

Curating Madame Vuillard

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On Exhibit: Curating Madame Vuillard

In October 2018 the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham opened a loan exhibition, 'Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard', featuring the art of the French post-Impressionist Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940). Curator Francesca Berry explains the feminist ideas motivating the exhibition.

Francesca Berry

Collection: [Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham](#)

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The focus of the Barber's exhibition was an oil on cardboard painting, *Madame Vuillard arranging her Hair*, by the French post-Impressionist artist [Édouard Vuillard](#) (fig. 1). It depicts the artist's sixty-one-year-old widowed mother, Madame Marie Vuillard (1839–1928), wearing a dressing gown and styling her hair. The figure is seen from the rear while its face is glimpsed in a mirror. Painted 1900 in Paris, and first exhibited and reviewed a year later in Brussels at the important secessionist 'La Libre esthétique' exhibition, [Madame Vuillard arranging her Hair](#) was acquired by the Henry Barber Trust in 1963. It usually hangs in the Barber's blue gallery where it forms part of a larger narrative on the development of modernist painting after Impressionism.

Small in size and muted in tone – chromatically, it is an exercise in the chalky harmonisation of brown, purple, green and cream – *Madame Vuillard arranging her Hair* risks being overshadowed by its neighbours in the gallery: paintings by the likes of Claude Monet (1840–1926), Edgar Degas (1834–1917) and Vuillard's better-known friend and fellow '[Intimist](#)', Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947). Nonetheless, the painting's important status in Vuillard's oeuvre – and in art-historical narratives of Nabi [Synthetism](#) and French modernism more generally – can be seen in the frequent requests the Barber receives for its loan out to international exhibitions.

In Birmingham, we installed *Madame Vuillard arranging her Hair* at the centre of '[Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard](#)' (fig. 2). This was an exhibition of twenty-eight objects, including nine paintings, seven lithographs, two pastels and a sketchbook facsimile. The exhibition was arranged around three key themes, identified in the introductory text and running through labels for individual objects: living and working together; relationships of care – particularly between women; and the maternal body in Intimist and post-Intimist space. Wall-mounted extracts from 1890s texts lent historical credibility and context to these themes. In 1892 art critics Gustave Geffroy (1855–1926) and Roger Marx (1859–1913) labelled the twenty-four-year-old Vuillard an 'Intimist with a delicious sense of humour' orientated towards domestic motifs, including work in the home.¹ Two years later Vuillard

used his diary to describe – while lying in bed – his subjective response to the visual sensations produced by the sight of his bedroom furniture, and the (inevitable) entry into his field of vision of ‘Maman in a blue dressing-gown’.² For decades Vuillard and his widowed mother shared a series of modest rented apartments in central Paris in which the artist maintained a ‘studio-bedroom’ for painting and drawing, while in the dining room Madame Vuillard ran a family sewing business (employing, among others, Vuillard’s grandmother and sister).³ Vuillard put his mother and the fabric of her atelier in the picture while she posed for his pencil and Kodak camera, and printed his amateur photographs. In this intimate exhibition, itself contained to a single large room (the Lady Barber Gallery) and adjacent learning space, it was possible to tell a focused narrative about the shared living and working practices of an avant-garde artist and his petit-bourgeois mother, but one which also spoke to broader concerns associated with the maternal, the familial and the domestic.

