

P

PRIVATE LIVES

Home and Family
in the Art of the Nabis
Paris, 1889–1900



VIEWING GUIDE & PROMPTS

This selection of images and prompts aims to spark deep looking, thinking, and conversation in the special exhibition *Private Lives*.

WHO WERE THE NABIS?

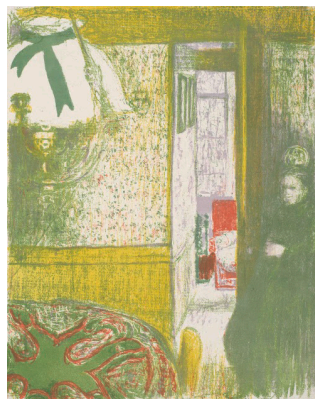
In 1889, a group of young artists in Paris created a loose-knit club of painters and printmakers. Borrowing from the Hebrew term *nebiim* (prophet), they dubbed themselves the Nabi (pronounced nah-BEE) brotherhood. Although they never exhibited under this title, they were united through their deep bonds of friendship and their shared desire to create a new, subjective type of art. This exhibition explores the work of four Nabi artists—Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis, and Félix Vallotton—who explored the themes of home and family as wellsprings for this new art.



HAPPY HOME OR TROUBLED INTERIOR?

The domestic interior provides a rich subject for artists to explore the pleasures and struggles of daily life. Such Nabi scenes are deceptively complex. At first glance, they may appear charming and idyllic, but further investigation reveals the psychological tensions of home and family life, which the artists examine through various formal means. Often, competing emotions can be found within the same scene, requiring the viewer to decipher layers of meaning.

- What feelings do you associate with home and family life? How has your experience of home changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?



HIDDEN FIGURES, HIDDEN STORIES

In 1908, art critic Julius Meier-Graefe wrote of Édouard Vuillard, “There is always something in the background with him. It is possible to have one of his interiors in the house for a month, and one fine day to discover a figure in the corner, and not only a figure, but a whole story.” Félix Vallotton, on the other hand, used crisply

delineated forms but omitted much of the context, leaving the viewer to guess at the relationship and the dialogue between figures. The Nabi artists relished ambiguity, providing clues to the unspoken narrative, but forcing the viewer to complete the story.

- What stories do their works suggest? What happened just before the moment depicted in each work? What will happen next?

HOW DO YOU PAINT A FEELING?

Art is not just a depiction of nature, but an expression of subjective experience. The Nabis used simplified lines and colors and daring forms to communicate not only the visual world but the emotions it triggered within the artists’ psyches. In opposition to Naturalism or Realism, which attempted to represent subject matter in a literal, truthful way, the Nabis favored Symbolism, seeking to create an art of suggestion.

While the Nabis’ domestic pictures provide glimpses into late nineteenth-century interiors, the goal of the artists was not documentation; rather they sought to conjure up memories and emotions inspired by a scene.

- Think of five words to describe your feelings as you look at this work. What techniques did the artist use to elicit emotion?



WOMEN'S WORK

Although no women were admitted into the Nabi brotherhood, the wives, mothers, and partners of these men were vital contributors to their artistic lives. They served as models, but also as caregivers, assistants, and, in some cases, collaborators. Their labor is keenly depicted in the works in this exhibition: housekeeping, sewing, caring for and feeding children, and breastfeeding were not hobbies, after all, but forms of female labor.

- What domestic duties can you identify in each picture? Do you normally think of the home as a place where work happens? What kinds of work take place in your home? Who performs this labor?



THE TRUTH ABOUT CATS AND DOGS

Modern petkeeping flourished during the end of the 1800s. For the first time, commercial pet foods, pet-care manuals, and boutiques filled with pet accessories proliferated in Paris. By the 1890s, pets—especially cats and dogs—were firmly ensconced in the homes and hearts of Parisians. For the Nabi artists,

pets were signifiers of home and intimacy. They were not mere symbols; instead, these artists included animals as unique individuals and members of the family, giving them their proper due alongside their human companions.

- What do you notice about the many cats, dogs, and other animals depicted in this exhibition? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your understanding of pets as family members?

