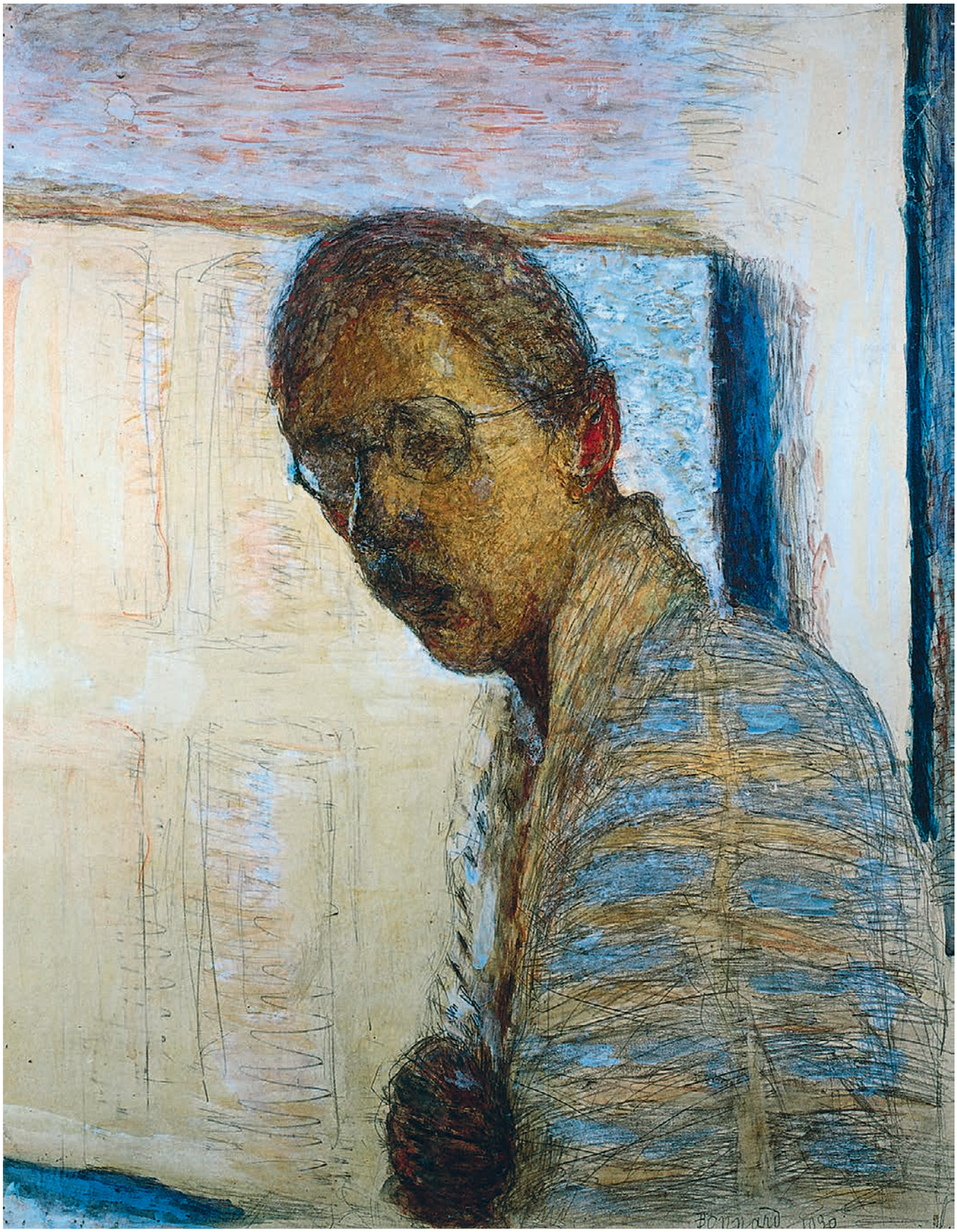

STÄDEL
MUSEUM

MATISSE
BONNARD

Long Live Painting!

PRESTEL Munich · London · New York

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APPENDIX

Figs. 1 and 2 Postcard from Henri Matisse to Pierre Bonnard, 13 August 1925, Private collection

Matisse – Bonnard

“Long Live Painting!”

FELIX KRÄMER

“Long live painting!” This was the programmatic exclamation with which Henri Matisse greeted his friend Pierre Bonnard on 13 August 1925 (figs. 1 and 2).[1] The few words on a postcard from Amsterdam were the beginning of a correspondence between the artist colleagues comprising 62 letters which lasted until 1946 and gave expression to their mutual esteem. The correspondence was initially sporadic but intensified in the 1930s. Its nature was characterized by everyday life: accounts of the weather, their travels or illnesses. They knew each other well, the tone they used with one another was familiar, the form of address “My dear Matisse”, “My dear Bonnard” or “My dear friend”. Only a few places in their letters contain passages about art, but in these their mutual understanding and admiration for each other’s work emerge all the more clearly. Their friendship of over 40 years was based on a familiarity that knew neither self-interest nor competitiveness, characterized instead by sympathy and interest in the other’s welfare. In addition to the personal level, which clearly comes to the fore in the letters, at least equally important from an art historical perspective is what is *not* found in the correspondence. During the phases of their lives in which Matisse and Bonnard saw each other regularly they scarcely wrote to each other. The communication then found its analogy in their works, which they contemplated and discussed together; and from these encounters each drew the affirmation needed to unwaveringly continue along his own path.

Pierre Bonnard was born in 1867 in Fontenay-aux-Roses near Paris. Henri Matisse came into the world two years later, in 1869, in Le Cateau-Cambrésis in Northern France. As leading exponents of French Modernism they would first meet each other at the beginning of the twentieth century. At this point in time Bonnard could already look back upon a long artistic career. At his parents’ wish he had initially studied law at the Sorbonne in Paris before commencing studies at the Académie Julian. Bonnard had enjoyed great success as early as 1891 with his poster design for the brand “France-Champagne” (fig. 3) and together with fellow students founded an artist group that – half in jest and half seriously – called itself the “Nabis”, derived from “Nebiim”, Hebrew for “prophets”. The group also included Édouard Vuillard and Félix Vallotton, with whom Bonnard remained close friends even after the dissolution of the Nabis at the end of the 1890s. Even though the members met regularly and exhibited together, they nonetheless did not form a collective “with solidly delineated contours” that “was characterized by a stylistic

consistency".[2] But as a group they were convinced that art should embrace all aspects of life and be an expression of something unseen. Works from Bonnard's Nabi period are characterized by a free play of perspectives and a markedly flat handling of paint (see fig. 4).

