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Katherine M. Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010. xix + 274 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$ 109.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-7546-6777-3.

Review by Laura Morowitz, Wagner College

Despite their importance to the history of Modern art, as recently as twenty-five years ago the Nabis were still a relatively little-studied artistic group (so little known, in fact, that my 1996 dissertation on them was cited, erroneously, as “The Nazis [sic] and Medieval Art”). Literature on the group (outside of some excellent monographs on members Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard) consisted largely of rehashing their youthful attempt at forming an artistic brotherhood, complete with esoteric rituals and hermetic nicknames.[1] French art historians such as Guy Cogeval and Claire Frèches-Thory focused their sustained studies on the formal innovations of the artists without delving too deeply into the social or political issues surrounding this eclectic group. An excellent exhibition at the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Museum in 1988, curated by Patricia Boyer-Eckert, firmly situated the artists into the Symbolist current as well as the cutting edge world of theater and popular arts in turn-of-the-century Montmartre.[2]

The last two decades have gone a long way to redressing this lacuna. In 1993 the largest Nabi retrospective to date was held at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris.[3] The show and accompanying catalogue, by Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perruchi-Petri, not only revealed the dizzying array of media in which the Nabis worked—from tapestries to wallpaper to large-scale murals and sculpture—but cast the widest net on who might rightly be considered a legitimate member of this “secret” society. Lesser known and more loosely affiliated artists such as Jan Verkade, Mogens Ballin, Aristide Maillol, and George Lacombe were given their due in the exhibition (although no firm criteria—outside of social engagement with the more widely accepted members of the group—were offered up for their inclusion). The exhibition helped establish the Nabis as key figures in the history of abstraction and of the Modernist movement. Indeed, artists such as Paul Sérusier, Felix Vallotton, and Édouard Vuillard had travelled to the very brink of abstraction by the early 1890s; such daringly radical works, poised between figuration and pure expressive form, would not be taken up again until Wassily Kandinsky and his generation in the second decade of the twentieth century.

The reluctance to treat the group as a totality is due in part to their incredible diversity. The array of their styles and subjects, as well as their personal backgrounds, still presents a challenge to any scholar wanting to approach the Nabis as a monolith. Seldom has a group of friends with similar artistic tastes been more divided politically or socially. The Nabis included the conservative Catholic Maurice Denis (later a member of the Action Française), the committed anarchist Henri Gabriel Ibels, as well as more middle-of-the-road bourgeoisie such as Édouard Vuillard. The commonality of the members can only be boiled down to friendship and a shared commitment to anti-Academic art.

For the most part discussion of Nabi politics and social affiliations was reserved for the monographic literature, taken up in books and exhibitions devoted to one member or another, for example in the writings of Jean Paul Bouillon on Denis or Sasha Newman on Felix Vallotton.[4] Group studies, instead, focused very much on the question of how, and in what manner, these artists differentiated

themselves from Academic currents. One potent way of aligning against the Academic establishment in the 1890s was through allegiance to the decorative. Indeed, this is where key Nabi scholarship has gone, most notably in the studies of Gloria Groom.<sup>[5]</sup> In an era where many of the most lauded artists, from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes to Paul Gauguin to Eugene Grasset, were deeply invested in casting themselves as decorative artists, the Nabis were very much in the vanguard. Many of their most important commissions—from the multi-panel murals of Maurice Denis and Edouard Vuillard, to the screens of Pierre Bonnard and the tapestries of Paul Ranson—were indeed site-specific works meant to transport the viewer by wholly transforming their physical environment.

In *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Kuenzli sets herself an ambitious and deeply fascinating goal: “This study seeks to recover the intellectual seriousness and artistic ambition underlying the Nabi’s practice of decoration and argues for its crucial importance to painterly modernism”(p. 1). Indeed Kuenzli’s own project may be seen as an art historical equivalent, an attempt to apply intellectual seriousness and ambition to the study of this artistic circle. Kuenzli aims to do so by elevating the privately-commissioned decorative panel to a crucial place in accounts of the Modernist sensibility, overturning the simple binary of domestic/female/disengaged vs. public/masculine/engaged. For Kuenzli (in opposition to other scholars of the Nabis who have focused heavily on printmaking, decorative arts, or religious subject matter), the decorative painted panels of these artists remain, by far, the most important part of their *oeuvre*. Her accumulated chapters convincingly situate Nabi practice at the very heart of Modernist art.

