

*H-France Review* Vol. 22 (July 2022), No. 119

Mary Weaver Chapin and Heather Lemonedes Brown, *Private Lives: Home and Family in the Art of the Nabis, Paris, 1889–1900*. Exh. cat. Cleveland, Ohio: The Cleveland Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. 300 pp. Chronology, map, figures, plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-78-0300257595.

Review by Jason Vrooman, Middlebury College Museum of Art.

The exhibition catalogue for *Private Lives: Home and Family in the Art of the Nabis, Paris, 1889–1900* is a welcome reminder that human beings are a beautifully complex amalgam of internal thoughts and feelings, intimate relationships, and connections to the broader world. Although I did not have the good fortune to see the associated exhibition when it was presented at the Cleveland Museum of Art (July 1 to September 19, 2021) or the Portland Art Museum (October 23, 2021 to January 23, 2022), I am grateful that its curators, Mary Weaver Chapin (Curator of Prints and Drawings, Portland Art Museum, Oregon) and Heather Lemonedes Brown (Virginia N. and Randall J. Barbato Deputy Director and Chief Curator, The Cleveland Museum of Art), published an accompanying catalogue worthy of their engaging subject.

The exhibition and catalogue train a focused lens on a seemingly intimate topic that ultimately proves expansive and provocative. *Private Lives* examines approximately one decade in the artistic output of Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), Maurice Denis (French, 1870–1943), Félix Vallotton (Swiss, 1865–1925), and Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940), four of the central figures in an artistic brotherhood known as the Nabis (a name derived from the Hebrew word for “prophet”). Through their thoughtful presentation of these artists’ imagery of domestic life, Chapin and Brown invite reflection on topics of broad relevance in both *fin-de-siècle* France and our own era. Such pertinent themes include the permeable boundaries between private and public life, gender politics (including women’s autonomy over their bodies), the role of media in shaping public opinion, complex class dynamics, critical awareness that the needs of all members of society are not valued equally, and art’s power to make us ponder what we might otherwise take for granted.

Published by the Cleveland Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the *Private Lives* catalogue is a gem in content as well as design. Works from the collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Portland Art Museum form the core of *Private Lives*, but thanks to the diligent work of the curators and assistance from FRAME (the French American Museum Exchange), the exhibition and catalogue unite works from eighteen additional American museums and libraries, seven European institutions, and a number of European and American private collections. The 180 plates and 114

figures are all beautifully reproduced in color on the catalogue's oversized pages. The resulting visual feast allows the reader-cum-viewer to luxuriate in the aesthetic innovations embraced by Bonnard, Denis, Vallotton, and Vuillard as tactics to prompt reflection on the vicissitudes of modern life.

Several features in *Private Lives* are particularly useful for understanding how these artists were influenced by their relationships to people and places, including a chronology of "personal connections among the four Nabi artists in this catalogue and the friends and family they depicted during their formative years to 1900" (p. xvii). A map situates relevant Nabi locales in and around Paris, including the artists' schools, apartments, and studios, as well as the cafés where they socialized and the galleries where they exhibited in the 1890s, suggesting that these artists crossed neighborhoods (and presumably class lines) frequently. For readers wishing to explore further, the catalogue includes an index and selected bibliography.<sup>[1]</sup>

Two introductory essays set the stage for the catalogue. "Introducing the Nabis," authored by Heather Lemonedes Brown, does a commendable job of summarizing the genesis of the Nabis as an unofficial yet influential artistic brotherhood in 1888. Conversations about art and life among the young artists spawned shared travels, group exhibitions in avant-garde galleries, and lasting friendships. (Membership in the Nabis gradually increased until the artists began to exhibit separately after 1900.)

Brown's biographies of Bonnard, Denis, Vallotton, and Vuillard--who are today undoubtedly the best known and most studied of the Nabis--succinctly detail the young men's artistic formations as well as sources of personal and professional inspiration. These influences ranged from the aesthetic (the Nabis were particularly enamored of the emotive colors of Symbolist painter Paul Gauguin and the shifting perspectives of Japanese prints) to the literary and musical (through their close association with the progressive journal *La Revue blanche*, the Nabis socialized and frequently collaborated with cultural luminaries including Guillaume Apollinaire, Claude Debussy, André Gide, Stéphane Mallarmé, Misia Godebska Natanson, Marcel Proust, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Paul Verlaine, among others). Brown likewise details the artists' romantic and familial circles, particularly the women in their lives. This presentation of the Nabis' intimate and professional networks pays dividends later in *Private Lives*.