Like Bonnard, Matisse also initially aspired to a career as a lawyer and worked as a paralegal in Saint-Quentin. Concurrently he also took private art courses. In 1891 Matisse decided in favour of a life as an artist and went to Paris. But his application to the École des Beaux-Arts was rejected. He was only admitted on becoming a student of the symbolist painter Gustave Moreau. For many years Matisse sold scarcely any works and had to support his family with odd jobs. For a meagre hourly wage, he painted the Grand Palais for the Paris World Exhibition of 1900 with a kilometres-long frieze of laurel garlands.[3] Until after the turn of the century Matisse's career was dominated by uncertainty and experimentation with various styles. He achieved his breakthrough only in 1905 with *Woman with a Hat*, a portrait painted with raw brushstrokes and glowing colours (p. 56, fig. 2) that aroused a scandal when he presented it at the Salon d'automne that year. One critic reviled him and the artist friends who had exhibited with him – among them André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck and Albert Marquet – as "fauves" (wild beasts). Intended as an insult, the term was self-confidently adopted by the painters as the name of their group.

The first documented meeting between Bonnard and Matisse occurs around this time. In April 1906 Matisse visited Bonnard's solo exhibition in the Galerie Ambroise Vollard in Paris at 6, rue Laffitte, where his own first monographic exhibition had taken place two years earlier. The dealer, whom Bonnard portrayed in his studio at the time (p. 27, cat. 4), played an important role especially in the early years of the two artists' friendship.[4] The invitation card to the Bonnard exhibition, to which Matisse added a drawing on the back and which he carefully retained, is the earliest evidence of their bond (p. 220, fig. 2). But by this time the two had probably already known each other for several years, since they moved in the same circles of artists and friends.

In compendia on the history of painting Bonnard and Matisse are generally classified in two opposing currents: Bonnard, with his airy, loose brushwork and use of delicate, shimmering colours, is regarded as a successor to the Impressionists, a painter of the nineteenth century; Matisse, with his interest in brilliant colours and planar, starkly contoured pictorial compositions, as a pioneer who already anticipated much later twentieth-century developments. This distorted view may well have arisen from the fact that Bonnard had already enjoyed success as a young artist whereas Matisse's career began only after the turn of the century, but then developed so rapidly that after the First World War he was already one of the best-known artists internationally. Bonnard added fuel to this idea by referring to himself, in an oft-quoted statement, as "the last of the Impressionists".[5] Even today many museums classify the two artists in different epochs. It is thus unsurprising that there are only very few collectors who are equally enthusiastic about Bonnard *and* Matisse – despite the close connection between their oeuvres.

While at first the two artists met only occasionally their friendship intensified through the years. They met regularly in the studio and discussed their works. When they transferred their main residences from the art metropolis of Paris to the French Riviera, their artistic exchange increased even more. Matisse broke the first ground at the end of 1917 when he began spending more and more time in Nice. In 1921 he rented an imposing apartment there with a view of the promenade and beyond it the sea. Henceforth he lived on the Côte d'Azur; his wife Amélie and their children Jean and Pierre remained in Paris. Bonnard decided only in 1926 to move permanently to Southern France. Whereas in 1912 he had initially purchased a small country house in the Seine valley near Giverny, he now bought the house Le Bosquet, which was located on a hill in Le Cannet and had a view of the Mediterranean, and moved there with his wife Marthe. The couple was joyfully greeted by Matisse, who travelled there from Nice, roughly 30 kilometres away, and was one of their first guests. Since both artists owned cars – Matisse even employed a chauffeur – the distance presented no obstacle to regular visits. Numerous works of the 1930s and 1940s have the surroundings of Le Bosquet as their theme – among them the sun-drenched landscape *Le Cannet, la route rose* (p. 22, cat. 3), which Bonnard donated to a charity auction for child war refugees in 1944; the only other artist who participated was Matisse with his now missing painting *The Black Door* (fig. 5).

Just how close the exchange between the two fellow artists in every respect was can be seen in their painting and in their intensive exploration of similar motifs and themes. Each artist's oeuvre consists largely of interiors, images of women – frequently nudes –, (floral) still lifes and landscapes. The latter are present in

Fig. 3 Pierre Bonnard, *France-Champagne*, 1891, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Fig. 4 Pierre Bonnard, *Woman with Dog*, 1891, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

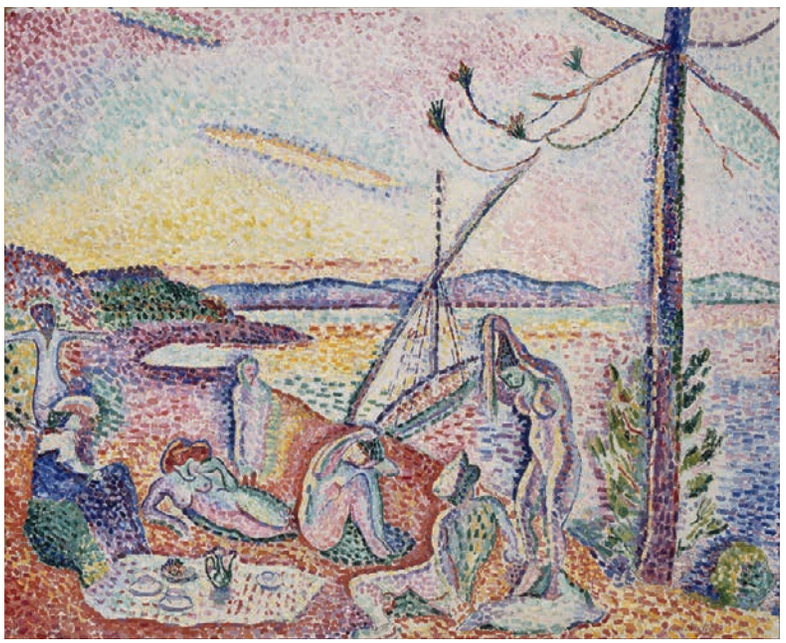
Landscape/Nature

DANIEL ZAMANI

By the beginning of the twentieth century, landscape had long established itself as a key genre of modern art. Once regarded as a minor subject when compared to the grandeur of history painting, it gained significant new impetus in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. As a reaction to the processes of mechanization and urbanization, depictions of idyllic nature became increasingly associated with ideals of purity and elevation, encapsulating modern man's longed-for communion with the outside world. Moreover, from the mid nineteenth century onwards, landscape became a central "vehicle of modernist innovation",[1] significantly contributing to the avant-garde's increasing appreciation of colour and form as independent, painterly values. Following their nineteenth-century predecessors, both Bonnard and Matisse experimented with the genre. However, its role significantly diverged in their respective oeuvres. In the case of Bonnard, it was on a par with his exploration of interior, still life and the nude. Indeed, much of his reputation as a leading heir of Impressionism was due to his exuberant depictions of sun-drenched Mediterranean vistas, Northern landscapes and pastoral scenes. Conversely, Matisse was never considered much of a landscapist *per se*, his forays into the genre sporadic and typically prompted by the direct experience of travel.

