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Julia Frey, *Venus Betrayed: The Private World of Édouard Vuillard*. London: Reaktion Books, 2019. 422 pp. £39.95 U.K (hb). ISBN 9781789141603.

Review by Maika Pollack, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Periods of on-and-off COVID-19 lockdowns throughout the 2020-2021 academic year have, to some of us introvert art historians, felt like a perpetual Edouard Vuillard. The painter's work of 1891-1992, in particular, in which patterned planes of nearly-flat color describe people cleaning, dining, resting, and sewing in comfortable interiors, look like #quarantinegoals.

While it is commonplace to think about Paris in the nineteenth century as a study in changing urban spaces—leisure time spent in parks, Haussmannization and its effects, and the Eiffel Tower being just a few lecture chestnuts—the fin-de-siècle requires us to think about interiors. Eugène Atget's exquisite photographs capture, alongside the arcades and shop displays, middle-class interiors in all their discrete splendor. Huysmans's *des Esseintes* haunts his own ornate halls. Deborah Silverman's *Art Nouveau in Fin de Siècle France* makes a case for the study of the domestic interior and the critical importance of the *style moderne* of the 1890s in understanding French national identity, labor, and art.[1] So what can we learn in 2021 from possibly the greatest painter of fin-de-siècle interiors? The art historian Julia Frey's 2019 book, *Venus Betrayed: The Private World of Édouard Vuillard* is a new look at Vuillard's life and work.

Vuillard was not just a painter of interiors, but an interloper into what Griselda Pollock famously termed the “spaces of femininity” of the nineteenth century.[2] His canvases render artificial interior light, patterned wallpaper placed behind patterned dresses, fabulous corsets being sewn, and tables being set and cleared. In this respect he crosses a gendered divide we often make within the study of nineteenth-century painting, in which the male gaze dominates the street, the café, the theater, and the brothel (Degas, Monet, Manet), while women inhabit, and represent, the home (Cassat, Morisot). Vuillard's early paintings are famously overdetermined images saturated with the fashionable fabrics of his time and glimpses of women—workers, clients—from his own mother's corset shop. His mother was in fact a corset maker, and our vision of him surrounded by ladies' undergarments and under a maternal stare is inseparable from the work; for few artists does biography map more neatly onto painting. “It has become a commonplace to call *maman* the most frequently painted mother in history,” writes Frey (p. 355). Vuillard will be forever seen, as Paul Signac saw him, as someone who “lives with his mother and . . . paints in the small family apartment” (Signac quoted in Frey, 91). (He lived this mother until he was sixty and only intermittently kept a studio outside his home.)

Frey does outstanding scholarly work combing through Vuillard's unpublished notebooks to capture a nuanced season-by-season look at his life and social circle. What do we learn about an artist's work by examining their life? The answer: generally not very much, but sometimes a great deal. Vuillard's paintings are occasionally illuminated by the events of his life in the corset shop, and the complicated dynamics of his affairs and family.

Frey does rigorous research to clear up the subject of a number of paintings, especially *Self-Portrait with Sister* (1892), of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She patiently explains that the young red-haired woman depicted kissing Vuillard in this painting is actually his young lover, his mother's teenage sewing assistant. (His betrayal of this woman is presumably the one referred to, obliquely, by the book's title.) The identification makes sense. It seems downright strange that we had previously assumed that the romantic pairing was with his sister. Other details unlock paintings. For example, his sister's marriage going wrong, with the dates and details of infidelities and miscarriages, give lockstep background to Vuillard's tense, dark, domestic scenes of the late 1890s. Frey writes thoughtfully about the class dynamics behind Vuillard's commissioned portraits of his wealthy, older mistresses. She writes of Vuillard's *Lucie Hessel*, of 1924: "*Lucie Hessel* (illus. 218), painted in 1924 when she was 52 and had been Vuillard's mistress for nearly 25 years, was his last true portrait of her until 1940. He portrays her tenderly but realistically, grey-haired and rheumy-eyed, gazing lovingly at him. He still loved her, but the painting also hints at their power struggles. Her sumptuous surroundings, the yawning décolleté of her expensive dress, and [her husband] Jos, deep in the background, cosseted by his art collection, continued to be both positive and negative factors in her relationship with Vuillard. By the 1920s, Vuillard was among the 'most famous of living portrait painters,' but he was more than ever a kept man" (p. 303).