Penned by Mary Weaver Chapin, "Intimism and the 'Daily Tragedy and Mystery of Ordinary Existence'" lays an important foundation for *Private Lives*. Chapin cites a number of nineteenth-century interpretations of the words *intime*, *intimité*, *intimisme*, and *intimiste*, from such illustrious sources as G.-Albert Aurier, Charles Baudelaire, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Creznitz, Maurice Denis, Gustave Geffroy, André Gide, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Claude Roger-Marx, and even the Larousse *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*. Camille Mauclair's definition acts as a kind of lodestar for *Private Lives*: "What do we mean by intimism?...This intimate meaning...allows us to divine--the daily tragedy and mystery of ordinary existence, and the latent poetry of things."<sup>[2]</sup>

Consonant with an interest in "the latent poetry of things," Chapin cites several more influences on the Nabis, notably artistic (including the intimate paintings of Jean-Siméon Chardin, Johannes Vermeer, and Jan Steen), literary (particularly the evocative poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and Symbolist plays, for which several of the Nabis created sets and theater programs), and philosophical (Henri Bergson's and Marcel Proust's explorations of the relationship between time

and memory). It should perhaps, therefore, come as no surprise that the Nabis' portraits, interiors, and cityscapes are rarely mere likenesses, architectural renderings, or topographical descriptions, but rather complex explorations of the psychology of people and places.

The essay likewise offers a thoughtful meditation on the intimate act of viewing fine art prints in the 1890s, which doubles as an invitation for readers of *Private Lives* to look closely at the works included in the catalogue, primarily easel paintings and prints.<sup>[3]</sup> Puzzling through the artists' formal experiments affords the spectator time to absorb mysteries hidden within the everyday—and to grapple with the fact that the home could be a source of both refuge *and* anxiety. Throughout the catalogue, the authors hold space for this duality. The conclusion to this essay offers an excellent summary of *Private Lives* writ large: "Returning to the elusive notion of *intimism*, it is clear that this term encompassed a vast sentimental and psychological range for the Nabis. If it is defined simply by *what* is depicted—bourgeois interiors, family and friends, playful pets and children—the subject is both conventional and cloying. Many of the Nabis' contemporaries made exactly this type of picture, celebrating happy loved ones in material comfort, each playing their assigned role. But the Nabis seized on ordinary subjects to create an art of mystery and memory. Their small canvases and prints lure the viewer into close proximity, sometimes offering a path into a cloistered world, but more often leaving them just at the threshold, a spectator to the dramas taking place within the picture plane. The Nabis call on senses beyond the visual: the soundscape of muffled voices and hushed interiors; 'a perfume of childhood or winter, woman or ashes,' in the words of [Claude] Roger-Marx; the tactile pleasures of plush fabric, baby flesh, and feline fur."<sup>[4]</sup> Most importantly for the Nabi aesthetic agenda, these works evoke joy and nostalgia as well as unexpressed and inexpressible emotion—that is, the tragedy and mystery of daily life" (p. 37).

After these foundational essays, the curators have structured the catalogue around five main essays: "Interior Dramas," "Family Life," "Music *chez soi*," "In the Garden," and "The Nabi City."<sup>[5]</sup> Although Chapin authored the first three and Brown the latter two essays, there is a welcome consistency of thorough research, sensitive and substantive visual analysis, clear and convincing argumentation, approachable tone, and elegant prose throughout the volume.

These core essays tend to follow a parallel structure, opening with a few paragraphs about broad social issues that productively frame the ensuing discussion. "Interior Dramas" expands the widely held belief in the home as a refuge capably cultivated by the "*femme au foyer*"—"the cradle of the family, a safe harbor in the dynamic city of Paris that was marked ever more conspicuously by speed and spectacle"—by demonstrating that such everyday acts as dining, sewing, relaxing, and even being amorous could spark a range of responses, from restful to stressful (p. 41). In a passage that resonates chillingly as I write in the United States in 2022, "Family Life" sets the stage for a thoughtful exploration of familial dynamics in Nabi art with a reminder that in *fin-de-siècle* France, anxiety about the declining birthrate, breastfeeding, and child rearing resulted in male "politicians and commentators" having much to say about women's bodies and how they should "raise their children for optimum health and moral behavior" (p. 101). "Music *chez soi*" notes that even as "domestic music allowed the entire family to partake in its pleasures from the safety of home, sheltered from the city's risqué environments," musical formation was rooted in traditional notions of class and gender: "Children were expected to learn the piano as proof of their good education, and music was part of the 'aesthetic dowry' young women brought to a marriage" (p. 144). Not even green space was neutral: "In the Garden" asserts that the "parks, squares, and tree-lined boulevards" of Napoléon III and Baron Haussmann's modern Paris were