One of the most significant junctures in Matisse's early development was his 1904 journey to Saint-Tropez – an idyllic peninsula on the Côte d'Azur which was then largely untouched by modern tourism. Prompted by an invitation from his colleague and friend, the painter Paul Signac, this was the first of a series of longer painting stints that paved the way for his more or less permanent residence in the South of France, colloquially known as the Midi. Hailed as "the most beautiful place in the world" by Auguste Renoir, the Mediterranean had by then long become an important source of inspiration for modern artists.[2] More specifically, Matisse's journey was in keeping with the heritage of painters such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Henri-Edmond Cross, whose highly idealized works typically cast the Mediterranean as the Arcadian landscape *par excellence*, often replete with pastoral and utopian associations.[3]

The most important painting of Matisse's sojourn in Saint-Tropez was *The Gulf of Saint-Tropez* (cat. 53), which clearly reflected his nascent fascination with the light of the Midi. Already before the turn of the century, Matisse had read Signac's treatise *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*. Written in 1898, the essay owed a significant debt to contemporary developments in optical theory. In it, Signac argued that separate, carefully



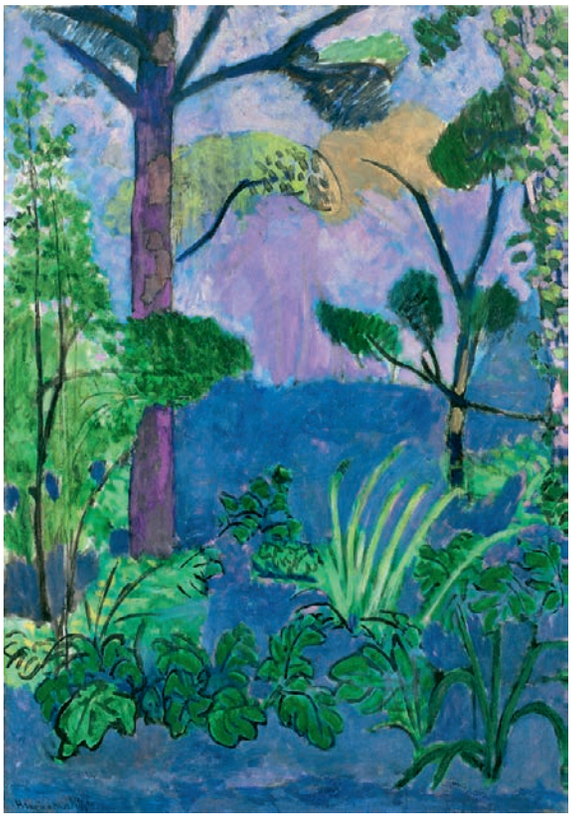


Fig. 1 Henri Matisse, *Luxury, Calm and Pleasure*, 1904, Centre Pompidou, Paris

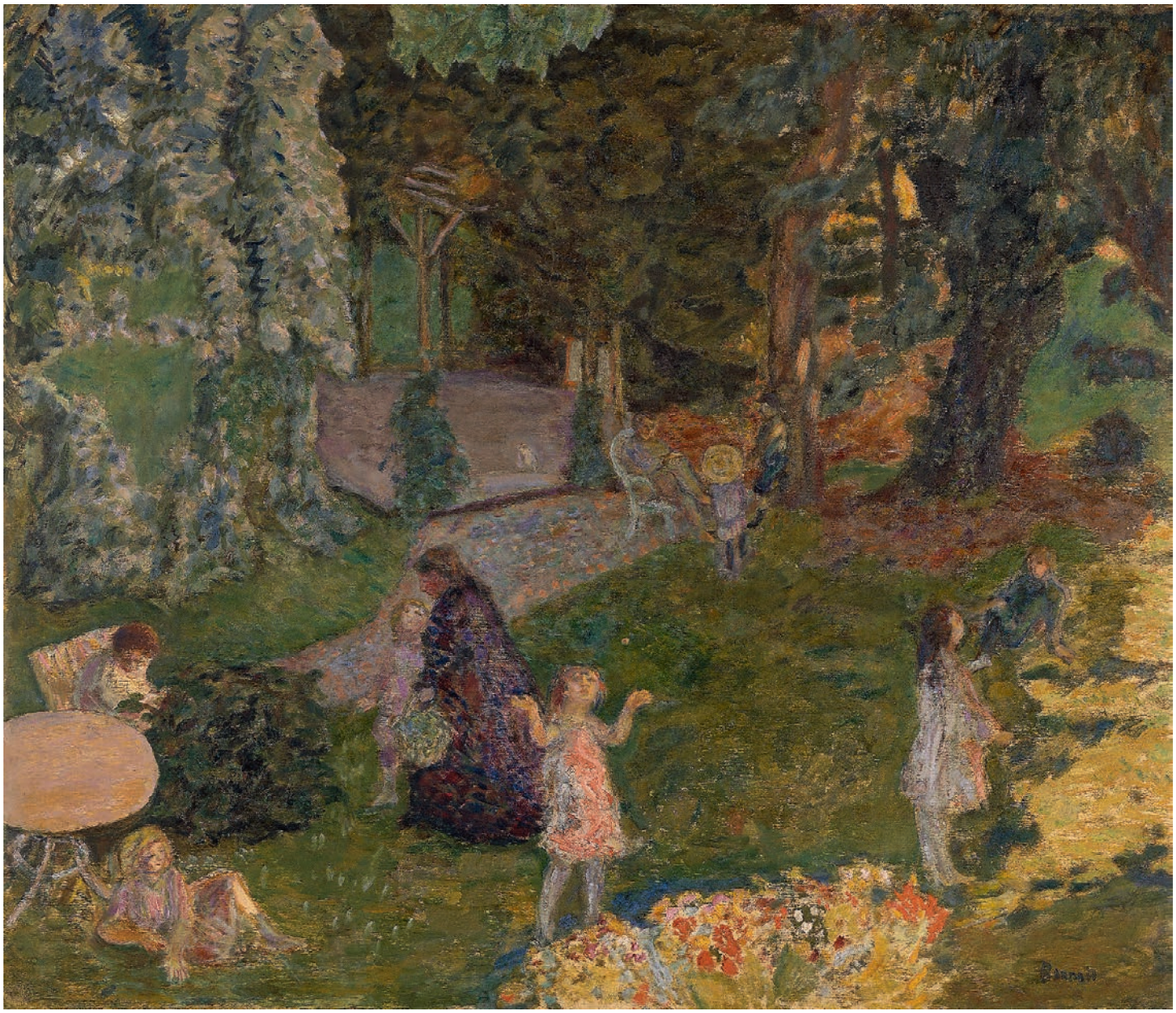
Fig. 2 Henri Matisse, *Moroccan Landscape* (*Acanthes*), 1912, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

