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VENUS BETRAYED

The Private World of
ÉDOUARD VUILLARD

JULIA FREY

REAKTION BOOKS

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Dinnertime

[Vuillard] looked at [the drawings] uneasily, raised his hands towards heaven and said, 'It's horrifying, all the things I'm confessing to you here!' You would have thought he had just revealed shameful thoughts.

CLAUDE ROGER-MARX, as he rummaged through
Édouard Vuillard's studio, 1945¹

Should you visit the Museum of Modern Art in New York, you might find a small crowd standing before *Dinnertime* (c. 1889; illus. 5). Many people, when they see their first Vuillard, stop dead. Painted on a piece of cardboard more than a yard wide, the work is strangely anxiety-producing; its chiaroscuro diagonals, dramatic backlighting, perturbing body language – something is happening here, but what? Despite widely varying styles, Vuillard's works over his fifty-year career share a paradoxical, compelling sense of mystery. *Dinnertime* contains an extraordinary series of seminal images that the twenty-year-old painter would repeat all his life.

Stylistically, *Dinnertime* has an odd comic-book quality. It looks most of all like a puppet-show maquette, whose cartoonish figures indicate the action and the proportional sizes of the set, characters and props. This is not surprising, since Vuillard worked with experimental puppet theatres for several years at about this time. At the back, a small person peers through a doorway, nearly hidden behind two women and a ghostly silhouette. As with the three witches who appear before the play *Macbeth* begins in earnest, it seems as if the curtain here has opened unexpectedly, revealing preparations for a mysterious rite involving a match, a tiny candle, a huge bottle of wine, a table with no food and a baguette as big as a truncheon.

In 2003 Guy Cogeval, co-author of the authoritative *Catalogue critique* of Vuillard's work, analysed the 'Gothic universe' of *Dinnertime*, calling it 'one of the most explicit confessions of how Vuillard saw his place in the family'.² Vuillard decided when he was very young that beauty in art sprang



5 *Dinnertime*, c. 1889,
oil on cardboard,
71.8 × 92.2 cm.

from its capacity to provoke emotion.³ In common with most artists, he focused not on figurative depiction, but rather on composition, light, colour and surface texture to achieve this. Yet his journal often mentions specific memories as his inspiration, adding a consciously personal narrative to thousands of works.

In his first surviving sketchbook, Vuillard developed a sort of visual shorthand to symbolize events, both positive and negative, that had moved him deeply. He had already decided that ‘practically speaking, I need to work from memory.’⁴ He would use these images later as the inspiration for fully developed pictures. He related consciously transcribing these *images-mères* (seminal images) into his art via formal means, ‘evoking these interior images by . . . colours and shapes. The art consists of introducing to these forms an order that suggests the images.’⁵ In September 1890 Vuillard said of his *images-mères*: ‘I already have enough to keep me busy

for years on end, developing and *making artworks* out of everything I have in my sketchbooks and folders.’⁶

Forty years later, when, somewhat to his distress, many considered him the most famous portrait painter in France, Vuillard repeated that ‘memories (above all childhood)’ were the major influence on all his aesthetic decisions.⁷ During the last thirty years of his life he worked almost exclusively from memory, rarely painting directly from a model. Instead, alone in his studio, he surrounded himself with sketches and photographs as reminders of the psychological atmosphere he wanted to produce in the work.

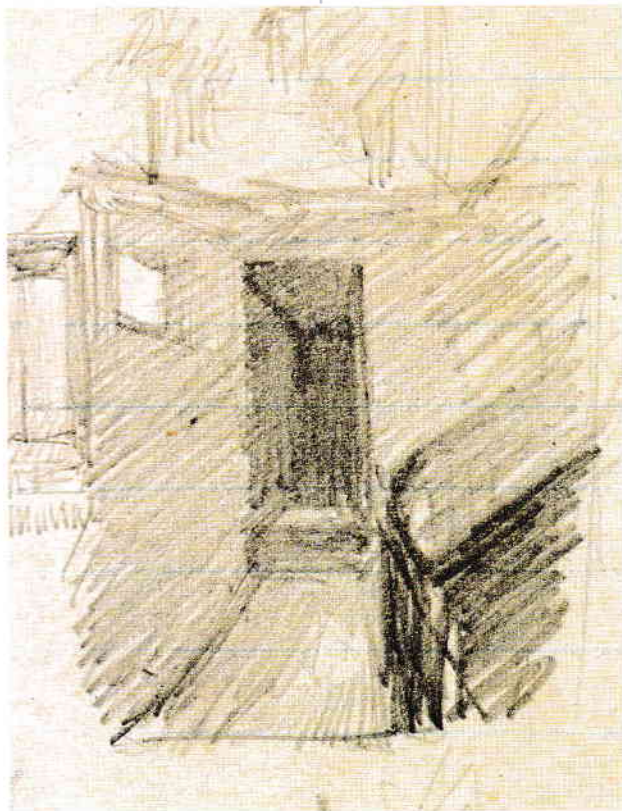
The curious scene in *Dinnertime* is an early example. It is distilled from at least five different *images-mères*, all found in a sketchbook of 1888–9, which at the time he was also using as a journal. Each image provides context for understanding not only this painting, but the lifelong themes of his art.

A DOUBLE LIFE

The small figure of a young man, only partially visible in a black doorway, has an anxious face, split in two by a dark shadow (illus. 7). In this mocking self-portrait, the artist peeps into a room where his mother, grandmother and sister have already gathered for dinner. Although family, friends and teachers repeatedly describe Vuillard as reticent, modest and excessively shy, he does not look shy here. He looks alarmed.