The great strength of her book lies in her willingness to take on the contradictory and conflicting aspects of Nabi artistic identity and to look at them in relation to a wide variety of late nineteenth-century phenomena including Wagnerism, the rise of the poster, the importance of theater, the Art Nouveau interior, and more. In her book, Kuenzli follows on the studies of Groom in focusing specifically on the decorative commissions of the Nabis. While Groom devoted extensive archival research to establishing the exact circumstances of many of the decorative commissions, in particular the background and artistic tastes of the patrons, Kuenzli instead directs her study to the meanings and function of such works, whose primary aims lie in providing “an imaginary sense of wholeness” (p. 13) and an invitation to reverie. Not surprisingly Maurice Denis and Edouard Vuillard are the primary focus, not only because of their large scale painting commissions but because they embody, far more than other Nabis such as Jozsef Rippl Ronai or Paul Serusier, the *intimiste* world of a cultivated Parisian elite.

In her introductory chapter Kuenzli sets out her themes. She then looks, in turn, at intersections between major Nabi commissions and poster art, the Symbolist theater, and the *gesamtkunstwerk*. As Easton noted in her pioneering study of Vuillard, certain Nabi artists had the astonishing ability to render banal and even prosaic subjects—walking a dog, running a sewing machine—with all the gravitas and poetry of a dream.<sup>[6]</sup> Kuenzli helps us to understand how centrally connected to Symbolism was the work of Vuillard and Bonnard. Despite their shunning of the more esoteric and religious themes of the Symbolist movement, their commitment to evocation and abstraction—even in works such as posters and playbills, intended for commercial purposes—link them solidly to Symbolist aims. Likewise Kuenzli shows how the Nabi embrace of Wagner was less about his storehouse of mythic themes and bombast than the notion of musicality—abstract rhythms—underlying visual works. Kuenzli convincingly argues for the Nabis’ embrace of pattern and rhythmic repetition—sometimes at the expense of figurative clarity—as a way of paralleling musical experience.

To understand the decorative requires us to really engage with what the *décoratif* meant in *fin-de-siècle* France. And, as Kuenzli establishes, it meant far more than just providing embellishment and beautification of walls. The rise of interest in the decorative, in the *peintre décorateur* is linked, and profoundly so, to the entire role of art in turn-of-the-century Europe. Discussion on the decorative ties in to at least three wider social questions: it is a response to the commodification of art in the nineteenth

century; to the desire for communal, rather than individual, production; and to the call for a specifically French art form in an age of increasingly nationalistic agitation. Kuenzli does an admirable job of treating the first two. As she notes, "...the Nabis believed that art could constitute a form of opposition to the dominant values of capitalism and bourgeois individualism" (p. 22). In parallel, she points out that the exceedingly small size of the easel paintings of Vuillard and Bonnard also rendered them "utterly unmarketable" (p. 20). That the Nabis were well aware of their ideal in contesting the market is revealed by their own writings, in which they distinguish, for example, among their "petite toiles bourgeoises" and their "icons." The qualities often signaled out for praise by the Nabis themselves, for example in the writings of Denis and Sérusier—site-specific, "authentic", "naïve"—all form a counter-image of the successful Academic artist. Decorative works, designed for permanent and singular installation, are virtually impossible to commodify.

Her chapters on Nabi work for theater and posters show their underlying commitment to a communal project, a kind of utopian notion of artistic brotherhood that manifest itself in myriad ways in the late nineteenth century from religiously inspired artistic organizations to the flourishing of art colonies and to Van Gogh's dream for a "Studio of the South".[7] Kuenzli repeatedly claims that the Nabi desire to exhibit their already-purchased decorative panels—at Bing's Galeries de l'Art Nouveau, at the Salon d'Automne—is proof of their public and communal ambitions. (This element of her argument seems less than compelling: what artist would not seize the opportunity to display works to a wider audience and gain further exposure?)

As scholars like Deborah Silverman and Aimee Price Brown have noted, artists working in the decorative were praised as embodying specifically French qualities.[8] Conservative critics such as Alphonse Germain repeatedly called for a new French artist to take up the mantle of the French decorator. (It is worth mentioning here that many of the Nabis' commissioned panels resonated with aristocratic touches: Denis' panels of *The Legend of St. Hubert* for Henri Cochin focus on hunting scenes, while Vuillard's panels for Dr. Louis-Henri Vaquez were literally hung in a room with a splendid fifteenth-century Franco-Flemish tapestry.) The issue of the Nabi's reception as distinctly "French artists" is left largely unexplored, except for Kuenzli's chapter on the Vaquez panels' critical reception, where she takes up the issue of Nabi production in the context of the Dreyfus Affair.