choreographed dots of interwoven colour could give greater vibrancy to a painting. In search of "a maximum of colour and light", pure, high-pitched hues should come together in an "optical mixture of pigments" (*mélange optique*), producing the effect of a pulsating shimmer across the surface.[4] In *The Gulf of Saint-Tropez*, Matisse dialogues with some of Signac's premises, vividly capturing the glimmering sheen of the sunset spreading over the bay on the island. In the foreground, we see his wife Amélie and their son Pierre, both resting by the seaside and rendered in a sketch-like manner; cast in darker shades of blue, violet, brown and green, they are set off against the ground's intense shades of orange, yellow and red, all rendered in short, staccato brushstrokes of pure colour. Across the bay, parts of the sky are left unpainted, the white ground heightening the effect of luminosity, as the intense yellow of the fading sunlight is played out against the cooler tones of violet and blue that mark mountain and sea.

Back in Paris, Matisse turned to the work's basic locality as the point of departure for a more monumental canvas (fig. 1). This composition, which he later described as "a picture made of pure rainbow colours",[5] dialogued even more conspicuously with the stylistic theories of Signac, who promptly acquired the work after it was exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants of 1905. Intensely coloured, its palette consists exclusively of high-pitched, jewel-like tones; the carefully applied, dotted brushstrokes are again set off against the pure white of the canvas, cloaking the scene in a vibrant haze. The original title – *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* – is derived from a line in Charles Baudelaire's poem "Invitation to a Voyage" (1857), in which the oneiric effect of sunlight over ocean and earth (compared to a "warmly glowing gown") is explicitly evoked.[6] Here, an anonymous narrator envisions the journey to an idyllic seaside place, where "all is order and measure, / Luxury, beauty and pleasure [Luxe, calme et volupté]."[7] Staunchly romantic in tone, this panegyric to nature is centred on the nostalgia for a lost Golden Age, interweaving an imaginary sailing trip with traditional tropes of the pastoral. Akin to a "Baudelairean painting",[8] Matisse's composition goes beyond the mundane setting of *The Gulf of Saint-Tropez*, as the real-life figures of Amélie and Pierre are now accompanied by a group of naked women who luxuriate in the warmth of the sinking sun, their poses reminiscent of Renaissance goddesses or nymphs. Instead of a contemporary scene of bourgeois recreation, we here encounter a more oneiric image of the Midi as a space of timeless beauty and joy. Indeed, as noted by the art historian James D. Herbert, Matisse's iconography was in keeping with the tenor of contemporary travel accounts such as that of Casimir Stryieuski, whose 1907 trip along the Rivera was cast in emphatically poetic tones:

"Certain sunny mornings there, you see as if in a land of dreams, and, if you distance yourself a bit from our city, seeking refuge under the olive trees with light foliage, you can believe yourself really transported into some sort of Virgilian atmosphere. You look for the statue of Pan, garlanded with flowers; you hear the flute of Thyrsis; you think you see Clytie offering herself to Helios: an entire living mythology animates the solitude."[9]

Matisse's journey to Saint-Tropez triggered a lifelong fascination with the landscape and light of the Mediterranean, and he vividly evoked his personal association with the coastal towns of the Midi in his strikingly bold *Self-Portrait* of 1906 (p. 1, cat. 1). Eschewing all signifiers of the painter's craft, he here shows himself in the striped jersey of a contemporary mariner, championing the natural, indigenous and 'primitive' over academic conventions or Old Masterly tradition. Of all the Southern seaside towns that attracted the artist in these years, the most significant was undoubtedly Collioure, located near Perpignan in the Pyrénées. In 1905, he embarked on his first journey there alongside his colleague André Derain, returning almost annually over the following summers. On one such sojourn in 1911, Matisse painted *The Open Window* (cat. 56), brilliantly capturing the harbour town's fabled light. Ever since the Renaissance, painting had been considered as a "window" onto the world. However, it was in the wake of Romanticism that the trope became specifically associated with a powerful longing for nature, often used to express man's yearning for the outside world. In Matisse's composition, the rectilinear frame creates a "picture within the picture", an effect heightened by the prominent inclusion of two smaller paintings on the right-hand wall, as well as the cropped-off view of his 1907 composition *Le Luxe I* to the upper left. Through the diagonal thrust of the open shutters, Matisse directs the viewer's gaze away from the solidity of the flat, largely monochrome walls, channelling it across the sill and towards the harbour town's sun-drenched hills. The room's reduced colour scheme, essentially consisting of pink, violet and green, is again taken up in the landscape beyond, visually linking both picture planes and resulting in a remarkably unified composition. As the art historian Shirley Neilsen Blum



Cat. 52 Pierre Bonnard, *The Family in the Garden* (*Grand-Lemps*), ca. 1901, Kunsthaus Zürich

Cat. 53 Henri Matisse, *The Gulf of Saint-Tropez*, 1904, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

Women/The Nude

ELENA SCHROLL

"My models, human figures, are never just 'extras' in an interior. They are the principal theme of my work," declared Henri Matisse in 1939 in his essay "Notes of a Painter on His Drawing".[1] Throughout his life, there was scarcely any other subject that was as fascinating to him as the female nude. When he began painting around the turn of the century, he approached the human body in classic studies after the model, placing it in traditional studio poses. In addition to experimentation with the application of paint, bodily proportions were the focus of his work, whereas space was often only suggested through broad brushstrokes (cat. 64). Over time the background took on a greater relevance, often acquiring elaborately staged backdrops.