“thought to benefit physical and moral health” and that bourgeois Parisians increasingly developed a fondness for amateur gardening as a “fashionable pastime”—though surely with different means and ends than the rural farmers feeding their own families and stocking city markets (p. 195). (For reasons that will soon be evident, I shall return later to the final essay, “The Nabi City.”)

After these relatively broad prologues to each essay, the authors proceed to elucidate similarities as well as differences in how the various artists treat these themes visually and ideologically. As a general rule, the work of Maurice Denis, a devout Catholic, presents the most traditional view of domestic life, with selected images often featuring a direct or indirect allusion to scenes of the Madonna and child. The works of Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard tend to be more visually complex, employing patterning, subtle color harmonies, cropping, and multiple, unexpected angles to evoke the richness and complexity of private life. For me, one of the catalogue’s most satisfying revelations was the authors’ demonstration that Bonnard and Vuillard frequently employed low perspectives that evoke the vantage points of children. In most of the essays, the authors present the work of Félix Vallotton as a kind of visual and conceptual counterpoint to notions of the happy home; frequently, Vallotton’s crisp compositions, stark contrasts of color, and fraught subject matter indicate feelings of isolation or even sexual tension.

Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of *Private Lives* is the way in which Chapin and Brown merge information about the social milieu with nuanced visual analysis, leveraging artworks into primary sources capable of simultaneously telling their own stories and illustrating broader points. Far from mere exercises in formalism, these close and sensitive readings consistently prove the curators’ claim that much of the power of Nabi art lurks beneath the surface. Given the catalogue’s welcome reliance on masterful visual reasoning, the publishers wisely chose to present the relevant works from the exhibition checklist immediately after each essay, rather than saving the totality of plates for a concluding section of the volume. Thus divided, the large and gorgeously reproduced plates help reinforce the corresponding essays’ arguments, while their thoughtful captions provide additional context and spark new thinking.

Shorter essays punctuate the catalogue. Averaging three pages plus compelling images, each of these spotlights expands on a theme raised briefly in the main sections. After “Interior Dramas,” Francesca Berry (Senior Lecturer, Department of Art History, Curating, and Visual Studies, University of Birmingham) offers a reflection on “The Gender Politics of the Nabis.” Following “Family Life,” Saskia Ooms (Curator, Musée de Montmartre) writes on “Home and Family through the Camera.” As a coda to “Music *chez soi*,” Francesca Brittan (Associate Professor, Department of Music, Case Western Reserve University) considers “Music at Home in the Belle Époque.” Finally, building on “In the Garden,” Kathleen Kete (Borden W. Painter Jr., ’58/H’95 Professor of European History, Trinity College, CT) provides context about “Pets and Family Life in Nineteenth-Century France.” I found myself wanting more information on these fascinating topics—particularly when the essayists proffered evidence that women in the Nabis’ circle played artistic roles beyond serving as muses. Motivated readers can thankfully use the footnotes to these pithy and provocative *précis* as catalysts to further exploration.

The final essay in the catalogue, “The Nabi City,” is a fitting conclusion to *Private Lives*. After reveling in the catalogue’s extended investigation of the interior realm, interspersed with glimpses of the outside world, I was excited to cross the threshold fully into the public realm. This lively jaunt through the streets of Paris acts as a kind of echo to the introductory essays’

presentation of the Nabis' cosmopolitanism. This worldliness surely influenced their depictions of children and nannies, laundresses and fashionable *parisiennes*, vegetable sellers and dandies, dogs and carriage horses, and many others interacting with their fellow denizens of Paris.

I will happily confess that the catalogue's final sentence primed me to want more: "Bonnard's city scenes focus on intentionally ambiguous interactions and unspoken exchanges, humanizing Paris and its anonymous inhabitants, suggesting intimate moments in their private lives" (p. 233). While I would have been thrilled to read Chapin and Brown's insightful analysis of more of the Nabis' urban imagery, such an examination would obviously have been beyond the scope of *Private Lives*. But capping an extensive investigation of the private sphere with even a brief consideration of the Nabis' public imagery was, to me, a welcome and powerful reminder that no person is an island--and no home is an impenetrable fortress. Admittedly with varying degrees of frequency, duration, agency, and autonomy, nearly all Parisians spent time in the bustling city before returning home vivified, exhausted, or both.

