One of the most important of these was to convert two small rooms on the ground floor into one large room that served as a space for living and dining. At one end of the room, white wooden cupboards were installed on either side of the fireplace. This painting shows the three cabinets to the right of the fireplace. Marthe is busy in front of the middle cupboard, while the left-hand cupboard stands open. Glowing lightbulbs on the ceiling cast the shadow of the glass-paned central door onto the closed cupboard at right.



Basket of Fruit in a Cupboard

1944-46

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Rockefeller, 1984

A basket filled with fruits rests on the floor of the cupboard. On the raised step behind it, we see three ceramic items: an egg cup, a flat plate, and the foot of a fruit dish. The white cabinetry acts like a frame around the colorful central motif.



Dachshund on a Chair

c. 1921

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Geneva

Bonnard looks down onto two of his rush-seated ladderback chairs, on the nearest of which one of his dachshunds has taken a seat, ready for the painter's attention.



Faience from Normandy (The Pot from Rouen)

1910

Oil on canvas

Private collection

At the center of the composition, atop a journal on the littered table, Bonnard has placed a small faience pitcher brimming with fleurs des champs—flowers of the field. Gathered in a neighboring meadow or in one of the wilder parts of the garden, by Marthe or by the painter himself, the flowers have been barely arranged, if at all; artless, simple, and fresh, they bring the outside world indoors. On the back wall, Bonnard has tacked one of his earliest views of the side of Ma Roulotte, with characteristic white, unpainted margins.



The Work Table

1926

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

The Work Table is remarkable for its experimentation with broad patches of relatively unmodulated color, the gold chair and the blue rug painted flatly, perhaps in homage to Bonnard's good friend Henri Matisse. On a sofa behind the table and its still life of books and papers, a white cat seems relaxed but intelligent, wide awake beside a sleeping dachshund, surveying the room and scrutinizing the viewer.



Homage to Maillol

1917

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art

The Louis E. Stern Collection, 1963

Red and pink anemones in a blue and white vase stand on a small cabinet placed beside a column or post in Bonnard's Paris apartment. Also standing on the cabinet is a bronze cast of Standing Bather, modeled around 1900 by Bonnard's friend Aristide Maillol. The composition emphasizes verticality: the statue and its cabinet-base, the pillar, the blue screen in the distance—all are narrow and tall, like the painting itself.



Flowers on the Mantelpiece at Le Cannet

1927

Oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, France

Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Léon Bouchut in 1974

In the upstairs sitting room at Le Bosquet, Marthe approaches a vase of anemones on the mantelpiece. Almost everything in the painting is some shade of yellow, from the painted wall to Marthe's yellow dress. Even the white cupboard glows with borrowed hues. Our attention is captured by the shiny blue vase filled with anemones, blue, white, and red—the tricolore—and their curvaceous green stems.



Basket of Fruit

c. 1946

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Basket of Fruit is among the artist's last still lifes. The perception of color is the underlying theme, as Bonnard balances warm colors—yellow to orange— with their cool complementary hues—violet to blue. In May 1946, Bonnard borrowed two paintings from Matisse—one of which was the Kimbell's Asie— specifically so that he could study their colors in his dining room at Le Bosquet. He sent this Basket of Fruit to his old friend in return. Matisse was full of praise. "I am still cohabiting with your painting, so mysterious and alluring."



Bouquet of Mimosas

1945

Oil on canvas

Private collection, New England

Bonnard's passion for the color yellow is celebrated. "One cannot have too much yellow," he said. For him, yellow was the color of light. Preparing this still life, Bonnard must have gathered flowers and foliage from the trees behind Le Bosquet—the subject of Studio with Mimosas, hanging nearby. Bringing them into the house, it is as if he brought the intense light of the southern sun with him.



Fruit and Fruit Dishes

c. 1930

Oil on canvas

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Nancy F. and Joseph P. Keithley Collection Gift

The artist's close point of view dictates that the surface of the painting will be almost entirely white— though Bonnard's whites contain myriad colors. Here, the careful arrangement of the blue-ringed bowls and plates with yellow, orange, and red fruits is worthy of Paul Cézanne, or of another of Bonnard's heroes, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. The equilibrium of the objects on the tabletop is disturbed first by the slivers of orange, yellow, and pink beyond the table and then by the cropped heads of a genial cat and a dog, cautiously watching each other.