Images of the opposite sex are also of central importance in the oeuvre of his fellow painter and long-time friend, Pierre Bonnard. Like Matisse, Bonnard first studied in Paris at the private Académie Julian and later at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he learned to draw after the live model as well as from sculptures in the collection of the Musée du Louvre. However, he soon abandoned the traditional gestures of painting the nude. The ossification in classically arranged poses yielded to the free movement of his protagonists in domestic interiors. Although the ways the two artists realized this differed markedly, in both of their works the female figure appeared primarily in connection with the interior. In Matisse's work she encounters the viewer first and foremost in the form of a dreamy, self-engrossed odalisque set against an Oriental décor, whereas Bonnard took intimate scenes of the bath and boudoir as his preferred theme.

With the painting *Olympia* of 1863 (fig. 1) Édouard Manet had not only aroused great indignation among his contemporaries but also initiated a development in nude painting that would inspire numerous artists to follow. In terms of composition the representation of unclothed women reclining on pillows stands in the tradition of Renaissance nudes such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538, Uffizi, Florence). But although Manet clearly looks to the works of his predecessors and suggests a mythologizing context with the title, he departs from previous pictorial conventions by presenting a real woman and not a goddess. Up to that point the profane unclothed body had been subject to a taboo, so that nudity generally appeared under the pretext of religious, mythologizing or historical guises. Manet liberated the nude from this corset and placed it in the present day, an artistic strategy on which Matisse and Bonnard would also draw in their images of nude women.

Inspired by travels to Algeria and Morocco, the motif of the odalisque became a favourite subject in Matisse's oeuvre. The artist was filled with admiration for the Orient and avidly collected foreign artefacts, decorative fabrics, garments and rugs. In his studio on Place Charles-Félix in Nice he arranged exotic objects into theatrical stage sets that served him until 1938 as scenery for many of his works. In contrast to Bonnard, he worked predominantly with professional models who appear like actresses in exotic attire in a meticulously conceived *mise en scène*. Frequently the odalisques lie stretched out on a diwan with heavy pillows, thus following the pictorial formula of Manet and his predecessors.

In *Reclining Nude with a Drape* (cat. 74), for example, the model rests on a white chaise longue that is only rendered in a cursory manner. The woman's upper body is supported by two colourfully decorated pillows. She has raised her arms provocatively to her head, emphasizing her bare breasts. Her crotch, in contrast, is covered by the light-coloured harem pants. In comparison with Matisse's other odalisque images the simplicity of the room is striking; the background is merely suggested by means of a red fabric. The artist repeatedly devoted himself to the same motif, in which the traditional Venus pose remained a fixed component of his visual repertoire, as in the paintings *Nude on a Yellow Sofa* (cat. 76) and *Odalisques* (cat. 75). Just how much his work is associated with this pictorial arrangement is also revealed by the humorous 1929 photograph of Bonnard, who posed as an odalisque in the Oriental decoration of a niche in Matisse's studio in Nice (see p. 68, fig. 1).

The erotically charged presentation of young, reclining odalisques must be understood in the context of nineteenth-century French Orientalizing painting. Matisse was eminently familiar with the harem scenes of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix, in equal measure decadent and sensual (see fig. 2). However, he soon developed the motif into his own visual idiom: much more so than his predecessors, he aspired to a unity of figure and surrounding space, which he sought to achieve through an interplay of colourful and ornamental surface designs; in this the ornament functioned not only as decorative accessory but rather as an essential means of expression. What catches the eye in the composition *Odalisque with a Tambourine* (cat. 69) is the woman stretched out in an armchair, with a transparent material playing around her naked curves. Although she looks at the viewer from the front, she seems inaccessible and her face lies in shadow. The viewer's gaze inevitably wanders away from her body and glides to the green and yellow striped upholstery, the fiery red floor, the tambourine in the upper right-hand corner and the wallpaper decorated with flower tendrils. The model appears as part of a decorative ensemble; she becomes the centre of an Orientalizing fantasy in which the ideal of an atmosphere withdrawn from earthly concerns is given visual form.

In the 1930s Matisse increasingly devoted his attention to the simplification of forms and surfaces. This is evidenced by the 1935 painting *Large Reclining Nude* (cat. 79), for which his studio assistant Lydia Delectorskaya posed. Stretched out upon a blue and white chequered ground lies a naked woman. Her upper body is supported by her left arm while the right one rests serenely behind her head. She directs her face at the viewer and at the same time her slightly bent leg denies him a view of her pudendum. The female form takes up almost the entire pictorial space, in the background only a vase with yellow flowers and the spiral-shaped back of a chair can be made out. Matisse devoted more than five months to working out this motif, documenting the various stages of the painting's development with a total of 22 photographs taken from May to October 1935 (see pp. 24/25). These reveal that he increasingly reduced the forms of figure and space in favour of an emphatically flat design. The largely realistic proportions of the body gradually yielded to a flat, elongated torso with stocky limbs and a comparatively small head. The model's curvy silhouette thus stands out from the uniform grid-like pattern of the ground where in the earlier versions a simple monochrome lounge could still be discerned. The bouquet of flowers and the chair were also increasingly reduced to their outlines during the process, until ultimately their basic features could only be intuited. The painter's reiteration of the flesh tone of the female body in the vase can be interpreted as an allusion to the connection between femininity and nature – a common feature in Matisse's work; the snail-like decorative element of the chair back might function as a further symbol of florescence and fertility. With its extreme reduction to essentials the composition was an important harbinger of Matisse's late working phase, anticipating the stencil-like flatness of his cut-outs (see cat. 114–133).

The formal correspondences between this major work by Matisse and Bonnard's *Reclining Nude against a White and Blue Plaid* (cat. 78), painted almost 30 years earlier, are striking. It is well conceivable that Matisse's redesigning of the composition was inspired in important ways by Bonnard's image. Both works captivate