‘Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard’ is the first exhibition dedicated exclusively to the artist’s portrayal of his mother, despite Vuillard being one of the most prolific painters of this subject. Remarkably, Madame Vuillard became a figurative presence in more than five hundred Vuillard paintings (about 15% of the artist’s total painted output) and countless works on paper, an artistic endeavour lasting forty years. Hence, Vuillard’s often cited – but rarely interrogated – statement of 1920: ‘Maman is my muse’.⁴ Self-sacrificial narratives catering to sentimentalist expectations have been and continue to be a flaw in the interpretation of the maternal in art, and in visual culture in general. Undoubtedly, Vuillard was devoted to his mother, just as Madame Vuillard was devoted to her son. There is evidence enough of this in Vuillard’s output alone. But continued curatorial and art-historical investment in the abstract concept of muse does little to elucidate the depth of the reciprocity required by Vuillard and Madame Vuillard’s co-habitation and integrated working practices. At the same time, Vuillard’s devotion to his mother, and painterly attention to feminine domesticity, has jarred with stereotypes of masculinity, of which the cliché of the ‘avant-garde male artist as (hetero)sexual outlaw’ is just one symptom. There is a long history of inferred effeminacy in the critical and art-historical construction of Vuillard, who – quite incorrectly – has been portrayed as acutely sensitive, rather reclusive, and even repressed. It is as though a son’s commitment to (and reliance upon) his widowed mother and prolonged professional interest in women’s everyday experience lies outside the terrain of normative masculinity.

My curatorial thesis for this exhibition was different. It was feminist, if subtly so, in two key ways. Firstly, I aimed to demonstrate that Vuillard’s in-depth interest in the portrayal of a feminine experience of domesticity was socially and politically engaged, thus moving his art beyond superficial ideals of domesticated femininity. In the artworks displayed, the figure of Madame Vuillard is presented, among other roles, as seamstress and *chef-patronne*, the imparter of matriarchal advice and giver of maternal care to her daughter, carer to her

dying mother, at her toilette, reading a book, resting after dinner, and as the apartment's cook and cleaner. The diversity of these activities, situated entirely in confined domestic space, show Vuillard's portrayal of his mother to be anything but sentimental. Indeed, themes of sex, illness, ageing and death, together with those of leisure, humour, care and women's domestic and professional work in the home, are integral to Vuillard's version of feminine domesticity.

Secondly, I aimed to give Madame Vuillard agency as a collaborator and enabler of Vuillard's body of work. No longer merely the passive subject of his art, nor abstracted into the concept of muse, Madame Vuillard was to come to the fore as a result of the diversity of her practical contribution to Vuillard's art making. That is, yes, as model, but also as technician, advisor, financier, carer and domestic servant, among other things, including the first and most sustained viewer of many of the small paintings that hung or otherwise were stored in the Vuillard apartments. While it is Vuillard's signature necessarily that appears at the corner of the works, it is important that the exhibition's title – 'Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard' – awards equal billing to son and to mother. It was intended that visitors immediately understand the exhibition's foregrounding of the mutuality that structured the living and working practices of Madame Vuillard, the small business owner, seamstress and housekeeper, and her son, the modernist artist.

The Barber was able to secure loans from important collections including Tate, the British Museum, the National Galleries of Scotland, and France's Musée d'Orsay and Musée national Picasso. Crucially, the Archives Vuillard in Paris agreed to lend seven original photographic prints from hundreds of family snapshots taken by Vuillard after 1897, and for which Madame Vuillard had been both the sitter and the printer. Printing these photographs at home would have entailed contact printing the negative by a window, washing the print in frequently changed water, fixing and then laying each print out to dry on lint-free cloth. This was a process requiring patience, attentiveness and, according to a contemporary Kodak user manual, 'clean hands, clean dishes and clean cloths.'⁵ Three of these small prints were displayed in a cabinet in front of the Barber's painting. Taken over a period of twenty-six years, each of the three photographs captures Madame Vuillard close to the mirrored bedroom wardrobe that also is a feature of *Madame Vuillard arranging her Hair*. We see Madame Vuillard once again styling her hair in a snapshot taken approximately two years after Vuillard made the Barber painting; receiving a wealthy guest (Vuillard's close friend and patron Lucy Hessel [c. 1880–1941]) to her bedroom c. 1904–8; and in 1928, drying her feet after bathing. In the latter photograph an eighty-nine-year-old Madame Vuillard is revealed to be a very frail, very elderly woman.

