

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **The Museum of Modern Art**

**PIERRE BONNARD RETROSPECTIVE OPENS THIS MONTH AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

**First In-Depth Survey in New York in More Than 30 Years  
Explores the Complexity and Mystery of Some of this Century's Most  
Beautiful Paintings**

### **Bonnard**

June 21-October 13, 1998

The first retrospective of the work of French painter Pierre Bonnard to be shown in New York since 1964 opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 21, 1998. One of the most enigmatic of the great artists of the twentieth century, Bonnard (1867-1947) is perhaps best known for his extraordinary colors and sensuous nudes. As this comprehensive exhibition makes clear, however, Bonnard is not simply a painter of hedonistic beauty, but one of the great masters of structure and composition, who reconfigured pictorial space to convey complex emotional states.

"On the surface, Bonnard's paintings appear to gently extend the art of the Impressionists. Looked at more closely, they are far more extreme," writes John Elderfield, Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs and Chief Curator at Large, The Museum of Modern Art, in his introduction to the exhibition. "At first sight, their subject matter is solely the behavior of people and the effects of light in scenes from what often looks like an intensely private existence. To spend time in front of these paintings, however, is to see them change. Figures and objects will move in and out of the viewer's attention, as each painting seems to present an analysis of the processes of seeing and remembering."

By focusing on interiors, still lifes, landscapes, and figure paintings, including the famous bath paintings of his enigmatic wife, Marthe, as well as the remarkable self-portraits, this exhibition emphasizes the consistency of Bonnard's preoccupation with the physical as modified by color and light, and shows how he was able to keep reshaping the familiar through compositions of increasing complexity, daring, and originality.

Comprising some 80 works, Bonnard concentrates on the artist's foremost period of innovation, beginning in the mid-1910s. It presents celebrated works from public collections and little-known works in private hands, some of which have never been seen in the United States before. The exhibition also brings together the largest number of Bonnard self-portraits to be shown in one place, concluding with the stark and moving images of the artist's last years.

"Bonnard painted from memory, aided only by small sketches, and the process of making a painting would extend over months, even years," writes Mr. Elderfield. "And he was deeply conscious of the complexities of visual perception: He carefully plotted his paintings, so that what is seen in them depends upon the active participation of the viewer, as happens when we perceive scenes in the world. Bonnard encourages us to

take time over his paintings, to be aware that some things will be hidden in them and that some things in them will be difficult to identify, and to approach them with curiosity, for pleasure, and the desire to understand."

*Bonnard* occupies eight galleries. The first two show the unfolding of Bonnard's art from around 1890 until the late 1920s. The remaining six galleries show his later paintings grouped according to subject matter.

Japanese prints and the work of Paul Gauguin influence early works like *Intimacy* (1891) and *The Croquet Game* (1892), in which Bonnard's fascination with how patterning can be used to hide things in a painting, slowing one's perception of them, is already evident. By 1900 Bonnard's subject matter had become moments of perception--he wanted to convey what it was like to come upon something unexpectedly for the first time. Bonnard surprised the viewer by making things strange: Everyday objects are oddly shaped, of uncertain texture or incredible color, hard to decipher, hidden in unlikely corners or reflected in mirrors, and so on. Having stopped a moment of time, he asks for our participation in unpacking the complexity of detail to be found there.

By 1920, Bonnard's mature style was formed and, while it did change as the years passed, the stylistic changes are finally less important than how Bonnard treated his key subjects--still life, landscape, bathers, interiors, and self-portraits.

Like all of Bonnard's mature works, his still lifes were painted on lengths of canvas tacked to the wall, some of them large enough to accommodate more than one picture. Bonnard would often crop the painted area slightly to square off the work, but he sometimes left raw canvas around the edges, as in *Basket of Fruit Reflected in a Mirror* (1944-46). In either case, he paid particular attention to the edges of a painting, often reserving his most enigmatic or fragmentary imagery for the margins. This is most evident, perhaps, in the *Provençal Jug* of 1930, which shows the hand and arm of an unseen figure on the right.

Bonnard's landscapes form a distinct group within his oeuvre. He made a point of leaving his own garden relatively untended, and his landscape paintings delight in the natural disorder of nature. They are, by far, the densest and most continuously patterned of his works. The range of markings is extraordinary: Dots, lines, bands, patches, scribbles, and streaks of multiple colors configure a strikingly active visual realm, a flat but dynamic map-making that opens into depth beneath the viewer's gaze.

Bonnard's early images of female bathers were unquestionably influenced by the work of Edgar Degas--but eschew Degas's uncomfortably stressful poses for a mixture of frank domestic realism and a note of idealization taken from classical sculpture.

The three late bathtub paintings on view--*Nude in the Bath* (1936), *The Large Bath, Nude* (1937-9), *Nude in the Bath and Small Dog* (1941-6)--are widely considered the culmination of Bonnard's career. Returning to the image of immersed bathing in a 1925 painting, the artist makes what had been, in part, tomblike into something closer to a shrine--suggesting not only mortality but also the commemoration and celebration of things carnal. (In fact, Marthe died in 1942, while *Nude in the Bath and Small Dog* was in progress.) The figure of Marthe--whose likeness appears in some 380 of Bonnard's works--is at once iconic in a grand, distant way and an all-too-proximate fleshy substance, both peacefully floating and

seeming to dissolve. The bathroom tiles form a iridescent screen that glitters and sparkles brilliantly.