Two Baskets of Fruit

1935

Oil on canvas

Collection of Anne and Chris Flowers

The setting for this ambitious still life is the dining room at Le Bosquet, where the plaster wall and its wainscot, at right, meet the wall of white cupboards, at left. A wicker garden chair with two printed cushions is placed in the corner. The source of light in the room is overhead; the baskets cast minimal shadows while the chair creates a deep shadow that seems almost tangible. To tease our eye, the artist spreads a tablecloth with a wayward red grid over the red baize that is always in place.



Corner of a Table

c. 1935

Oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

State purchase, 1936. Acquired by the Musée d'Orsay in 1977.

On deposit at Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne—Centre de création industrielle

In Corner of a Table, the eye is forced to look only downwards—everything around the table has been reduced to insignificance—and the result is a kind of perceptual vertigo. Baskets and boxes cast irregular and perplexing shadows. All laws of perspective are ignored; the line of the tablecloth first recedes in a gentle arc, then takes an abrupt upward turn under the basket at the top of the composition. Against a triangle of floor or wall in the upper left, the artist places lines that we read as a tiny chair. The result is that Corner of a Table is one of Bonnard's most innovative compositions.



Young Girl with Black Stockings

1893

Oil on wood

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of Zeïneb and Jean-Pierre Marcie- Rivière, 2011

Marthe de Méigny was about twenty-four when she met Pierre Bonnard, about twenty-six, in 1893. Bonnard, smitten, soon began to make paintings, drawings, and prints inspired by her. Among the earliest paintings devoted to Marthe is Young Girl with Black Stockings, painted in the year they met. It announces the direction that the artist's earliest depictions of his lover would take; though here she shows only the skin of her back and averts her gaze, her stockinged legs smolder with erotic intent.



Marthe on a Divan

c. 1900

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Bonnard gave this painting of Marthe to his closest friend, the painter Edouard Vuillard. Here she is fully clothed, her skirt falling to the right as she curls inward to the left, her face half in shadow. Is the glimpse of her thigh meant to be titillating? Or is it purely accidental, something seen when entering a silent room to encounter an intimate companion there? “This is what my beloved looks like, sleeping,” the painting tells us.



The Siesta

1900

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria

Melbourne Felton Bequest, 1949

The Siesta is one of the most resplendent of Bonnard's early works. In it we have been granted admittance to the private world of the painter's life, to one of its most personal spaces, the bedroom he and Marthe share, where they make love and where they sleep. Her clothes have been cast off, and she is arranged for contemplation—savoring, even—like the classic Sleeping Venus of the Renaissance. The pose of her body is inspired by an ancient marble in the Louvre.



Man and Woman

1900

Oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Acquired, 1948

Although we recognize Pierre and Marthe in this painting, its original title, Man and Woman, suggests that it is meant to be read as a story, a fable, even. The man, his shadowed body thin and angular, his expression obscure, has risen from the bed and is dressing. The woman, her voluptuous body glowing like ivory in the light and her cheek flushed pink, remains in bed, her mood still playful. Their separation from each other, reinforced by the placement of a folding screen between them, has sometimes been interpreted as alienation and sometimes as proof of their natural and careless independence.



Nude Rising from Bed

c. 1912

Oil on canvas

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Promised Gift of Nancy F. and Joseph P. Keithley

Nude Rising from the Bed depicts an “everyday spectacle,” as Bonnard would refer to the “modest acts of life” that he portrayed again and again—a woman at her toilette, or bathing, or drinking coffee, or speaking to a pet. Painted about a decade after The Siesta and Man and Woman, hanging nearby, it indicates the direction that Bonnard’s later paintings of the nude would take, never entirely divorced from the erotic, perhaps, but never coupled with lust.