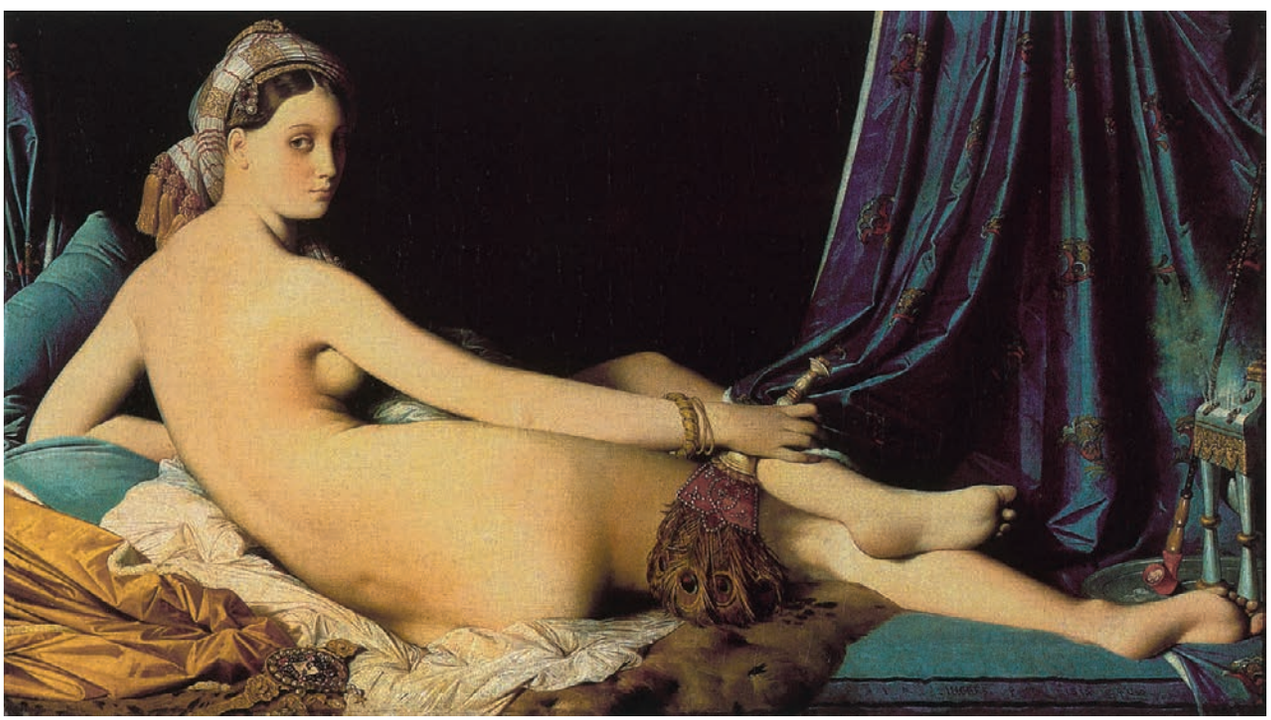
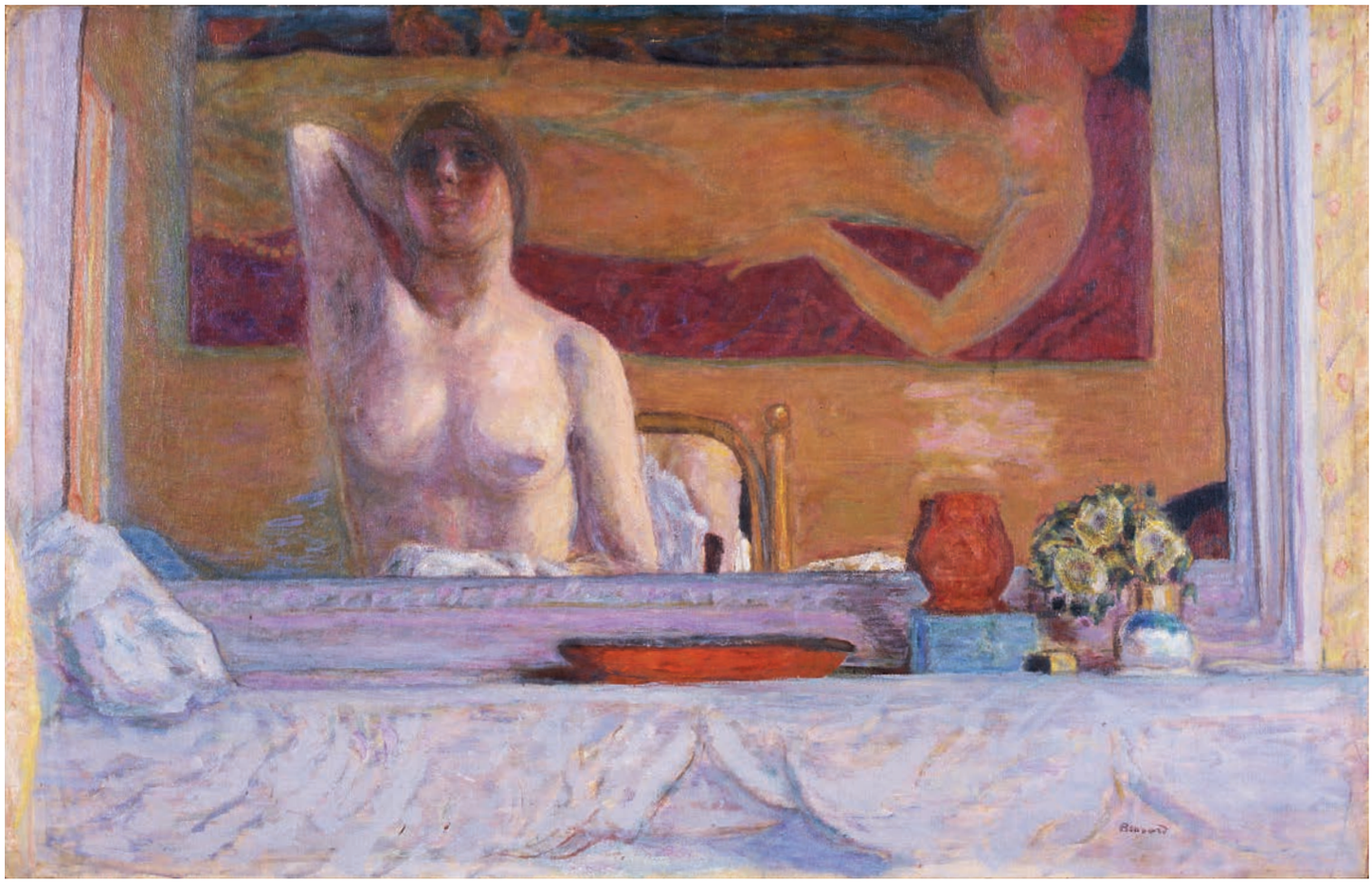


Fig. 1 Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 2 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Cat. 76 Henri Matisse, *Nude on a Yellow Sofa*, 1926, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



Cat. 77 Pierre Bonnard, *The Fireplace* (*Woman at Her Toilet*), 1916, Private collection

Fig. 1 Brassaï, Pierre Bonnard in his studio in Le Cannet, 1946, Private collection

Chronology

LISA PREGITZER

Pierre Bonnard is born in Fontenay-aux-Roses, near Paris, on 3 October 1867. In 1885 he begins studying law and also attends painting courses at the Académie Julian in Paris. He subsequently enrols at the École des Beaux-Arts. In 1893 he makes the acquaintance of Maria Boursin, who calls herself Marthe de Méligny and who remains his life companion and most important model until her death in 1942. With his designs for prints and advertising graphics as well as his connection to the painters' group known as the Nabis he already becomes well known in the 1890s and enjoys considerable financial success.

