What is it about the work of Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) that triggers such varied responses? Henri Matisse called him “one of the greatest painters among us” and valued his friendship. Pablo Picasso denied that what Bonnard did was even painting, describing his work as “a potpourri of indecision.” Duncan Phillips, the founder of the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., thought he was “the greatest living painter” when he assembled his stellar collection of Bonnards, making the Phillips just about the only place in the United States where one could see a substantial number of works, most of which, including the most important, the museum inexplicably does not exhibit at present. Linda Nochlin admitted to admiring what she called “the pictorial rhetoric” of Bonnard’s bathers at the same time that she claimed that “as a woman who is a feminist,” she was repelled by them. These days, Peter Doig is a fan, interested in what he sees as the underlying melancholy of Bonnard’s images and his creation of what Doig calls “memory space,” while John Gibbons, the London-based Irish sculptor, is unsatisfied by the structure of Bonnard’s paintings, finding the relationship of interior events to the shape and proportion of the canvas to be insufficiently considered. Yet the British critic David Sylvester singled out as part of Bonnard’s originality and strength the way he related everything in the picture to an implied cardo and decumanus crossing the center of his compositions. And so on.

Happily, there have been many opportunities to test these assessments in what seems to be a steady stream of ambitious traveling exhibitions. My own bookshelf includes fairly hefty catalogues from shows seen between 1984 and 2017 at the Centre Georges Pompidou; the Phillips; the Dallas Museum of Art; Tate Gallery; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Denver Art Museum; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the Musée National des Beaux-Arts, Québec, Canada. And that’s not to mention shows for which I don’t have catalogues and a traveling exhibition devoted to the decorative mural cycles conceived by Bonnard and his closest colleagues, seen in Chicago and New York some years ago.

Now, at Tate Modern, the first major survey of the artist seen in the United Kingdom in more than two decades, “The C. C. Land Exhibition: Bonnard: The Colour of Memory,” attempts to present
him from a fresh point of view.\(^1\) (That strange sequence is the show’s official title; as is apparently standard practice at Tate, the sponsor of the exhibition is perceived as more important than the subject and gets top billing.) A joint project of the Tate and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, “Bonnard: The Colour of Memory” is organized by Matthew Gale, the museum’s Head of Displays, with Helen O’Malley and Juliette Rizzi, Assistant Curators. The exhibition is large—more than eighty canvases, plus some of those mysterious black-and-white pencil drawings that always seem full of color, and a few watercolors—accompanied by a generous selection of photographs, including many taken by Bonnard and his wife, Marthe, of each other, often in the nude, as well as snapshots of summer idylls with friends, Bonnard’s sister, and her family. There is also a home movie of Bonnard relaxing with friends and photographs recording his studio, with and without the artist at work, by Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Ostier.

The theme of the exhibition is the seamless connection between Bonnard’s daily experience and his paintings—hence all the contextualizing photographs, which, together with the wall texts, suggest that we should be thinking about the exhibition’s landscapes, interiors, and nudes at their toilette mainly in relation to the quotidian domesticity of the painter and his wife. Of course, on some level, these paintings are about just that. Spend some time with Bonnard and you soon come to recognize the layout of his home, through the relationships of windows and doors, along with the placement of radiators, alluded to in the interiors. We become familiar with the views out the windows, itemize the dishes and pitchers on the tables, and recognize articles of clothing. We note the furniture in the rather claustrophobic, modest rooms. We find the cats and the dachshund snuggled into chairs, and we certainly recognize Marthe, long-legged, slim, and ageless, as she bathes and dries herself. It’s all so completely convincing and so evocative of day-to-day, unremarkable living, admittedly in idyllic places, that we could easily believe that Bonnard was simply chronicling his life, albeit doing so in terms of brilliantly deployed, seductive hues, inventive structure, and unexpected viewpoints.

