

Édouard Vuillard
The Poetry of the Everyday
Belinda Thompson
Chris Stephens

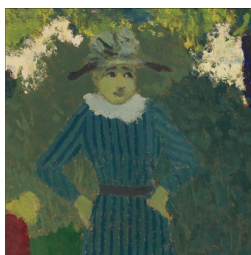
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- Explores Édouard Vuillard’s early career combining intimate subject matter with abstraction by simplifying pictorial elements and observing decorative fabrics and wallpapers

During the 1890s and early 1900s Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) produced a body of work that combines intimate subject matter with abstract form through the simplification of pictorial elements and observation of decorative fabrics and wallpapers. Through these devices he developed an art that is unashamedly decorative and yet always replete with subtle suggestions of deeper meanings. In balancing form and content, psychological drama and abstraction, his pictures are about as close to poetry as any artist’s, and all the more brilliant for their understatement and the near imperceptibility of their craft.

Illustrating many rarely seen paintings from private collections, this book offers a fresh look at the early career of this much-loved artist. Introduced by Chris Stephens, director of the Holburne Museum, and with an original essay by Belinda Thompson.

Belinda Thomson is a freelance art historian and Honorary Professor in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh. A specialist in late 19th-century French painting, particularly Gauguin and the Nabis, she published a monograph on Vuillard in 1988 (Phaidon). In 1991-2 she curated the Vuillard exhibition for the South Bank Centre which was seen in Glasgow, Sheffield and Amsterdam and in 1994 co-curated *Bonnard at le Bosquet*, London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 2010-11 she was lead curator of *Gauguin: Maker of Myth* at the Tate Modern, London, and at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. **Dr Chris Stephens** has been Director of the Holburne Museum since 2017. Prior to that he worked at Tate for over 20 years, as Head of Displays, Tate Britain, for much of that time, and also as Head of Modern British Art. Exhibitions in London and St Ives included *Barbara Hepworth: Centenary* (2003), *Francis Bacon* (2008), *Henry Moore* (2010), *Picasso and Modern British Art* (2012), *Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture for a Modern World* (2015) and *David Hockney* (2017). His book *St Ives: The Art and the Artists* was published by Pavilion in 2018.



Vuillard's Poetry of the Everyday: Questions of Intimism and Taste
Belinda Thomson

1894 was a key year for Édouard Vuillard. He had recently shown small groups of works in various exhibitions, attracting the attention of a wide range of critics. He successfully completed an ambitious decorative scheme, the *Salon Public* Gallery project for the dining room of the businessman and journalist Alexandre Sarrasin.¹ This directly translated onto a larger scale, using the medium of distemper, the practical experiments he had been making on a much smaller scale, using oil on cardboard supports (e.g. nos. 1, 5, 6). Moreover he arrived at certain important conclusions in his theoretical thinking. Although by nature reflective and serious, Vuillard was by no means a propounding theorist like fellow Nabis Maurice Denis and Paul Sérusier.² Throughout his career, he set down his

¹ Opposite: detail from *In the Ark*, The House IIIa, 1891 (cat. 8)



Fig. 2: *In the Ark*, 1891

in law, the painter Ker Xavier Roussel, who since they wed in 1891 had been living under her roof. At the time their marriage, following the loss of a baby and Roussel's rock-bottom inability, was virtually on the rocks. Mme Vuillard decided to terminate the lease and move two floors down to a smaller flat.³ If the proximity and enhanced intimacy created by the four of them living together had a constituting effect on the Roussel marriage, it was also one of the drivers of Vuillard's art. One of the most salient characteristics of Vuillard's homes in the early 1890s, as evidenced by his paintings, is the ubiquity of wallpaper. In *In the Ark's* lease with a *Copie of Caille* (cat. 8) for instance, he presents

the sister, his sister Marie, more or less centrally but defines her shape imperceptibly, the colour of her charcoal dress emerging with the tones of the near black patterned wallpaper behind her. He directs our attention to the much lighter room glimpsed through the open doorway where his mother – reduced to a simple blacky shape – leans herself in the light from the window with some mundane task. Wallpaper patterns sometimes enable us to identify rooms that might otherwise seem distinct, such as the two interiors associated with Marie and Roussel's marriage: The *Chair*, despite its gloomy lighting, features the same red, green and blue-and-black half-wallpaper design as *The Boudoir Chamber* (Fig. 2), where the wall in its most intense height. One might even attempt to identify this paper with an 1878-9 Leroy design (Fig. 3).⁴ Conversely, machine-made

Fig. 3: Manufacture Indes Lévys, machine-printed coloured wallpaper, 1878-9

