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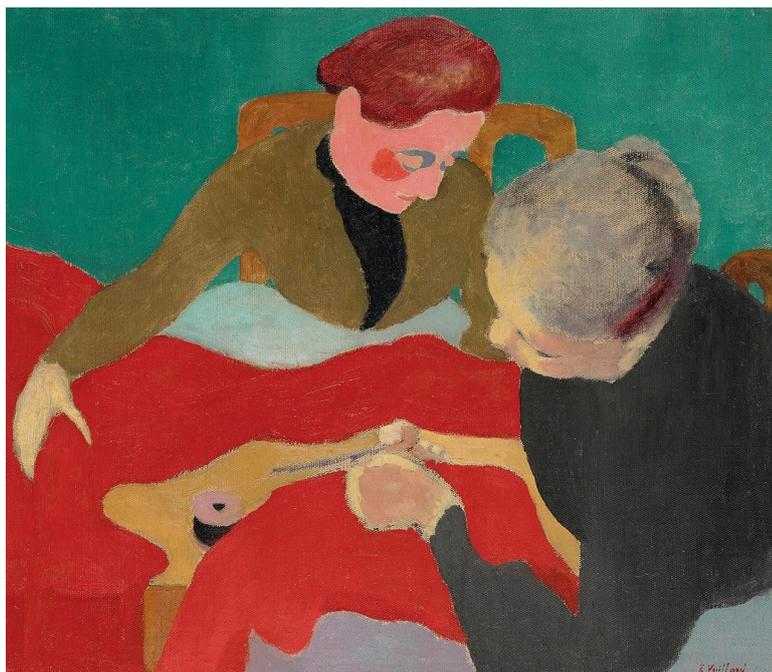
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'Venus Betrayed' Review: The Intimist

The son of a corset-maker, Vuillard excelled at luminous, charged paintings of life behind closed doors.



'The Seamstresses' (1891) by Édouard Vuillard. PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

By Maxwell Carter

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A dozen years ago, I visited the Egyptologist William Kelly Simpson. An Indiana Jones-like figure, he collected objects across civilizations and categories, from ancient stone heads and Mughal miniatures to an extraordinarily fine, pastel-hued double portrait of Marcel Duchamp by Florine Stettheimer. Pride of place was reserved for Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940).

Here hung one of Vuillard's first still lifes, executed before his 20th birthday; there, an 1891-92 self-portrait in flattened forms and pure yellows, reds and greens. On this wall, Vuillard's mother ("Maman") knitting, from 1893; on that, his bedridden brother, Miquen (1922). Sketches of unprepossessing relations don't tend to set the heart racing. These were magical. My eye was drawn, inevitably, to his 1899 masterpiece on board, "Misia and Vallotton at Villeneuve," which—as Vuillard's friend and patron Thadée Natanson, whose belly and pipe spill onto the work's left edge, said of his contemporary output—is filled "with almost everything he [knew]."

 VENUS BETRAYED

By Julia Frey

Reaktion, 422 pages, \$55

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Simpson’s thoroughly domestic sampling is typical. As much as any painter, then or since, Vuillard mastered the light, shapes and shadows of home life. Whistler’s mother gained immortality from one canvas, the Musée d’Orsay’s “Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1” (1871); Vuillard depicted Maman compulsively for 40 years. How does one wring dramatic interest and sustained insight from the cloistered routines of an artist who lived with his mother; never married; seldom traveled; and, with the exception of his youthful Nabism, recoiled from the dominant movements of the day? Julia Frey, an emeritus professor of French and art history at the University of Colorado, has done so in her marvelous, beautifully illustrated “Venus Betrayed: The Private World of Édouard Vuillard.”

In essential respects, Vuillard’s upbringing was little different from his maturity. His father, Honoré, whose middling naval career in the French colonies had reaped “a humiliating limp and no prospects,” died in 1884, when Édouard was 15. Thereafter he was surrounded by and preoccupied with women, namely his widowed mother, Marie, inscrutable older sister, Mimi, and the apprentices in his mother’s modest corset-making concern.

The 19th-century corset combined, Ms. Frey notes, “two things not usually found in a single article of clothing: sexual allure and disciplined respectability.” Vuillard’s own deeply riven duality was not unrelated, triggered by what Ms. Frey calls the “sensual nightmare” of his childhood: “His mother’s apprentices, bent silently over their sewing, cutting and assembling garments, eyed him hungrily. . . . Overwhelmed by feminine odours and emotions, [he] fell silent, his eyes averted until everyone forgot he was there. Then, from a place unseen, Vuillard secretly memorized the gestures and body language of any woman who interested him.” Just as Anna Héloïse Matisse’s house-paint trade and hat making inspired her son’s brilliant colors and intensely decorative aesthetic, the fabrics, intimacy and confined atmosphere of Vuillard’s adolescence informed his art.