Kuenzli's chapters result in original readings and insights. Seemingly disparate commissions, even those by different Nabis, are revealed to have a common and compelling underlying aim and aesthetic strategy. While most previous studies have dealt with the Nabi's exhibition of works at Siegfried Bing's 1895 Galeries de l'Art Nouveau as a kind of unsuccessful experiment, Kuenzli sees this exhibit as central to their practice and their work as inspirational to later figures associated with the decorative such as Julius Meier-Graefe and Henry van de Velde. Kuenzli fails to mention, however, the important re-evaluation in the 1890s of medieval stained glass and tapestries. It was not only the Nabis and many artists and critics who found them to be excellent sources for a decorative aesthetic, one that combined a spiritual subject matter with powerful rhythms that relied on a flat, non-perspectival use of space. Tying their exhibit at Bing's into that larger context might have yielded even further discoveries.

Kuenzli's book is less a study of the Nabis than a focused examination of some of the group's leading figures. Her aims lead her to focus on the artists who obviously best suit her needs, but a case can certainly be made for the centrality of Vallotton and Ibels in a different kind of history of the movement. Moreover Paul Ranson and Ker Xavier Roussel, both of whom were interested in the decorative, seem to get short shrift. And surely the monk-artists Verkade and Ballins deserve consideration in the chapter on Catholic Modernism, even if by way of contrast? Kuenzli is at her weakest when she (repeatedly) discounts the approach of Susan Sidlauskas and Deborah Silverman, whose interpretations still bear up under scrutiny.[8] Least convincing is Kuenzli's argument that the decorative works of the Nabis attempt to "transgress gender," an argument she makes throughout several chapters. (Art Nouveau as a whole, she argues, attempted to "detach art

from the articulation of social and gender difference” [p. 153].) Yet women in Nabi paintings appear in exclusively “feminine” occupations: tending children, picking flowers, sewing, and reading. When men appear at all they are usually sinister or comic interlopers in a purely female realm. There is little here for a male viewer to indentify with; instead the aim of reverie and escape is undeniably gendered as feminine. If the Nabis incorporated media more normally associated with women—from dress making to tapestries to ceramics—they still subverted such media to the intellectual (hence “masculine” for nineteenth-century ideology) media of painting. As Kuenzli rightly notes, while others such as Gauguin or Armand Point remade themselves à la William Morris into craftsmen, the Nabis never abandoned their roles as designers. They seldom, if ever, executed their more decorative works, maintaining their role as painters.

Nevertheless the book remains a central achievement, a study which situates several of the Nabi artists in the most profound aesthetic debates of their time. Moreover, this study convincingly shows how the work of these artists not only expressed but, in many cases, anticipated the very aesthetic debates of the fin de siècle. Copiously illustrated, clearly written, and persuasively argued, Kuenzli assuredly achieves her aim of restoring to these artists their “crucial importance to painterly modernism” and indeed to the larger history of modern art.

#### NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Easton, *The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard* (Smithsonian Books, 1989); and Sasha Newman, *Bonnard* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984).

[2] Patricia Boyer-Eckert, *The Nabis and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University/The Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1988).

[3] Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perruchi-Petri *Nabis 188-1890*. exh. cat. (Zürich: Kunsthaus/Paris: Musée D’Orsay, 1993).

[4] Jean Paul Bouillon, “The Politics of Maurice Denis,” in Guy Cogeval et. al., eds., *Maurice Denis, 1870-1943, exh. cat.*, (Lyon: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1994, 95-109; and Sasha M. Newman, *Felix Vallotton*, (New York: Abbeville, 1991).

[5] Gloria Groom et. al., *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Roussel, 1890-1930*, exh. cat. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press/Art Institute of Chicago, 2001).

[6] Easton, op. cit.

[7] See Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan, *Artistic Brotherhoods in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Ashgate/Scolars Press, 2000).

[8] Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Aimee Price Brown, *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2010).

[9] Susan Sidlauskas, “Contesting Femininity: Vuillard’s Family Pictures,” *Art Bulletin* vol. 79 (March 1997).

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