

Bonnard and Marthe: A 20th century psychodrama?

If you're a die-hard Bonnard aficionado, you will find plenty to enjoy in *Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory* currently on at Tate Modern. But if you're not a fan of Bonnard's out-of-focus, colour-saturated style, then this exhibition might feel long and meandering. So in case you need something to get you round, my suspicion is that scattered throughout this blockbuster are clues to a shorter, more interesting show about Bonnard the man and his complicated relationships that will still make a visit to the Tate worthwhile.

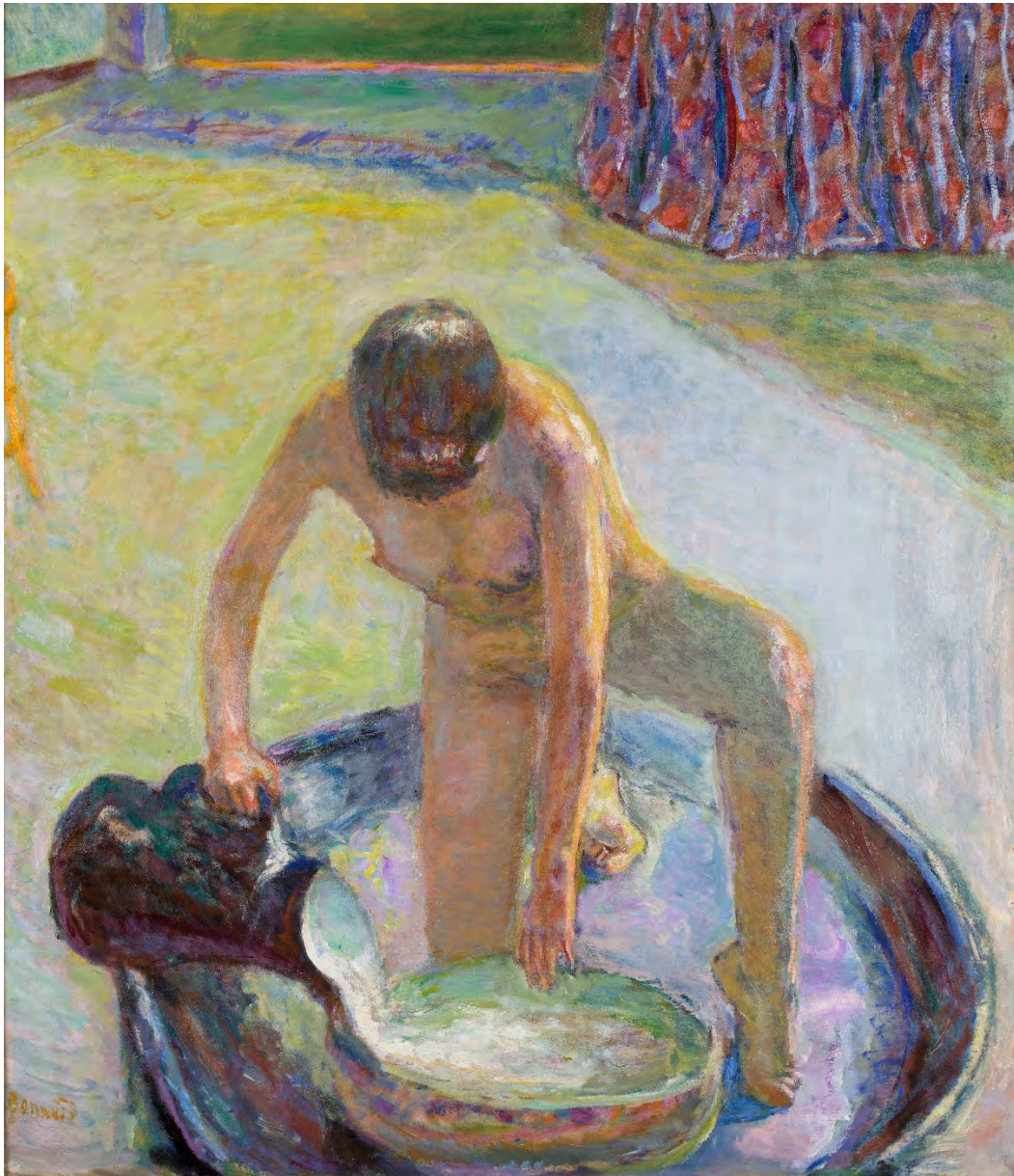
Bonnard is often called a 'painter of happiness' but his domestic arrangements and love life suggest another side to him. The story starts in 1893. Bonnard was still in his 20s but had already found fame as an artist. One day, he met a frail girl in the street who introduced herself as 16-year-old Marthe de Méligny, an orphan from an aristocratic Italian family. Bonnard asked her to model for him and at their very first sitting, he fell both in love and into bed with her.