Henri Matisse is born on 31 December 1869 in Le Cateau-Cambrésis in the North of France. After studying law in Paris as well as working briefly as a paralegal, he abandons law in 1891, instead enrolling at the Académie Julian. His lover, Caroline Joblaud, gives birth to their daughter Marguerite in 1894. Four years later Matisse marries Amélie Parayre. Their sons Jean Gérard and Pierre are born in 1899 and 1900. Whereas Bonnard is already one of the most renowned artists in France in the 1890s, Matisse only attains increasing recognition in the French art scene after participating in the Salon d'automne of 1905.

From the beginning of the twentieth century Bonnard and Matisse move in the same circles. However, their first personal encounter is not documented. The following chronology gives insights into important stages of their lives through the course of their artistic friendship, which lasted over 40 years, from Bonnard's solo exhibition at the Vollard gallery in 1906 until his death in 1947.

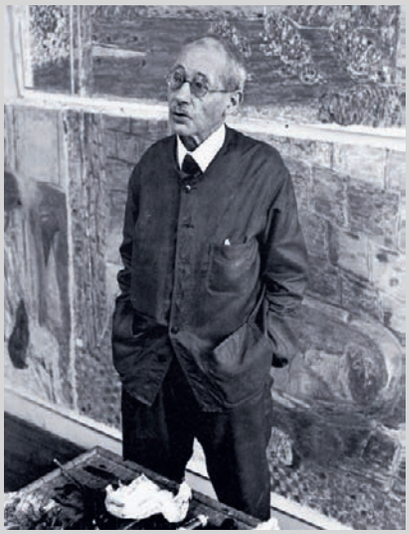


Fig. 18 André Ostier, Pierre Bonnard in his Studio in Le Cannet, 1941

Fig. 19 Willy Maywald, Henri Matisse's studio in Vence, 1947

> *lead. What an intensive life the colours have, and how they vary with the light! I make discoveries every day, and I have to thank you for this pleasure and this instruction.* [...]"

In August the French-Hungarian photographer Brassaï visits Matisse and Bonnard, whom he portrays in front of four of his late works (fig. 1), including his last painting, *Almond Tree in Blossom* (p. 65, fig. 9). In his reminiscences, published under the title *Les Artistes de ma vie* (1982), he draws a comparison between the luxury and opulence of Matisse's rooms in Le Rêve and the ascetic humbleness of Bonnard's rustic furnishing in Le Bosquet. Bonnard ends his notes on painting, which he had begun in 1927, with a final journal entry in 1946:

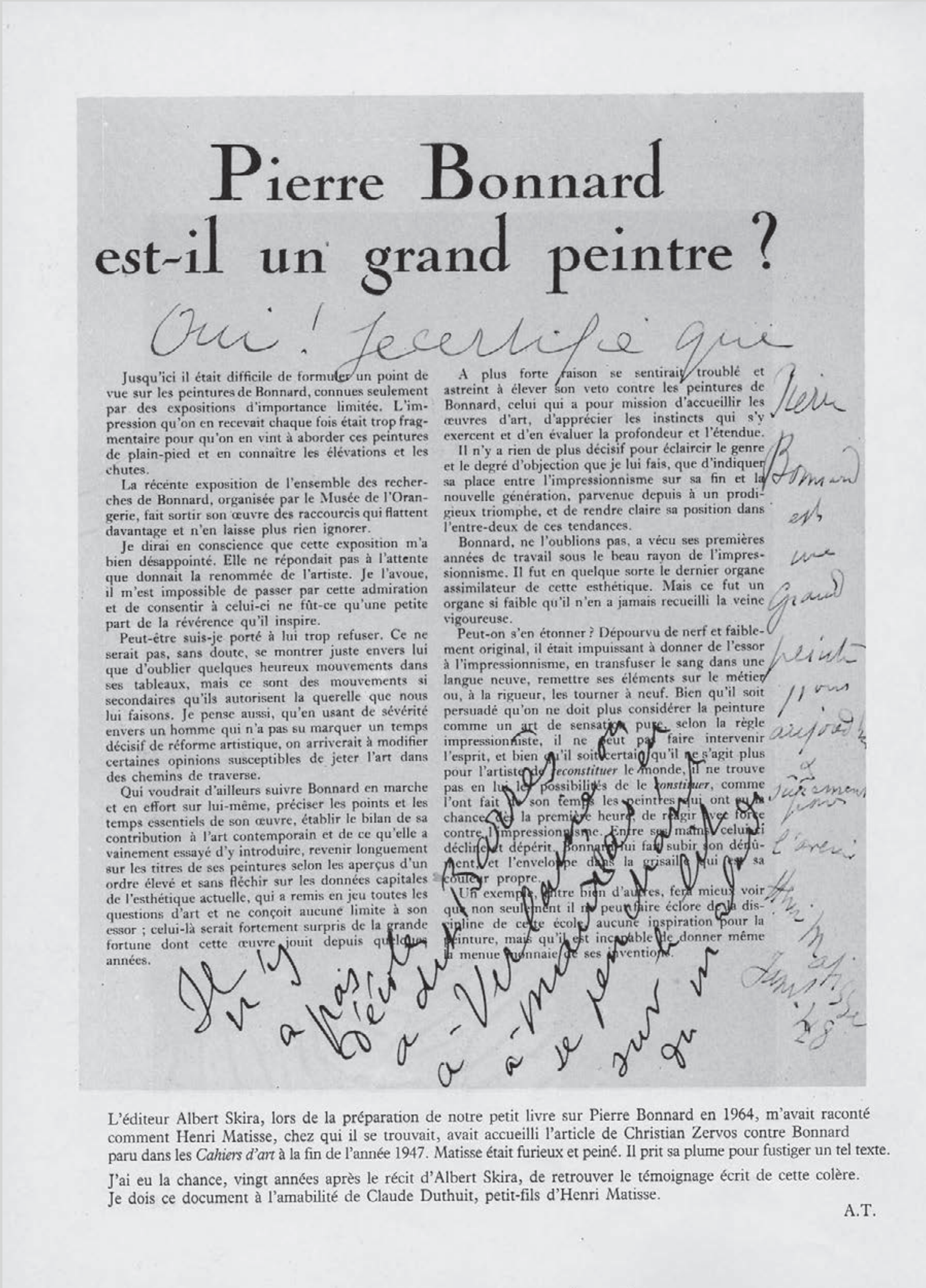
> *"I hope that my painting will endure without craquelure. I should like to present myself to the young painters of the year 2000 with the wings of a butterfly."*

