

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Absorbing Bonnard's rich range and depth

I have only one quibble with "Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia," opening Saturday, Feb. 6, at the Legion of Honor. I hate the title.

That would seem a very trite thing to say about a well-considered exhibition, engagingly presented, that reveals the French painter to be a master not only of design but also of psychological narrative. But there's my point: It is an exhibition that is much more complex, about the work of an artist far deeper than his reputation (or that title) would suggest. A good number of his many landscape pictures are included at the Legion, but his achievement was in his extraordinary images of people engaged in the small, often dark dramas of life that make up about half the show.

The oft-reinforced cardboard-cutout image of Bonnard (1867-1947) is of a painter who made lovely pictures of



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domestic life and idyllic landscapes; one essay in the voluminous exhibition catalog puts the burden of that characterization on the art historian Charles Terrasse, Bonnard's nephew, who claimed that his uncle "wished to paint only happy things."

If you know anything about
Desmarais continues on E2

Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Saturday, Feb. 6-May 15. \$6-\$10. Legion of Honor, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. www.legionofhonor.famsf.org.

Pierre Bonnard, "Woman With a Cat, or the Demanding Cat" (1912)

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



“Women in the Garden: Woman in Dress With White Dots”



Pierre Bonnard, “The Checkered Blouse” (1892)



Photos by Artists Rights Society / ADAGP, Paris

Pierre Bonnard, “Nude in an Interior” (1912-1914)

Show reveals Bonnard’s true depths

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Bonnard, you probably know that he was a Post-Impressionist who, along with Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis and others, formed an esoteric group calling itself Les Nabis (the Prophets) in the early 1890s. Their work had a strong Art Nouveau mood to it — drawing on nature, poster-graphic, proudly decorative and subdued in color.

Several Bonnard works from that period are included, notably “The Checkered Blouse” (1892), so solidly structured it could almost be mistaken for a Japanese woodblock print, and, from the same year, “Twilight: The Croquet Game,” a large canvas dense with foliage in tones of green with four figures — the artist’s extended family — in patterned garments, flatly painted, looking like fabric swatches stuck to the picture.

Complex individual

But the Legion presentation, put together by scholars at Paris’ Musée d’Orsay, which holds the definitive Bonnard collection, gives us a sense of a far more complex, if not conflicted, human being.

Historically, he was a friend of Odilon Redon and other Symbolists, and a contributor to the development of Alfred Jarry’s famous proto-Dadaist theater work “Ubu Roi.” Artistically, he made works scandalously charged with erotic energy: “Woman Dozing on a Bed” (1899) centers a woozy arrangement of room details and bed-clothes around the dark juncture between a woman’s brazenly spread legs. Like most of