Thus, 'Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard' provides a way of putting into practice feminist reinterpretation of historical objects that is not limited only to work produced by artists identified as women. It is a common misconception of feminist curation (and feminist

art history more broadly) that it necessarily focuses on art authored by women, sometimes also by women who claim to be feminist. But in permanent collections in which historical work authored by women is woefully under-represented as a result of past and ongoing acquisition practices, feminist curation that operates only on those terms will always be limited. Of course, we are familiar with women as models and patrons. But what also of women as artistic collaborators by other, more prosaic, means? Including as technicians, financiers, carers, and emotional and physical labourers in the service of the production of art for which they are not 'the artist'. In Vuillard's immediate circle of the 'all-male' Nabi group, for example, we can locate evidence of female family members, including France Ranson (1864–1952), Marie Roussel (1861–1948), Elizabeth Mertzdorff (1840–1919), Marthe Bonnard (1869–1942), Andrée Terrasse (1872–1923), and Marthe Denis (1870–1919) practicing multiple forms of collaborative labour and behaviour in the production of art by Paul Ranson (1864–1909), Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867–1944), Bonnard and Maurice Denis (1870–1943). Here, I am not suggesting turning to familial biography as a method for establishing the meaning of art objects, as this has well-established limitations. Rather, I advocate applying a materialist (Marxist Feminist) methodology as a means to recover the historical conditions of artistic production and so seek feminine agency in art otherwise presumed to be authored only by men.

As has already become clear, there is a good deal of feminine agency to be found in Vuillard's practice and in his artworks. With the active input of his mother and the other women of the household, Vuillard attempted a prolonged engagement with the personal, social and material conditions of feminine domesticity. Moreover, Madame Vuillard, her mother Désirée Michaud (1818–1893) and daughter Marie Roussel all lived with Vuillard's art, both during the process of its making and once it was finished. Inevitably, they were the first audience for the works made in the studio-bedroom, and the most sustained audience for the paintings that remained in the Vuillard personal collection that hung on their apartment walls. Thus, Vuillard produced art in collaboration not only with women as models, technicians, financiers, houseworkers, etc., but also in the knowledge that what he produced would be subject to their spectatorship. Indeed, this would be the spectatorship of the very same women whose habitual gestures, working habits and personal lives Vuillard used as the basis of his output. One might even go so far as to suggest that the Intimist artworks were made with a female audience in mind. So, might it be to this particularly elusive mode of feminine agency – the dominant female gaze – that one can attribute, at least in part, something of the profundity of Vuillard's engagement with feminine experience? One of Vuillard's earliest critics and patrons, Thadée Natanson (1868–1951), seemed to think so when, in November 1893, he invoked – only then to patronise – a female audience for Vuillard's interiors paintings. Misguidedly, he dismissed a section of the audience as those 'whose emotions, experienced in matters of intimacy, are more keenly evoked by the subjects M. Vuillard relishes'.⁶ Instead, the formalist Natanson wanted viewers only to see 'the particularly intense appeal of tones and colours' and not to seek in

Vuillard some 'desire to conform his works to an emergent theory', to feminism even, as a result of his profound engaged with women's experience of domesticity.⁷

In the Barber's Learning Room, where we introduced aspects of Vuillard's career and working method, we also offered advice on 'How to Look at a Painting by Vuillard'. Here, exhibition visitors were encouraged to look closely and at length at these small artworks. Paint can be slow to coalesce into a discernible figure or object. Here, we borrowed from the art dealer [Julius Meier-Graefe](#), who noted in 1908 that:

'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. Not a story that can be told in words, be it understood.'⁸

Meier-Graefe was fortunate enough to own works by Vuillard and, therefore, to get to know these over a period of time on a day-to-day basis. Just as Madame Vuillard did, though she was not an art world professional and so did not publish her response. As with so many women as historical viewers of artworks, we can only imagine her spectatorship.

'Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard' attracted many visitors, of all identities and motivations. At an average of 202 visitors per day (more than 18,000 in total), it is the Barber Institute of Fine Art's sixth most visited temporary exhibition. Moreover, it was an exhibition that brought the national art press to the Barber. Lengthy features and favourable reviews were published in *The Telegraph*, *The Observer*, *The Times* and *The New European*, among others. Most were written by art writers that either had not previously visited the Barber Institute or had not done so for several years. Gratifyingly, the feminist curatorial thesis for the exhibition was echoed in the press. In [The Observer](#) Laura Cumming gave Madame Vuillard a subtle agency by orientating her review to Madame Vuillard's constant authoritative presence in the household, the practice and the artwork.⁹ Other critics noted the extent of Vuillard's attention to the physical and emotional labour of women. Several realised that this made his socially-engaged work exceptional among that of the Parisian avant-garde yet simultaneously invisible to art histories intent upon mythologising a correlation between artistic creativity and male virility. Nancy Durrant of [The Times](#) closed her review thus:

'What emerges from this show, however, isn't primarily Vuillard's talent, although it's perfectly evident. It's a snapshot of something unique in art: a long, dedicated exploration of the unexceptional life of a petit-bourgeois woman, in all her roles except that of wife or lover. Which makes a nice change.'¹⁰

Indeed. Curating 'Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard' has been one of the most rewarding and educational experiences of my career as an art historian. With the patient

guidance of the Barber Institute's staff I learnt a huge amount about the practicalities of making an international loan exhibition come to fruition. Equally, I gained invaluable experience in disseminating my research beyond conventional academic audiences and traditional scholarly outcomes. Thus, I fully came to realise that, as sites for knowledge exchange, temporary art exhibitions are unparalleled in inviting people to look, talk, write about and feedback to the topic of one's research. Finally, the process of curating Madame Vuillard reinvigorated my conviction that the region's historical art collections are primed for re-interpretation for new audiences via feminist curation.

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Key Terms

Synthetism: A post-Impressionist decorative style which fused form, motif and meaning. Its visual effects were achieved by the application of broad areas of non-naturalistic colour and a disinclination to model volume and space in light and shade. Through Synthetism, the Nabis aimed to achieve visual expression of individual emotions and memories, as stimulated by the observable world.

Intimism: A label given by early critics to the art of Vuillard and Bonnard, among others, in order to associate their small, Synthetist, paintings of domestic interiors with the properties of intimacy.

Images

Fig. 1 Édouard Vuillard, *Madame Vuillard arranging her Hair* (1900), oil on cardboard, laid on wood, 51.8 × 38.0 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham © The Henry Barber Trust.

Fig. 2 Installation view of 'Maman: Vuillard and Madame Vuillard', Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, 18 October 2018 – 20 January 2019 ©.

¹ Gustave Geffroy, 'Chez le Barc de Boutteville' (28 November 1892), repr. in *La Vie artistique*, vol.2 (Paris, 1893), p.82; Roger Marx, 'Les Symbolistes', *Le Voltaire* (24 November 1892), p.2.

² Édouard Vuillard, *Journal*, I.2, folio 50v-52 (26 October 1894), Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Paris.

³ The artist also rented a series of studios external to the Vuillard apartments.

⁴ Jacques Salomon, 'Vuillard Remembered' (1953), trans. and repr. in John Russell (ed.), *Édouard Vuillard 1868–1940* (London, 1971), p.125.

⁵ Eastman Kodak Company, *Developing and Printing with the Eastman 3A or the ABC Outfit*, (Rochester, New York, 1924), pp.12–17.

⁶ Thadée Natanson, 'Expositions: un groupe de peintres', *La Revue blanche* (November 1893), p.339.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Julius Meier-Graefe, *The Development of Modern Art* (1908), repr. in John Russell, *Vuillard* (London, 1971), p. 98.

⁹ Laura Cumming, 'Vuillard and Madame Vuillard review – all about his mother', *The Observer* (21 October 2018),

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/21/vuillard-and-madame-vuillard-review-barber-institute-birmingham>, accessed 20 April 2019.

¹⁰ Nancy Durrant, 'Édouard Vuillard and his bonne maman muse', *The Times* (21 December 2018), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/edouard-vuillard-and-his-bonne-maman-muse-d3v2c22wk>, accessed 20 April 2019.