

Pierre Bonnard: Love him or loathe him?

What to make of Pierre Bonnard? Picasso loathed him, complaining that what he did wasn't painting, but instead he produced 'a potpourri of indecision'. Matisse though championed Bonnard, calling him 'a rare and courageous painter' that created 'works of the highest quality'. And in their latest blockbuster, *Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory*, Tate Modern has thrown its considerable weight behind Matisse by bringing together 100 of Bonnard's paintings in a chronological overview that spans almost five decades from 1900 to his death in 1947.

One problem with Bonnard is that he isn't easy to categorize. Post-impressionism had run its course but he also remained detached from all the -isms associated with modernism. Despite this, the Tate's aim is to align Bonnard with the latter, not the former, by making the case for Bonnard as an artist of the 20th century artist. To place him firmly in the modernist era, the show starts in earnest in 1912 when Bonnard was in his 40s.

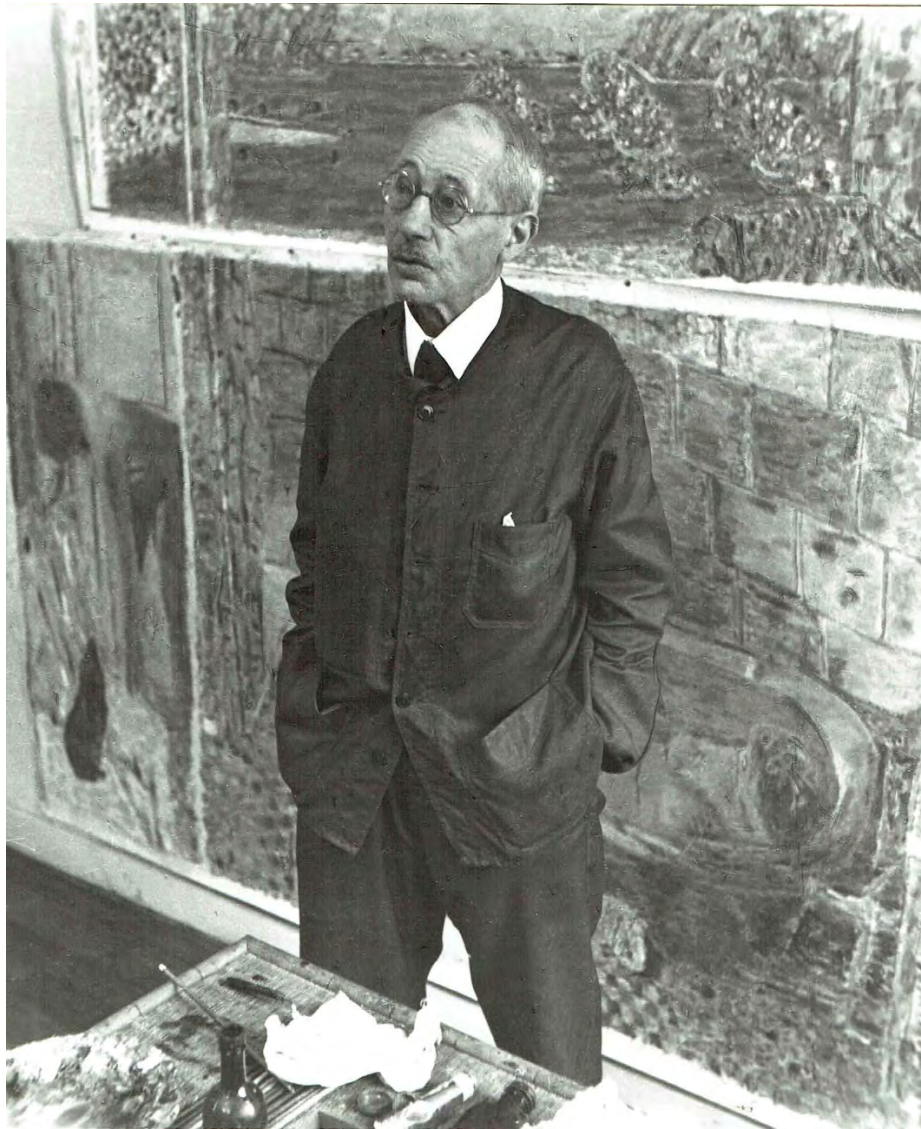
By this time, he had already become a successful graphic artist and the best works in the show demonstrate Bonnard's eye for an arresting image. There are several paintings of reflections in mirrors where we see Bonnard's model looking back at us, not our own image. In other paintings, he makes us look over an object in the foreground to see into the painting, while a recurring technique is to divide the canvas into separate spaces. In *Nude in an Interior* (c1935), the painting is bisected by a doorway through which we can see Marthe, Bonnard's lover, dressing, arms raised to her hair. We're on the outside with Bonnard looking into the intimate space beyond the door.



Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) *Nude in an Interior* c. 1935, Oil paint on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA

Starting the show with Bonnard in his 40s is though the first of many misjudgments, as we get little sense of his development as an artist or the influences on his art as the 1800's gave way to the 20th century. Bonnard's narrow range of subjects – gardens, countryside views, kitchens, Marthe – had all become fixed by this time as had his out-of-focus style.

Instead Tate tries to make the case for Bonnard to be set alongside the modernist greats with two main arguments. The first is that Bonnard was an early adopter of modern inventions, like both still and moving photography. His aim was to paint what he remembered, not what he saw, and he took photographs and made notes before returning to the studio to work. The show features many of these aide-mémoires. There is also a room where several of his paintings have been removed from their frames to replicate Bonnard's way of working on unstretched canvases pinned to the wall.



Andre Ostier *Pierre Bonnard in his studio at Le Cannet* 1941, Indivision A. et A. Ostier

But memory is a less powerful visual stimulus than being present in the moment and Bonnard's pursuit of his elusive recollections became a long and inconclusive process. Infamously, he often worked on paintings for decades, rarely regarding his works as complete. As a result, Bonnard's paintings seem fussy and full of hesitation. He may have worked with modern aids as the Tate asserts, but these seem secondary and do little to give his works definition.

The other basis for the Tate's plea to reconsider Bonnard's importance lies in his use of colour, arguing that innovatively, he explored colour for its own sake. From the early 1920s, Bonnard increasingly left Paris to discover the French countryside and the Mediterranean coast. The greys, browns and muted pinks of the earlier paintings are quickly replaced in the paintings from this period by an explosion of sharply contrasting colours from a palette of reds, blues, purples and especially yellows. Occasionally this works well. The acid yellows of the mimosa tree in '*L'atelier au mimosa*' (1939-46) for instance flood through the window lighting up the inside of Bonnard's studio.



Pierre Bonnard (1867 – 1947) *The Studio with Mimosas* (1939-46), Oil paint on canvas, Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou, Photo (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais

But unlike master colourists such as van Gogh, Bonnard seems unable to express deeper truths through his use of colour. Instead the colours in these works regularly seem hazy and indistinct, fading into one another, rather than yielding a memorable image or a universal insight.

So far then the Tate's arguments are unproven. But there is an even bigger elephant in the room. Could Bonnard even draw? So many things bear little resemblance to what they're meant to be. The Tate links this tentatively with abstraction, but it's difficult to escape the conclusion that Bonnard had severe technical limitations as an artist. The faces of his sitters are crude and their bodies lack structure. Once this suspicion sets in, it becomes fatal – perhaps only the nose of the dog is visible in *The Dining Room, Vernon* (c. 1925) as Bonnard couldn't do dogs? In contrast to say Picasso where there is a definite sense of a tangible object being deconstructed in his works, Bonnard's abstraction (if it can be called that) seems accidental.



Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) *The Dining Room, Vernon* (c. 1925), Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen
Photo © Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Like many recent Tate blockbusters, there's a sense an interesting, smaller show is hidden beneath all the bluster, and for me, this would be about Bonnard's complicated and intense relationship with Marthe de Meligny. They met in 1893 and stayed together for over 40 years despite Bonnard's affairs. Mathe was without doubt his muse – he painted her 384 times - but it was only when they married in 1925, that Bonnard discovered she had lied about her name and her background. I'll write more about this next time.

But for now, if you're a die-hard Bonnard fan, there will be plenty to enjoy here. But if you're not, this is a long and repetitive show, full of misjudgments. There are too many paintings, resulting in lots of chaff and very little wheat. By showing the good and the not-so-good, the exhibition unwittingly casts doubt on Bonnard's competence. The show's narrative is weak – we're left unsure why he was trying to capture memories – and there is little sense of Bonnard's journey as an artist or the influences on his art. The claims made for his modernity are unconvincing and all that colour is so overwhelming, you feel trapped. Bonnard once said: 'You can never have too much yellow'. But believe me, you can and I for one was happy to escape into a grey London afternoon. Perhaps Picasso was right after all!

The C C Land Exhibition PIERRE BONNARD: The Colour of Memory is on at Tate Modern until 6th May 2019

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