Bonnard's interiors are often presented as luminous spaces filled with familiar objects that become more unfamiliar the longer you examine them. The artist was often drawn to the same interior, as if trying to unravel its mystery. MoMA's magnificent *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden (The Breakfast Room)* (1930-1), for example, and *Still Life in Front of the Window* (1931) show the same room at Arcachon, near Bordeaux; *Large Dining Room Overlooking the Garden* (1934-5) and *Table in Front of the Window* (1934-5) depict the same room in a rented villa near Deauville; and *The French Window* (1932) and *The Breakfast Table* (1936) are from the same room in Bonnard's house at Le Cannet.

The most daring of Bonnard's self-portraits make it clear that they are mirrored representations. In most of these late works the subject is transparently Bonnard's own mortality, and in two works, *Portrait of the Painter in a Red Dressing Gown* (1943) and *Self-Portrait* (1945), this is metaphorically expressed by the wartime blackout curtain depicted next to the artist's image. They are among the most poignant self-representations in Western art: querulous apparitions, despairing, frightened, self-effacing.

Bonnard died in January 1947. Some fifteen months later, in May 1948, MoMA opened its first retrospective exhibition of his work; a second was held in 1964. This third Bonnard retrospective at the Museum celebrates a career that ended more than half a century ago but remains as vital and challenging as any in contemporary art.

*Bonnard* is organized by the Tate Gallery, London, in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art. It was curated by Sarah Whitfield, independent Art Historian, for the Tate Gallery, in consultation with John Elderfield and art historian and critic David Sylvester. It is coordinated for and installed at The Museum of Modern Art by Mr. Elderfield, who also contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue, and refined the selection of works for the New York showing.

The exhibition, which remains on view through October 13, 1998, is supported in part by The Starr Foundation. Additional funding is provided by Mrs. Melville Wakeman Hall and Catharine and Jeffrey Soros. The accompanying publication is made possible by a generous grant from the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund. An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Touch monitors are provided by Elo TouchSystems.

*Bonnard* was shown at the Tate Gallery, London (February 12-May 17, 1998) prior to opening at MoMA, its final venue.

#### **PUBLICATION**

*Bonnard*, by Sarah Whitfield and John Elderfield. 270 pages; 273 illustrations (115 in color). Clothbound published in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.,

\$60; paperbound published by The Museum of Modern Art, \$29.95.

#### **ACCOUSTIGUIDE**

John Elderfield, Chief Curator at Large and Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs, The Museum of Modern Art, and Jonathan Crary,

Associate Professor, Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University, are narrators of Pleasures of Seeing, the 45-minute audiotour of the exhibition. They are accompanied by Glenn D. Lowry, Director, The Museum of Modern Art. Audiotours are \$4, members \$3.50. Available in English only.

#### **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

##### **About Bonnard: A Panel Discussion.**

Tuesday, October 6, 1998, 6:30 p.m.

Panelists: Jonathan Crary, Associate Professor, Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University; Jack Flam, Distinguished Professor of Art History, Brooklyn College and the Graduate School, City University of New York; Timothy Hyman, painter and writer; and Wendy Steiner, Richard L. Fisher Professor of English and Chairman, Department of English, University of Pennsylvania. Moderated by John Elderfield.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets: \$8; members \$7; students and seniors \$5; available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, the public may call the Department of Education at 212.708.9781.

#### **BROCHURE**

A brochure, available at the entrance of the *Bonnard* exhibition, offers a room-by-room guide, focusing on one painting in each one of the galleries: Early Works, After Impressionism, Still Life, Landscapes, Bathers, Interiors, Late Bathers, and Self-Portraits. Additionally, it contains a brief chronology and sections on perception and painting process. The brochure was written by Maria Gonzalez, Department of Education.

#### **WEB SITE**

The *Bonnard* exhibition subsite can be accessed from kiosks situated adjacent to the exhibition entrance, as well as through the MoMA Web site ([www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)). The site comprises five sections: Bonnard's Paintings, with images and an analysis of selected works; Perception and Process, which describes Bonnard's working methods, his studio and discusses visual perception as it relates to Bonnard's paintings; a Curatorial Interview; Bonnard's Life, a chronology with numerous documentary photographs; and Related Materials, describing public programs and other ancillary events. This is the first exhibition that will include a kiosk designed and produced by MoMA. The Web site was coordinated by Elaine Cohen, Department of Education.

#### **THE EDWARD JOHN NOBLE EDUCATION CENTER**

An installation in the Museum's Education Center, located on the ground floor, to the west of the Museum's Sculpture Garden, features photographs and eye-witness accounts of Bonnard's painting process. Also included is a blow-up of the painting *The Bathroom* (1932), and the visitor is invited to consider the manner in which light, color, pattern and perception are approached by the artist. The installation texts were provided by Christel Hollevoet, Office of the Chief Curator at Large.

No. 46

[press office](#) [menu](#)

©1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York