1947

Bonnard dies on 23 January and is buried beside his wife in the cemetery of Le Cannet. Among the numerous honours bestowed upon the artist in the year of his death is also a comprehensive retrospective in the Parisian Musée de l'Orangerie, for which Matisse provides Bonnard's *Evening in the Living Room* (cat. 20) as a loan. Matisse discusses the death of his friend with Charles Terrasse, to whom he suggests that a death mask of his uncle be made. Terrasse reports to him on 2 March about the funeral:

> *"You, who knew my uncle Bonnard so well, you understand all that we have lost with him.* [...] *He rests now in Le Cannet. We led him to his final resting place on a cold day.* [...] *It seemed as if nature, which he loved and celebrated so much, herself was sharing in our grief."*

In the winter of 1947 Christian Zervos, a prominent critic and editor of the journal *Cahiers d'art*, publishes an essay on Bonnard, in which he answers the central question – "Is Pierre Bonnard a great painter?" – with a clear "No". Matisse reacts with a fierce letter of complaint and paints over his own issue of the journal with the words "Yes! I certify that Pierre Bonnard is a great painter, for today and definitely also for the future [...]." (fig. 20).



Pierre Bonnard est-il un grand peintre ?

Oui! Je certifie que Pierre Bonnard est un grand peintre pour aujourd'hui & sûrement pour l'avenir.

Jusqu'ici il était difficile de formuler un point de vue sur les peintures de Bonnard, connues seulement par des expositions d'importance limitée. L'impression qu'on en recevait chaque fois était trop fragmentaire pour qu'on en vînt à aborder ces peintures de plain-pied et en connaître les élévations et les chutes.

La récente exposition de l'ensemble des recherches de Bonnard, organisée par le Musée de l'Orangerie, fait sortir son œuvre des raccourcis qui flattent davantage et n'en laisse plus rien ignorer.

Je dirai en conscience que cette exposition m'a bien désappointé. Elle ne répondait pas à l'attente que donnait la renommée de l'artiste. Je l'avoue, il m'est impossible de passer par cette admiration et de consentir à celui-ci ne fût-ce qu'une petite part de la révérence qu'il inspire.

Peut-être suis-je porté à lui trop refuser. Ce ne serait pas, sans doute, se montrer juste envers lui que d'oublier quelques heureux mouvements dans ses tableaux, mais ce sont des mouvements si secondaires qu'ils autorisent la querelle que nous lui faisons. Je pense aussi, qu'en usant de sévérité envers un homme qui n'a pas su marquer un temps décisif de réforme artistique, on arriverait à modifier certaines opinions susceptibles de jeter l'art dans des chemins de traverse.

Qui voudrait d'ailleurs suivre Bonnard en marche et en effort sur lui-même, préciser les points et les temps essentiels de son œuvre, établir le bilan de sa contribution à l'art contemporain et de ce qu'elle a vainement essayé d'y introduire, revenir longuement sur les titres de ses peintures selon les aperçus d'un ordre élevé et sans fléchir sur les données capitales de l'esthétique actuelle, qui a remis en jeu toutes les questions d'art et ne conçoit aucune limite à son essor ; celui-là serait fortement surpris de la grande fortune dont cette œuvre jouit depuis quelques années.

A plus forte raison se sentirait troublé et astreint à élever son veto contre les peintures de Bonnard, celui qui a pour mission d'accueillir les œuvres d'art, d'apprécier les instincts qui s'y exercent et d'en évaluer la profondeur et l'étendue.

Il n'y a rien de plus décisif pour éclaircir le genre et le degré d'objection que je lui fais, que d'indiquer sa place entre l'impressionnisme sur sa fin et la nouvelle génération, parvenue depuis à un prodigieux triomphe, et de rendre claire sa position dans l'entre-deux de ces tendances.

Bonnard, ne l'oublions pas, a vécu ses premières années de travail sous le beau rayon de l'impressionnisme. Il fut en quelque sorte le dernier organe assimilateur de cette esthétique. Mais ce fut un organe si faible qu'il n'en a jamais recueilli la veine vigoureuse.

Peut-on s'en étonner ? Dépourvu de nerf et faiblement original, il était impuissant à donner de l'essor à l'impressionnisme, en transfuser le sang dans une langue neuve, remettre ses éléments sur le métier ou, à la rigueur, les tourner à neuf. Bien qu'il soit persuadé qu'on ne doit plus considérer la peinture comme un art de sensation pure, selon la règle impressionniste, il ne peut pas faire intervenir l'esprit, et bien qu'il soit certain qu'il ne s'agit plus pour l'artiste de *reconstituer* le monde, il ne trouve pas en lui les possibilités de le *constituer*, comme l'ont fait de son temps les peintres qui ont eu la chance, dès la première heure, de réagir avec force contre l'impressionnisme. Entre ses mains celui-ci décline et dépérit. Bonnard lui fait subir son dénûment, et l'enveloppe dans la grisaille qui est sa couleur propre.

Un exemple, entre bien d'autres, fera mieux voir que non seulement il ne peut faire éclore de la discipline de cette école aucune inspiration pour la peinture, mais qu'il est incapable de donner même la menue monnaie de ses inventions.

L'éditeur Albert Skira, lors de la préparation de notre petit livre sur Pierre Bonnard en 1964, m'avait raconté comment Henri Matisse, chez qui il se trouvait, avait accueilli l'article de Christian Zervos contre Bonnard paru dans les *Cahiers d'art* à la fin de l'année 1947. Matisse était furieux et peiné. Il prit sa plume pour fustiger un tel texte.

J'ai eu la chance, vingt années après le récit d'Albert Skira, de retrouver le témoignage écrit de cette colère. Je dois ce document à l'amabilité de Claude Duthuit, petit-fils d'Henri Matisse.

A.T.

Fig. 20 Christian Zervos' article in *Cahiers d'art*, 1947, with a handwritten statement by Henri Matisse: "Yes! I certify that Pierre Bonnard is a great painter, for today and definitely also for the future […]."