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Martin Schwander, ed., *Édouard Vuillard: Im Louvre--Bilder für eine Basler Villa/In the Louvre--Paintings for a Basel Villa*. Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2021. 199 pp. €39.90/£35.00/\$45.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-7774-3759-0.

Review by Maika Pollack, University of Hawai'i.

As an art historian of the fin-de-siècle, I am not alone in having a bucket list of decorative paintings located in private residences that I would love to see. Some of these are very hard to view. The top of my current list is probably Gustav Klimt's *Stoclet Frieze* (1905-1911), painted for Adolphe Stoclet, the Belgian banker. Located in a Brussels building designed by Wiener Werkstätte architect Josef Hoffmann, it is now the *kuleana* of the Brooklyn-born sound artist Charlemagne (née Chaim Moshe Tzadik) Palestine and his wife, Aude Stoclet.[1] Palestine tells me to come by any time, but alas I am located in Honolulu.

Odilon Redon's library murals (1912) in the library in the former Abbaye Sainte-Marie de Fontfroide, near Narbonne, tantalized me with their inaccessibility while writing my dissertation some years ago, necessitating an elaborate trip deep into the countryside around Bordeaux, and some skulking around the grounds of a monastery deconsecrated during the great wave of *laïcité* in 1905. Seeing these particular murals has been made easier in the past decade: the library is now open to the public, according to *Le guide du routard*.

It is not just the vast scale of these fin-de-siècle decorative painting projects that beguile--Redon's murals cover entire walls and the Stoclet Frieze has a double tree of life spreading its branches behind a vast dining table's seats. It is also the intimacy: these artworks or series of artworks contain private meanings, intended for the private homes of collectors, never put on view to the cold hard traffic of the museum, or on public walls in front of passersby. While museums have moved toward greater accessibility, decorative painting cycles have no fundamental obligation to be accessible to the public. Often viewing them meant knowing someone, and the complex navigation of geographic and social positions to arrive at a particular place. These paintings convey private, even hermetic worlds of meaning.

Rooms painted in decorative cycles by French artists generally have been written about well in books and essays by Deborah Silverman, who equates lush vegetal motifs with a growing fin-de-siècle interest in the unconscious mind and makes a case that a desire to render interiors as shelters to a home's occupants provided a contrast to the harsh effects of the urban life.[2] In fantastic exhibition catalog essays, Gloria Groom has treated interiors by Gauguin and Redon.[3] But what *Édouard Vuillard: Im Louvre--Bilder für eine Basler Villa/In The Louvre--*

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*Paintings for a Basel Villa* gives us is an intimate and perhaps even forensic look into the intricacies of one particular legendary and obscure decorative cycle.

The catalog accompanied an exhibition of the same name, which was on view at the Kunstforum Baloise in Basel (from September 2021 to January 2022), curated by Martin Schwander. The cycle of six paintings was commissioned by Camille Bauer in 1921-1922 but was removed from the home (1955) and the building subsequently demolished. The curator points out that a 2003 catalog notes “few Vuillard specialists have seen [the paintings] in [their] entirety.”<sup>[4]</sup> These six paintings are now spread out across two continents and were last put on view together in 1968, at the Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris in the exhibition *Édouard Vuillard. K. X. Roussel*. One painting is now located at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio. The Bauer home was destroyed and the site (21 Aeschengraben, Basel) is now the corporate headquarters of Baloise, the Swiss insurance company and the sponsor of the Kunstforum putting on the exhibition.

Four paintings represent views of the Louvre and Musée des arts décoratifs. Thus, the paintings themselves are self-referential, examining the role of, for example, paintings in the art museum by representing paintings in the art museum. (The confusion perhaps led most of Vuillard’s friends, including Claude Roger-Marx, to mistakenly assume the cycle of six paintings had been painted for the Basel art museum.) In one of the paintings, we see five paintings. In another, a giant Roman vase. Depicted all around are *cloched* women and hatted men, members of a middle-class public viewing the artworks. In the medieval gallery, a woman and her daughter (or governess and her charge) stand in the light of deconsecrated stained glass. The focus is not so much on the art, but on the people looking at artworks. Two smaller *sopraporte* have still life motifs that reference Chardin’s *Les Attributs des arts* (1765).

Preparatory sketches for the *sopraporte* show the artist drawing window-like paintings on photographs of the building’s vestibule in 1921, to the right and left of doors. The interiors are grand. Vuillard’s interiors, of course, famously look like they are composed of decorative patterns. The claustrophobic rooms of his mother’s dress shop are painted as if papered with cutout Japanese paper; women’s dresses blend into walls of floral chintz. Letters between Maria Bauer and Jacques Salomon describe Vuillard’s project as “décorer votre maison.” Vuillard himself had his retrospective held at the Musée des arts décoratifs (and not, say, the Louvre) in 1938.