Soon they were inseparable, bound by reciprocal physical desire. The paintings of Marthe from this period, usually lying naked on their rumbled bed, are borderline obscene. The Tate doesn't feature any of these but there is one post-coital painting that shows things might already not be what they seem. In *Man and Woman* (1900), we see Bonnard and Marthe in their bedroom, where they have again been making love. Marthe has stayed on the bed and is playing with two kittens. But Bonnard has used a folded screen to divide the canvas in half and has placed himself in the shadows behind the screen. The effect of this is oddly ambivalent. Bonnard is separate, observing her, perhaps uncomfortable with her proximity, while we feel like we have opened a wrong door and intruded on an awkward moment.



Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) *Man and Woman (L'Homme et la femme)* 1900, Oil paint on canvas, Paris, Musée d'Orsay Photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Patrice Schmidt

The couple rented a modest studio in Paris and Bonnard became ever more captivated by Marthe. For him, the way Marthe moved, her posture, her presence in the space they shared, everything about her was fascinating, and Bonnard painted her constantly. Marthe's health though was not strong. It's not clear whether she suffered from a physical illness – TB and asthma have been suggested – or a psychological one. Bathing, sometimes two or three times a day, though relieved her symptoms, and gave Bonnard plenty of opportunity to watch Marthe naked in the bath, toweling herself dry, and dressing before he later captured these memories in paint.