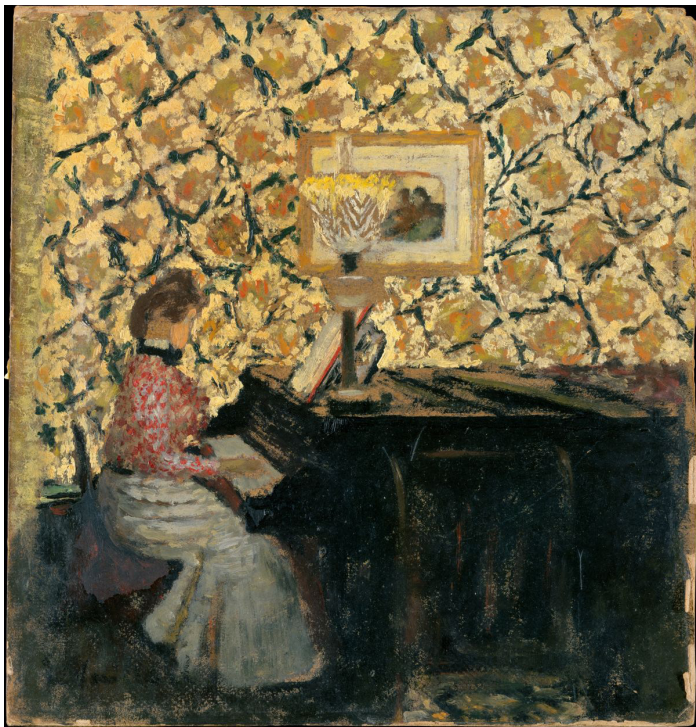


HOW DO CHILDREN EXPERIENCE THE WORLD?

The Nabis loved depicting children. Not only were they part of the artists' intimate family circles, but children also offered an example of how to view the world with a fresh perspective. Often, the artists deployed a deliberately childlike technique or adopted the child's point of view to render these young models.

- Look closely at two or three works in the exhibition that depict children with adults. Which works convey the child's perspective and which privilege the adult's? What techniques do the artists use to help you imagine the scene from either perspective?





THE MUSIC OF PAINTING

Painting and music are so-called sister arts, since both are ruled by harmony and rhythm. Moreover, painting, like music, can elicit an emotional response. The Nabis were particularly attuned to the musical universe of fin-de-siècle Paris, and counted many musicians among their family members and friends. Music in the home—ranging from child recitals to sophisticated performances—was part of the intimate lives of many Parisians.

- Close your eyes as you listen to a piece of music, whether in the exhibition, at home, or somewhere else. What do you visualize? Do you see colors, patterns, a scene? What feelings do you associate with this music?

PATTERN UPON PATTERN

In the 1800s, middle-class homes were filled with patterns, from wallpaper and furniture to tablecloths, drapery, and even clothes. Stripes, checks, arabesques, and floral designs abounded. Wallpaper plays a leading role in many of the Nabis' pictures. In fact, both Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis made designs for wallpaper.

- What relationships do you notice between the figures and the wallpaper in these works? Does the wallpaper accentuate the figures or hide them? Does it create an environment that's comforting, claustrophobic, beautiful to look at, or something else?



COVER: Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947). *Women with a Dog* (detail), 1891. Oil and ink on canvas; 41 x 32.5 cm. The Clark Art Institute, Acquired by the Clark, 1979, 1979.23. Image courtesy of the Clark Art Institute. clarkart.edu. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; **PAGE 1, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940). *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*, 1893. Oil on canvas; 46.3 x 56.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Saidie A. May, 141.1934. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; Maurice Denis (French, 1870–1943). *Washing the Baby*, 1899. Oil on canvas; 65 x 45 cm. Private collection. Image © Catalogue raisonné Maurice Denis. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940). *Interior with Hanging Lamp, from Landscapes and Interiors*, 1899. Color lithograph on China paper; image: 35.9 x 39.2 cm; sheet: 41 x 34.5 cm. Portland Art Museum, Museum Purchase: Funds Provided by James and Diane Burke in honor of Ross Passo and Julia Saltalamacchia. © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; **PAGE 2, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940). *Woman Sweeping at 346, rue Saint-Honoré*, 1895. Oil on board; 33 x 508 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Promised Gift of Nancy F. and Joseph P. Keithley, 13. 2020. © 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947). *Family Scene*, 1892. Color lithograph on paper; image: 21.7 x 26.7 cm; sheet: 27.9 x 39.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 570.1951. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; Félix Vallotton (Swiss, 1865–1925). *The Red Room, Étretat*, 1899. Oil on artist's board; 49.2 x 51.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Mrs. Clive Runnells, 1977.606; Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947). *Women with a Dog*, 1891. Oil and ink on canvas; 41 x 32.5 cm. The Clark Art Institute, Acquired by the Clark, 1979, 1979.23. Image courtesy of the Clark Art Institute. clarkart.edu. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; **BACK PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940). *Misia at the Piano*, 1895 or early 1896. Oil on cardboard; 26 x 25 cm. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.224;). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; Maurice Denis (French, 1870–1943). *The Harpists*, ca. 1893. Watercolor, pencil, and gouache on paper; 65 x 50.3 cm. Private collection. Image © Catalogue raisonné Maurice Denis.