After his father’s death in 1884, the family, in economic straits, was almost entirely dependent on Madame Vuillard’s cottage industry as a corset-maker, which she ran from their dining room. Édouard, the youngest child – then fifteen – fell into the first of what became a repetitive, frightening depression. A typical adolescent, he dealt with misery by slipping out secretly, pursuing forbidden pleasures. Nearly every night he haunted the boulevards and nightclubs, at times bankrolled by wealthy boys, borrowing money that he could not repay.

In mid-December 1888, on a single page of his sketchbook (illus. 7), we find two *images-mères* for the figure of Vuillard in *Dinnertime*, with variations reappearing on other pages: a faceless man standing in a doorway, and Vuillard’s own face, with dots for eyes, staring out of darkness.



6 Detail from journal:
dark doorway,
27 November 1888,
graphite on lined
paper.



7 Detail from journal
(from left to right)
person with oil lamp,
man in doorway,
self-portrait: face in
shadow, notation
'got home at 4:30',
12 December 1888,
graphite on lined
paper.



8 Detail from journal:
'evening at Colmet's,
histoires de femmes'
(naked women
sitting on a table),
11 December 1888,
graphite on lined paper.

Above the drawings, the notation 'got home at 4:30' bears witness to his nocturnal life. Nearby, other drawings and notes reveal what he had been doing until dawn: meeting friends and going en masse to various entertainments, drinking too much, stalking women alone in the street and oversleeping for his art classes the next day. Twice he mentions 'histoires de femmes' – an ambiguous expression that can mean anything from talking about women, to sexual involvements, to love problems, to old wives' tales and secrets only women share. The day before, a minuscule sketch (greatly enlarged in illus. 8) shows at least two naked women sitting on a table, surrounded by onlookers. Were they invited prostitutes or merely Vuillard's humorous representation of the subject of conversation? Above the drawing his handwriting becomes so tiny that the word 'femmes' is almost illegible.

Vuillard, haunted by his 'vices', led parallel existences. In his secret journal he sometimes records betrayals, debts, guilt and the humiliation of having a friend pay his way.⁸ More surprisingly, he constantly revealed his overlapping worlds in artworks that subtly represented his unmentionable paradoxes.

DOORWAYS

A door, they say, is either open or shut (illus. 6). But in *Dinnertime* Vuillard hovers, Janus-like, on the threshold of two incompatible territories: on the lit side is the predictable stay-at-home, the good son – his childhood alter ego, Monsieur Rien-du-tout (Mr Nobody)⁹ – but he emerges from



9 Detail from journal: 'sunshine background', lit doorway with figure, 21 November 1888, graphite on lined paper.

10 Detail from journal:
woman in opening,
hands on hips, probably
9 December 1888,
graphite on lined paper.



darkness, where Vuillard, the sneaky night owl, will later slip out, blithely getting into trouble.

In many paintings, especially those Vuillard made before he was thirty, a woman suddenly opens a door, pushes aside a curtain, appears in a doorway (illus. 10) or flees through it, sometimes leading a child. A closed door hides potential dangers: discovery, scandal, confrontation, punishment, imprisonment, banishment. By 1904 the husbands of his mistresses lounge in doorways; then, as time passes, Vuillard's doors increasingly open to potential freedom (illus. 9).

ART AS MENACE

At sixteen Vuillard had announced that, like his best friend Kerr (François-Xavier Roussel), he was going to be an artist – one of the few times the typically submissive Vuillard refused to hide or compromise his own

needs. In *Dinnertime*, he suggests how threatening this decision was to his (and his family's) financial security. A large painting in the centre background tilts forwards from the wall at a steep angle, ready to fall and crush the figures.

Although he had finished secondary school with brilliant results the year after his father's death, Vuillard listlessly avoided 'serious' studies leading to stable careers, or getting a job – any job – to aid the struggling household. His evasion of adult responsibilities was enabled by his women-folk; they left him more or less to his own devices, even scraping together the fees for private evening art classes when, after only eighteen months, he dropped out of the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts* – which was not only free of charge but had seemed the ticket to artistic success. Although full of ambitious daydreams, the boy used his freedom to lead his version of *la vie de bohème*, spending time at friends' studios in a haze of cigarette smoke, endlessly discussing art and politics.

FORBIDDEN PLEASURES

Perhaps more threatening than the precariously hung painting in *Dinnertime* is the little green candle directly beneath it, which Cogeval interprets as a phallic representation Vuillard's carnal desire.¹⁰ Although small, it gives off an exaggerated light, illuminating the whole painting, calling the viewer's attention to his sins.

In 1945 Thadée Natanson, one-time editor of the avant-garde magazine *La Revue Blanche*, looked back on Vuillard's life. Natanson, who first met the artist when they were both students at the Lycée Condorcet, wrote that among their friends – perhaps among all artists – Vuillard was the most dominated by *sensualité*. He went on to say that he perceived Vuillard as hyper-sensitive. For him, everything – music, a lighting effect, the velvety petal of a flower, the soft down on the back of a woman's neck – provoked a kind of erotic tension, so sharp that it was almost painful. Unreleased it left him like an impassioned lover, feverishly obsessed by certain objects and people. According to Natanson, their mutual friend the painter and printmaker Félix Vallotton declared that he felt *jouissance* (intense sexual pleasure) when looking at Vuillard's art.¹¹ Vallotton was fascinated by Vuillard's ability to provoke this sensation without vulgarity, using discreet, even