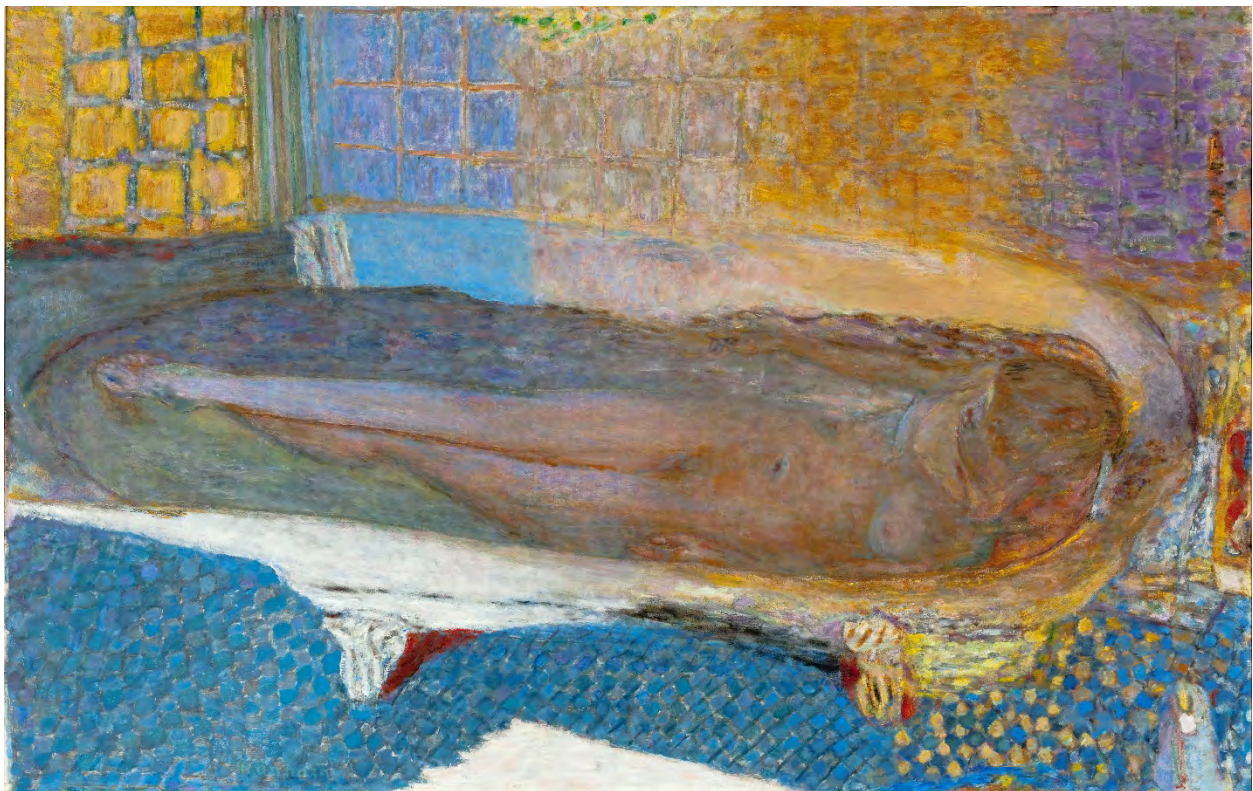


Pierre Bonnard (1867 – 1947) *Nude Crouching in the Tub* (1918), Oil paint on canvas, Paris, Musée d'Orsay Photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Patrice Schmidt

As the years passed, Marthe's neurosis worsened until she was reluctant to leave the house. Bonnard began to travel alone and in the south of France in 1918 when already over 50, he met Renée Montchaty. As before, he asked her to pose for him and soon they were having an affair. Bonnard had had affairs before, but this was different. He began to live openly with Renée but without separating from Marthe. For several years, the three formed an unlikely ménage à trios. Then in 1921 on a trip to Rome, Bonnard asked Renée to marry him. It's not clear what happened next; perhaps Bonnard realised that the thirty years with Marthe were more important to him than the three with Renée. But he jilted Renée and in August 1925, married Marthe. A month later, Renée killed herself.