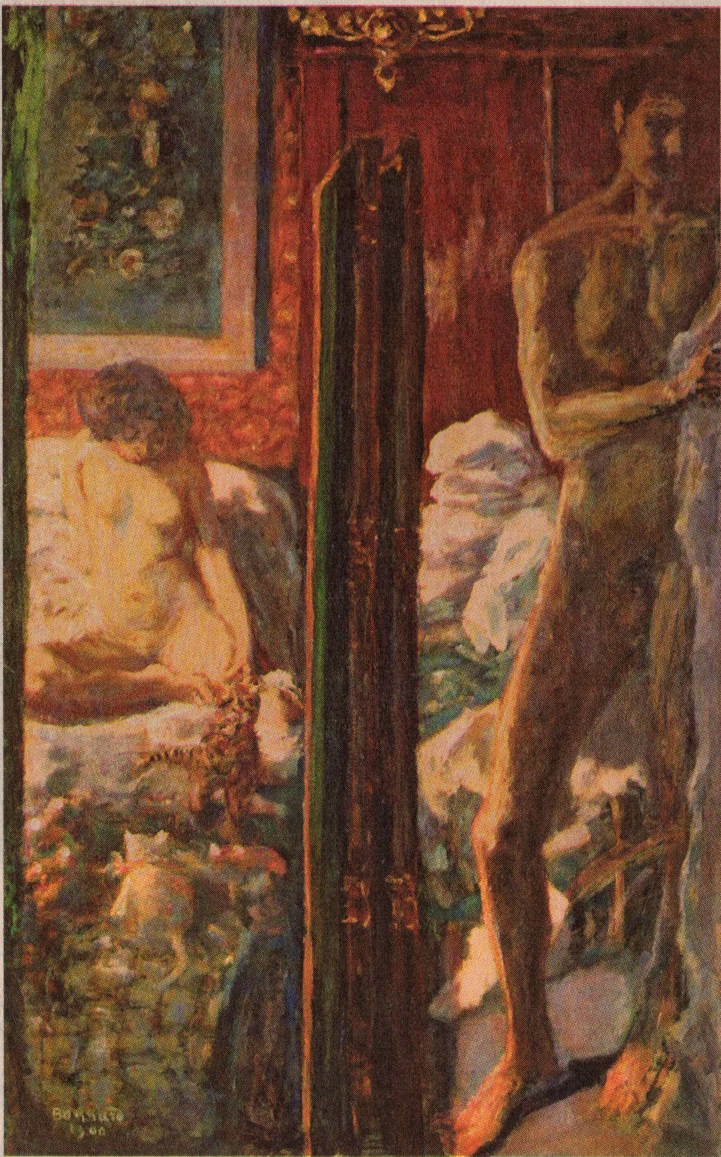
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the nudes in the exhibition, though she is said by scholars to be his girlfriend and later wife, she is anonymized, a scumble of dark paint obscuring her features.

After the breakup of the Nabis later in the 1890s, Bonnard moved on artistically. The influence of those early years never quite dissipated, however, and his work was the better for it. A marvelous puzzle of a picture, “Lunch by the Lamp” (1898), layers forms on top of forms with little attention to Western traditions of perspective, so that a child’s head, a hanging lamp and a mother feeding a baby all combine into a strange new form.

Around 1912-1914, we see the same technique in the National Gallery of Art’s great “Nude in an Interior,” a near-abstract composition — azure and turquoise rectangles against shades of amber and ruby — in which a door frame neatly slices through a female figure, creating a hard, straight edge at one side of the body in contrast to the voluptuous outline on the other.

More than simply formal tricks, these compositional decisions have a narrative, almost novelistic power about them. It’s impossible to guess what the precise story might be, but the image of the nude



Pierre Bonnard, “Man and Woman” (1900)

caught through the doorway has a potency that full-on description would not. Are we peeking? Is she merely incidental, not worthy of our full attention? Is she primping for

us, or in spite of our presence?

“Man and Woman” (1900) relates an even stronger emotional account. A nude couple in the most intimate of settings, yet divided: physically (by a

folding screen) and psychically, each lost in thought, attending to a mundane task. It could simply be a passing moment, or the end of something. The exhibition wall label proposes that it “may allude to the biblical theme of Adam and Eve, representing the moment after the Fall.”

Intentional ambiguity

The more we look, the more we realize that a view of Bonnard as a painter of Arcadia could be based only on an unwise assumption: that he just couldn’t paint a clearly read image. How else to explain the headless human figures, the animals lurking in darkness, the bodies dissipating into their surroundings? Nudes in bathtubs become corpses entombed, a head in shadow a black cinder. Even his self-portraits, presented together on a wall, range over the years from solidly delineated to barely holding their form.

None of this is to say that the show is a downer. There are light moments throughout, giving the whole affair a nice emotional pace (a museum employee told me that a cat owners club had called to ask how many paintings depicted pets — the answer is a lot, and they are witty and delightful). It will attract hordes of visitors, and it should. And they will see an exhibition of the work of a man of great visual intelligence, made of flesh and blood.

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