Vuillard’s relationship with Maman—an enigmatic, pervasive presence—was “lauded by his friends, and idealized by art critics,” as Ms. Frey relates. Judging by her

frequently doleful, mildly frightening likenesses, Ms. Frey's selection and explication of which are consistently excellent, their bond was more complicated. Her hulking outline broods from doorways and slumps uneasily in chairs, as in the haunting "Family Evening" (ca. 1894-5) and spectral "Cup of Coffee" (1899). She carried the family through force of will; across hundreds of psychologically ambiguous oils, watercolors and drawings, she is rarely observed at leisure.

Miquen was stolid and conservative, largely estranged from his brother's affections and paintings. Deprived of meaningful fraternal companionship, Vuillard fell in with his fellow pupils at the Lycée Condorcet and Académie Julian, including Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, François-Xavier Roussel (known as Kerr) and Paul Sérusier. These daring, self-proclaimed Nabis (Hebrew for "prophets") rallied around "The Talisman" (1888), Sérusier's high-keyed, Gauguin-influenced panel landscape. Vuillard's dazzling Nabi experiments of the early 1890s alternate between ocher and electric palettes; between complex patterning and passages of solid, evenly applied pigment; between private and public spheres. Vuillard's radical and retiring personas converged in 1893, when Mimi wed the charming, highly unstable Roussel.

He didn't follow the ill-matched pair into matrimony. The reasons would have been personal as well as practical; Vuillard's commercial audience was limited well into his 30s. Chronicling rash infatuations—with Juan Gris's ex-wife, Lucie Belin, among others—his diaries are shot through with "menace, voyeurism and pursuit." A repressed, financially dependent bachelor, he looked to his marginally widening circle for the trappings of luxury and sophistication. These he found in the salon of Natanson, co-founder of the avant-garde journal *La Revue Blanche*, and his wife, Misia, with whom Vuillard fell hopelessly in love.

An accomplished pianist and flirt, Misia was the "it girl" of the Belle Époque. Striking if not necessarily pretty, marked by the twisted knot of her chignon, she exulted in "cultivating the budding geniuses of the artistic vanguard in her private garden." This powerful coquette, writes Ms. Frey, "affected Vuillard like an addictive stimulant, making him both happy and miserable. From 1896 to 1899 he painted virtually no woman but her, recognizable in some 40 pictures." Misia, who also posed for Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Bonnard, proved to be Vuillard's most absorbing subject.

Though Misia encouraged his tortured devotion with Thadée's tacit consent—in "Misia and Vallotton" the dog pawing for her attention may as well be Vuillard—their parlor-

room romance wasn’t consummated. He would move on to the actress Berthe Bady and an abiding affair with his dealer Jos Hessel’s wife, Lucie. Misia’s third act didn’t lack for drama—she lost an eye and became addicted to cocaine and morphine (allegedly injected through her clothes), dying, thrice divorced, in 1950.

With Jos’s selfish prodding, Vuillard settled into his later, mellower style and semicontented involvement with Lucie. (Jos stood to make his commission from Vuillard’s lucrative society portraiture and to free himself for philandering. He is said to have remonstrated with Lucie: “*Ma chère*, feel lucky that you’ve had Édouard—if you hadn’t had him, I would have made you take Bonnard!”) During four decades of love and friendship, Vuillard painted her at least 260 times, from the seemingly post-coital “Lucie Hessel Dreaming at the Seaside” (1902) to the matronly, firelit “Lucie Hessel” of 1924.

As the saying goes in fiction, artist monographs are best when the author shows rather than tells. “Venus Betrayed” balances and melds the biographical with the visual without forcing connections or overplaying symbols. Obligatory references to the dean of Vuillard scholarship, Guy Cogeval—in whose creative readings candles double as phallic representations and baguettes herald the fear of castration—point up Ms. Frey’s welcome analytical restraint.

By the end, Vuillard had reached far beyond his timidly bound milieu. He served as one of Proust’s (apparently many) models for Elstir; was elected to the French Académie des Beaux-Arts; and gave Winston Churchill tips for his Sunday dabbling. Yet, resisting lazy, regressive pastiche, Vuillard struggled within to the last. In “Self-Portrait in a Bamboo Mirror” (ca. 1890), his unlined face is dimly reflected. “Self-Portrait in the Washroom Mirror” (1923-24) shows his reflection—wiser, wizened—once more. We alone can see; in each mirror, his eyes are shut.

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