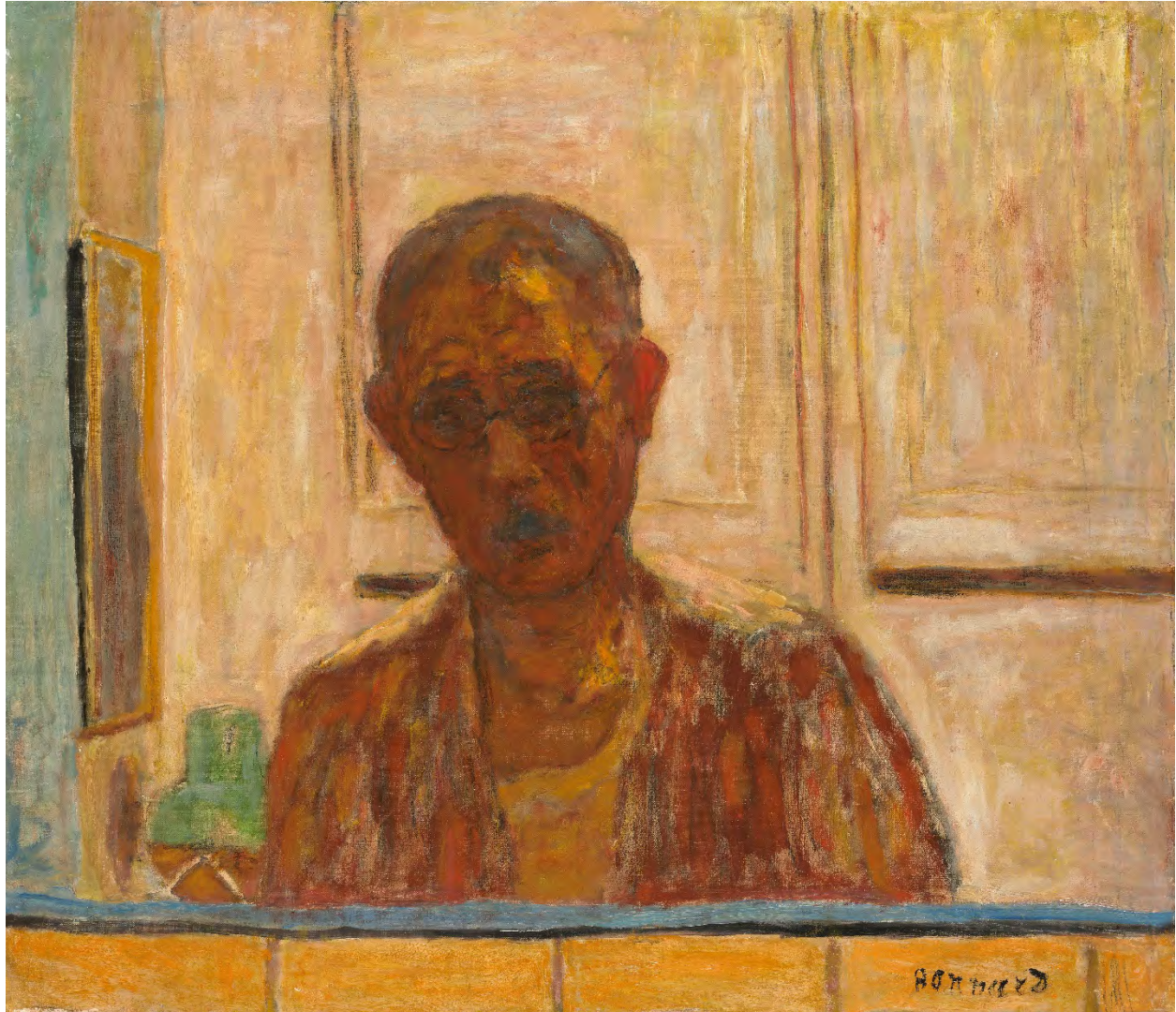
But there's another twist to this story, because at their wedding, Bonnard found out that for those thirty years, Marthe had been lying to him. Eight years older than he believed, Marthe the orphan from an aristocratic Italian family was in fact Maria Boursin, the daughter of a carpenter from rural France.

Perhaps he was in love with the idea of her and not with the actual Marthe, and their life together carried on. Her health though continued to deteriorate, isolating them both. In 1930, Bonnard wrote 'I live a very secluded life ... obliged to avoid all contact with people'. The eroticism of the early paintings and the easy domesticity of their middle years drain away in the paintings of Marthe. In *Nude in a Bath* (1936-8), the light shimmers around her in shades of gold and purple, but Marthe now lies full length in the bath. It has become her sarcophagus, enclosing her cool, boneless body, while we look down on her with Bonnard, distant and separate.



Pierre Bonnard (1867 – 1947) *Nude in the Bath (Nu dans le bain)* (1936-8), Oil paint on canvas, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris/ Roger-Viollet

The isolation and his wife's ill health took its toll on Bonnard. While Marthe appears endlessly, Bonnard rarely painted himself, but in a series of anguished self-portraits, we now see Bonnard red-tinted and hollow-eyed. For all the supposed serenity of his art, here the 'painter of happiness' looks lonely, trapped and tormented. When Marthe died in 1942, Bonnard was a broken man, who lived like a ghost according to Cartier-Bresson the photographer until his own death in 1947.



Pierre Bonnard (1867 – 1947) *Self Portrait* (c.1938), Oil paint on Canvas, Private Collection

We'll never really know the true nature of their relationship and there's a danger here of going in for amateur psychoanalysis. But I see them as a pair of obsessives – he obsessed with her, she obsessed with herself. Each betrayed the other. Bonnard had affairs, while Marthe lied about her real name and background for more than 30 years. But these infidelities weren't enough to break the bond of mutual dependence that held them together. Only death separated them.

The Tate might argue unconvincingly that Bonnard's incorporation of photography in his art and his use of colour make him a modernist artist, but for me, the real 20th century story of this exhibition lies in the

dark psychodrama of Bonnard and Marthe. You have to search for it, but it's there in the show, twisting and turning beneath all the sunlit views and apparent domestic bliss.

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

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