The Bathroom (The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa)

1908

Oil on canvas

Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels Acquired from Mlle. Eugénie Hauman, Brussels, 1949

A woman is perfuming herself, standing proudly in the center of a dressing room, beside the flat tub in which she has just bathed. This is one of the most important works in the development of Bonnard's talent as a painter of the female nude, and yet its principal subject might really be the presence of light. The woman is seen against the glow of the lace-curtained window, and, as a result, most of her body is in shadow. But that shadow only serves to brighten the glimmers of light that illuminate parts of her body.



The Mirror in the Green Room

1909

Oil on canvas

Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields

James E. Roberts Fund

Set in the same space as The Bathroom, displayed nearby, Mirror in the Green Room brings the viewer close to the dressing table—so close that the objects resting on its surface are cropped by the picture's edge. Bonnard calls on the viewer to look closely and attentively at his composition. He simplifies the mirror frame's design, thus making the image it encloses a bit more noticeable. Were it not for the discreet reflection of the inside of the basin and the opening of the pitcher, the mirror might be mistaken for a framed painting, hanging against the patterned wallpaper.



The Spring (Nude in the Bath)

1917

Oil on canvas

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen / Basel, Beyeler Collection

Kneeling in a deep enameled bathtub, set in the corner of a room with yellow walls, Marthe reaches towards the stream of water that falls into the painting from an unseen faucet. This is The Spring—“La Source”—of the painting’s title, traditionally given to paintings in which a nude woman is placed in or near a flowing stream or fountain. Bonnard replaces allegory with reality, a classical nude with a real one. He draws our attention to her hands, one of which, beneath the flow of water, divides it into glittering streams.



Large Nude in the Bathtub

1924

Oil on canvas

Private collection

In this painting, the arrangement of Marthe's body—the complexity of the pose—suggests the artist's collaboration as sculptor-choreographer. Taking care with details, he gathers the figure's most expressive elements together—her head and shoulders, hands and feet. Painstakingly organized, the painting is a sort of fiction, but one that issues from the world of Bonnard's existence. Bonnard does not set out to tell the story of his life with Marthe, but every detail of the painting is drawn from that life.



In the Bathroom (Sketch)

c. 1940

Oil on canvas

Private collection

After purchasing the villa Le Bosquet in February 1926, the Bonnards carried out extensive renovations and alterations, including the creation of a bathroom for Marthe. In the Bathroom shows the result. A large enameled bathtub is in one corner, a sink and a slender radiator in another. French doors are centered on the far wall. On the walls, white-glazed ceramic tiles are capped by a dark blue-green border, which seems to continue into the mirror over the sink. Bonnard depicts the room from below, the view from the bather's vantage point, which becomes our own.



After the Shower

1924

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art

The Louis E. Stern Collection, 1963

After the Shower is thought to have been painted in Saint-Tropez around 1914. The artist stands away from his model, permitting a view of a yellow-painted room with an open window in the background. His elevated viewpoint causes the tabletop and the floor to tip upwards. A variety of accessory objects allude to the rituals of breakfast and bath: a place is laid at the end of the table; a copious towel is draped to dry on a rack in the foreground at left.



Nude in an Interior

c. 1935

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Bonnard understood that he could inspire his viewers to closer looking by grabbing their attention with a subtle visual puzzle. In Nude in an Interior, he creates a complex space that is difficult to interpret. Though his compositional strategies might initially baffle, Bonnard presents a domestic view as he might have encountered it, the model seen by accident, unawares.



The Bathroom

1932

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Florene May Schoenborn Bequest, 1996

Within the Bonnard's bathroom, light seems to be in motion. Marthe's body glows pink, her bent arm and her belly lit from beneath, light bouncing off the upended floor, which is blue and gray, then blue and white, then blue and yellow. On the far wall, the white ceramic tiles glow icy blue at left, while those on the right are smoldering blue-violet. Above the sink is a slash of white, a vivid reflection, but where it originates, we are not told.