Mathias Chivot tells us that the Louvre removed its collections in September 1914 due to the threat of bombings during World War I and only reopened to the public in January 1919. Therefore the Louvre galleries themselves represent a kind of absence in the second half of the decade, just before the paintings were made, and Vuillard’s notes show him returning, ecstatic, to the museum in February 1919, with weekly visits through 1922 (he visited sixteen times in April 1922). Perhaps there is an almost Warburgian desire to remake the French museum in Switzerland in order to save it or preserve it. If the Mnemosyne Atlas was started in 1927, we might even think of the 1920s as an era in which the project of making archives of images and art takes on a particular urgency in the post-World War I moment. (That Vuillard spent World War I at the front, documenting the experience of war alongside Pierre Bonnard and Félix Vallotton, is almost unbelievable.)

The book is beautifully illustrated, and the publication in German and English is nicely designed. In some ways it reminds me of an old issue of *Parkett Magazine*, with its images constantly unfolding over dual-language spreads which seem to deepen the meaning of the artwork and the

text even as they duplicate the essay in a different language. The catalog is printed on a pleasing-to-the-touch matte paper; the illustrations are generous; and the writing, scholarly. There is much of interest here for those who love Vuillard--and the volume provides an almost forensic glimpse into the most private of painting forms, as well as an intriguing analysis of a cycle of paintings about the museum.

Alongside the fascinating sleuthing about provenance and the afterlife of their role in the Bauer home, I would have loved to see an essay that delved into what the paintings depict in depth: spectatorship as it relates to class and gender. More could be made of the role of the viewer as represented by these paintings. Of course, Marcel Duchamp famously reimagined the relationship of viewer to artwork by defining the participatory role of the viewer in 1957 [5], but even in the 1920s you can see the beginnings of a radical reassessment of the viewer. These paintings, despite their location in a private home (and thus, ironically, themselves rarely seen), depict viewing in the public space of the museum in a way that lends itself to a deeper understanding of the changing role of spectator to artwork in the first half of the 1920s.

The frisson of discovery and rediscovery of this sleeper of an exhibition catalog made me wonder about the other decorative painting cycles in private homes as of yet unidentified, perhaps only seen by families or staff of the original individuals commissioning the work--hidden away, waiting for exploration.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Andreas Burckhardt and Thomas von Planta, "Vorwort und Dank"

Martin Schwander, "Édouard Vuillard und sein 'decor bâlios'"

Mathias Chivot, "Grosse Bühne für die Kunst: Édouard Vuillard im Louvre"

Lukas Gloor, "Édouard Vuillards Zyklus *Au Louvre*"

Martin Schwander, "Stilleben als Selbstbildnisse: Zu den beiden Supraporten aus Édouard Vuillards Zyklus *Au Louvre*"

Lukas Gloor and Martin Schwander, "Édouard Vuillards Zyklus *Au Louvre*: Bildtitel, Provenienzen und Ausstellungen"

"Édouard Vuillards Zyklus *Au Louvre*--Tafeln"

Bodo Vischer, "Der Maler und der Dolmetscher: Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Édouard Vuillards Zyklus *Au Louvre*"

Dorothee Huber, "Luxus auf Zeit: Die Villa am Aeschengraben 21"

#### NOTES

[1] *Kuleana* is the Hawaiian word for right or responsibility, which also connotes the social privilege that a particular responsibility may carry.

[2] For the best summary of her argument, see Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[3] See Gloria Groom, "The Late Work," in Douglas W. Druick, ed., *Odilon Redon, Prince of Dreams 1840-1916* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1994), pp. 305-352; and Groom, "Avant et Après: 'All this and All That'" in Gloria Groom, ed., *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 18-25.

[4] "Décor aujourd'hui réputé de Vuillard, mais que peu de ses spécialistes ont vu au complet," in Antoine Salomon, Guy Cogeval, and Mathias Chivot, eds., *Vuillard. Le regarde innombrable. Catalogue critique des peintures et pastels*, 3 vols. (Milan and Paris: Skira, 2003), vol. 3, p. 1388, as quoted in Martin Schwander, "Édouard Vuillard and his 'décor bâlois'" in Schwander, ed., *Édouard Vuillard: In the Louvre - Paintings for a Basel Villa* (Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2022) and requoted (citing Schwander) in the reviewed book on p. 18.

[5] Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *Art News* 56/4 (June-July-August 1957): 28-29.

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