Yet the best Vuillards--the only good ones?--were painted ca. 1891-1895, and are great. These have been the subject of several exhibitions that I'd love to take a machine back in time to see--one by Dr. Elizabeth Easton at the Brooklyn Museum, in 1990, looks particularly spectacular.[3] Rending planes of interlocking textile to describe domestic scenes with a voyeuristic intensity, the gloppiness of distemper in them adds to the claustrophobic rendering of interior spaces. Women, seemingly unaware of the male gaze, sweep and sew and sit, *femme fleurs* in a secret garden. They are modern, and still, and owe much to contemporaneous theories about posture and also the flat printed planes and textile anti-volumes of *japonisme*. Biography and the occasional foray into personal psychology seem beside the point in the face of these softly brilliant paintings. None of the sometimes sordid details of Vuillard's entanglements and affairs bring much light onto the stark lack of interest in the later paintings. As Susan Sidlauskas says in her important 1997 essay "Contesting Femininity: Vuillard's Family Pictures," "life never translates seamlessly into art." [4] The question of why the best Vuillard paintings only occur for such a brief period of his life remains sadly unelucidated by the biography.

It's hard to say when Vuillard's life begins to slide. The young Vuillard's running around with rich art friends is somewhat sympathetic ("The moralizing of people who live from trust funds," he writes bitterly, and for the ages). [5] His sister marries the handsome but mediocre artist Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Roussel, in turn, drags down the whole family with his buffoonish antics. Vuillard's affair with Thadée Natanson's self-absorbed wife, Misia, is frankly boring. For about a decade, his time is spent appeasing and mediating between these two pretty but tedious friends, Misia and Ker-Xavier. Frey notes that the start of his contract with the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery, about which Vuillard complains bitterly, coincides with an era of commissioned portraits in a

more conventional style. Most of these still depict interiors, but spatially, objects are rendered in a much more conventional manner than in his earlier works. Is that affair that began in 1900 with the wife of his gallery manager, the wealthy Lucie Hessel, the final blow to his independence? He goes on painting for another forty years, and by 1938 he is elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and has a solo exhibition at Musée des Arts Décoratifs (why his painting was considered “decorative art” and not fine art merits more consideration than it is given).

While it is strong on archival research and relentless in dissecting relationships and personalities, in some ways the book approaches but never answers the questions that simmer below the most fascinating examples of Vuillard’s oeuvre: How did gender constructs inform the tension of the “masculine” gaze in the “feminine” domestic interior? How do Vuillard’s interiors upend the dichotomy Griselda Pollock establishes between female and male spaces of the nineteenth century? [6] How might Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” apply to the discreet pastel interiors full of ladies purchasing corsets that he portrays? [7] And at a moment when questions of working at home and families at home both feel absolutely current, one can’t help but wonder what Vuillard’s interiors might tell us about the very notion of home, who belongs there, and what kind of lines it draws between labor and leisure, work and life. What further might they tell us about what Griselda Pollock calls “the negotiation of gendered class identities and class gender positions?” [8] This, above all, was what I longed to know.

If *Venus Betrayed* never attempts to reach beyond the terms of a scholarly biography, it also never overreaches, and it’s no hagiography. Frey is the great biographer of Toulouse-Lautrec, a lifelong scholar of the second half of the nineteenth century, and her take on Vuillard is even-keel. It’s a good read, a smart read—even, I would say during COVID, an enchanting read, full of escapist details about places we can’t visit right now. But sometimes one person’s life isn’t enough—to understand gender roles and gendered notions of spaces—and we need to analyze the way in which gender is constructed in an age, and not just look, however closely, at the life one artist lived. Perhaps there is something still greater to yet be written about how Vuillard paints the home and what he does to our notions of masculine and feminine, labor and leisure, in the fin-de-siècle.

NOTES

[1] Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 23.

[2] Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50-90.

[3] *Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard*, May 18-July 30, 1990, The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

[4] Susan Sidlauskas, “Contesting Femininity: Vuillard’s Family Pictures,” *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997): 85.

[5] Frey, p. 312. Quoted in Julie Girard, *Le Journal d’Edouard Vuillard*, p. 26; translated by Frey.

[6] Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity."

[7] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 4 (1975): 6-18.

[8] Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," p. 70.

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