The Large Bathtub, Nude

1937–39

Oil on canvas

Private collection

This is the second of Bonnard's great bathtub compositions, rarely exhibited and generously lent to the exhibition. Here, the artist's point of view is more vertical, and the tub looms larger in comparison to the figure and to its environs. Though smaller, Marthe's body appears more relaxed, its contours more natural and less assertive. The color scheme, too, is less extreme, relying on the juxtaposition of gold, lemon yellow, and white with deep blue and pale lilac to convey the sensation of a space quietly infused with even, balanced light. Still, as in the Paris version of the theme (hanging to the left), Bonnard gives free rein to fantasy. The humble patterned linoleum beneath the tub becomes a magically glistening mosaic, a fluid memory of Byzantium.



Nude in the Bath

1936

Oil on canvas

Musée d'art moderne de Paris

Purchased from the artist, 1937, for the Universal Exposition of 1937

By 1928, Bonnard had already formulated the idea of a composition in which the bathtub would be shown in its entirety, the recumbent figure inscribed within the irregular oblong of its rim, her body submerged in water, an idea that took form in this majestic canvas. A few straight lines—the edge of the bathtub and the delineation between Marthe's legs—underscore the regular geometry of one segment of the background wall, where a white grid asserts its presence against a bright blue field. Elsewhere, all semblance of perspective is abandoned, all contours subsumed by the effulgent light, made manifest in the shimmering patches of saturated color that describe the gleaming tiled wall. The picture space expands and contracts under the prismatic force of bold zones of blue, yellow, and violet, accented with both bright and muted white.



Nude in Bathtub

1941–46

Oil on canvas

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

Acquired through the generosity of the Sarah Mellon Scaife Family

The last of Bonnard's paintings of Marthe soaking in the bath, the visionary Nude in Bathtub is also the last of the artist's depictions of the woman who was his closest companion for fifty years. Although Marthe was still living when the painting was begun around 1940 or 1941, her death in 1942 left Bonnard without a model; the painting was completed entirely from memory and the imagination. Notwithstanding the privations of war and the anguish of loneliness, in his last years Bonnard painted some of his most ambitious and inventive works, among them Nude in Bathtub. Such paintings, no matter what shape their subjects might assume, emerged as expressions of the artist's emotions, particularly his feelings of love.



Self-Portrait with Beard

c. 1920

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Over the course of his career, from the late 1880s until the year before his death, Bonnard executed more than a dozen painted self-portraits. He made many more drawings of himself, and he can be identified in many other works that could not properly be called self-portraits, such as Man and Woman or Earthly Paradise, both exhibited here. In this portrait, his expression is wary, his eyes slightly narrowed, though his gaze is direct. The likeness is roughly drawn in black paint, wiped into the ground beneath patches of red, orange, and yellow that give it a mysterious glowering quality, as if it were seen in firelight.



Self-Portrait (The Boxer)

1931

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of Philippe Meyer, 2000

A self-portrait painted when the artist was in his early sixties, this painting was titled The Boxer when first exhibited. Bonnard stands before the mirror, indicated by the dark line at the right. The wall behind him is lit by a harsh electric bulb. His right shoulder and bicep are in the light, as is his upraised, clenched fist at left, and everything else is thrown into moody shadow. Bonnard's body is lean and wiry, but his gestures, when one observes the expression of ineffable sadness on his face, give no hint of pugilistic bravado. It is a work that could only have been painted by someone unafraid to expose an emotional wound to public view, a boxer more brave than strong, a man aware of his frailties and flaws and determined to combat them.



Portrait of the Artist in the Dressing Room Mirror

1945

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne—Centre de création industrielle

Donation, 1984, Formerly Collection of Florence Gould

The most private world of all might be the mirror in which we see only ourselves. Here, Bonnard shows us a mirror, making sure we notice its edges, below and at right. We look into the mirror to find Bonnard there. We are faced with questions about vision and cognition once posed by the painter's nephew, writing in 1943: What is the relationship between what we see and what Bonnard sees? What relationship does he himself establish between the world and his art? The answer to the first question cannot be known, rooted as it is in unending philosophical questions of perception and knowledge. We can try to answer the second by saying that Bonnard's art is about the world—his world—and though they are not the same thing, it would be impossible to understand, or even to imagine, the one without the other.