Enjoying this ambitious, beautiful, and thought-provoking catalogue at a time when I am weighing the potential costs and benefits of social interactions after an extended period of COVID-19-induced isolation, I could not help but reflect on the lessons *Private Lives* might offer for the present moment. Although it is true that the catalogue tells a partial story of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, largely of upper middle class life as seen through the eyes of four white male artists, I nonetheless drew a valuable lesson from the Nabis' sensitive (if selective) depictions of everyday life, which invite us to look at the world with fresh eyes. Given the many challenges of the world today--white supremacy, police brutality, war, famine, systemic inequality, climate change, an ongoing pandemic, a global refugee crisis, challenges to women's bodily autonomy, attacks on transgender rights, gun violence, and seemingly irreconcilable political differences, to name just a few--it is tempting to cocoon ourselves within whatever privilege we might have. But if we pair the rejuvenation offered by the comforts of home and loved ones with wide ranging and empathetic observation of the surrounding world, we just might find the courage to make a small difference in the lives of others, and in so doing enrich our own.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

William M. Griswold and Brian J. Ferriso, "Directors' Foreword"

Heather Lemonedes Brown, "Introducing the Nabis"

Mary Weaver Chapin, "Intimism and the 'Daily Tragedy and Mystery of Ordinary Existence'"

Mary Weaver Chapin, "Interior Dramas"

Francesca Berry, "The Gender Politics of the Nabis"

Mary Weaver Chapin, "Family Life"

Saskia Ooms, "Home and Family Through the Camera"

Mary Weaver Chapin, "Music *chez soi*"

Francesca Brittan, "Music at Home in the Belle Époque"

Heather Lemonedes Brown, "In the Garden"

Kathleen Kete, "Pets and Family Life in Nineteenth-Century France"

Heather Lemonedes Brown, "The Nabi City"

## NOTES

[1] Throughout *Private Lives*, the authors diligently reference several key moments in the reception of the Nabis. Generous quotations from critics writing when these artists were first exhibiting serve as a reminder that viewers have long appreciated what could be termed a productive ambiguity in the Nabis' art. Deference is likewise paid to "second wave" Nabi scholarship, particularly the groundbreaking work of Gloria Groom, Elizabeth Easton, Claire Frèches-Thory, Susan Sidlauskas, Guy Cogeval, and others in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the footnotes and bibliography, I was likewise pleased to see frequent spotlights on recent scholarship by a new generation of Nabi scholars.

[2] Camille Mauclair, *The Great French Painters and the Evolution of French Painting from 1830 to the Present Day*, transl. P. G. Konody (London: E. P. Dutton, 1903), 122 (as cited in Chapin and Brown, *Private Lives*, p. 21 and p. 23).

[3] The curators' choice to focus primarily on easel paintings and prints makes sense, both within the conceptual framework of *Private Lives* and the logistical challenges of mounting a traveling exhibition. Readers new to Nabi scholarship who are eager to learn more about other important aspects of the Nabis' output—particularly large-scale decorative cycles and such functional items as fans, folding screens, china, lampshades, stained glass, theater programs, posters, and much more—may want to start with the scholarship of Gloria Groom and the catalogue of a major 1993 Nabi exhibition organized by Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perruchi-Petri: Gloria Groom, *Édouard Vuillard: Painter-Decorator; Patrons and Projects, 1892-1912* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Gloria Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press; Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2001); Eds. Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perruchi-Petri, *Nabis, 1888-1900*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux; Munich: Prestel, 1993).

[4] Claude Roger-Marx, *The Graphic Work of Édouard Vuillard*, transl. Susan Fargo Gilchrist (San Francisco: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1990), p. 14.

[5] The following exhibition review suggests that these essays generally correspond to the major sections of the exhibition as presented in Cleveland: Lance Esplund, "Private Lives: Home and Family in the Art of the Nabis, Paris, 1889-1900" Review: Windows on the Housebound," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/private-lives-home-and-family-in-the-art-of-the-nabis-bonnard-vuillard-vallotton-paris-post-impressionism-11628888792>.

[jvrooman@middlebury.edu](mailto:jvrooman@middlebury.edu)

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the *H-France* website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of *H-France*. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172