The exhibition encourages this kind of thinking from the start. In the first gallery, we encounter the sensuous, frankly autobiographical _Man and Woman_ (1900, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), a dim, fin-de-siècle interior, with a rangy male nude standing to one side and a female nude seated on the bed and playing with kittens—protagonists who are recognizably Bonnard and Marthe, to the initiated. At first encounter, the painting seems an unabashed celebration of gratified desire, but what about the dark screen that divides the painting and separates the two figures? Further complications are hinted at by another canvas in this first section, _Young Women in the Garden_ (1921–23/1945–46, Private collection). Included, perhaps, to demonstrate Bonnard’s habit of reworking paintings over an extended period, the painting is also a window into his life. The dark-haired woman with the fashionable bob, barely visible in the lower right corner, is emblematic of Marthe. The glowing blonde who dominates the picture clearly refers to Renée Monchaty, a young aspiring artist whom Bonnard met in 1918. She posed for him, and they seem to have had an intense relationship. Despite his long connection with Marthe, Bonnard is said to have proposed marriage to Monchaty. But after he and Marthe married in 1925, Monchaty committed suicide. Bonnard’s return to working on _Young Women in the Garden_, in 1945, three years after Marthe’s
death, makes it tempting to read the painting as a coded memorial.
Fortunately, we are also reminded that Bonnard habitually worked from memory, an important fact that, it is to be hoped, will encourage less scrutiny of the paintings for clues to actuality and more attention to the artist’s extraordinary transformation of the banal into the formally—and often emotionally—dazzling. The exhibition includes many splendid works, from the very beginning of Bonnard’s mature canvases to his last years, brought together from a wide range of international sources. The earlier paintings include such standouts as *Mirror above a Washstand* (1908, Pushkin Museum, Moscow) with its combination of patterns and geometry; its subdued blues, off-whites, and grays; and its images within images: a half-hidden, seated woman reflected in the mirror turns to us, while an abruptly cropped nude bather turns her back. The equally notable *Dining Room in the Country* (1913, Minneapolis Institute of Art)—as glowing and warm, with its reds and oranges, as *Mirror above a Washstand* is cool—uses the crisp verticals of an open door and a window to frame a landscape view in a similar play of near and far; the curve of a table with a white cloth anchors everything, including the woman in red leaning in the window. The theme of compressed, disparate elements reaches a climax in *The Mantelpiece* (1916, Private collection), in which we glimpse the bare, reflected torso of a creamy-skinned young woman against a painting of a tawny reclining nude, with everything held in place by the pale rosy marble of the mantelpiece and punctuated by a random assortment of intensely colored objects. The late works include the luminous *Studio with Mimosa* (1939–46, Centre Pompidou, Paris) with its explosion of acid yellow and distant blue sea, disciplined by the grid of the window and a rose wall. And then there are those late nude bathers, reclining in the tub or sometimes dramatically cropped by their architectural settings and almost overwhelmed by the reverberations of the patterns and the saturated colors that surround them, along with the series of haunting, spectral self-portraits, among other treats.

Paintings such as these are reason enough to spend time at the show, yet it’s difficult not to feel that the works on view have been chosen to illustrate what the accompanying texts refer to as Bonnard’s “private world,” rather than to bear witness to his achievement as a painter. There’s even an effort to give a sense of how the works looked when they were in Bonnard’s studio, an attempt to reconstruct the well-documented fact that he worked on unstretched canvases, tacked to the wall. Bonnard explained this by saying that he didn’t like standard-size canvases, while the wall texts suggest that this made the paintings easier to transport when he moved, as he often did, between Normandy and the south of France. There’s a photograph of Bonnard standing in front of a wall of canvases, and five major works from 1925 have been unframed and hung in close proximity to suggest how these works looked in the studio. It’s an interesting idea, but the result falls short of being truly illuminating.
Given the number of wonderful paintings in “Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory,” it seems positively churlish to complain about the selection, but it’s impossible to overlook the inclusion of less-than-stellar works whose presence seems dictated by the demands of an imposed narrative rather than by aesthetics. Take, for example, two deservedly little-known, undistinguished canvases relating to World War I: one showing a village in ruins with a row of soldiers, painted in 1917, when Bonnard, too old for active service, was a non-combatant artist sent to record the effects of the war; the other provoked by Fourteenth of July celebrations in 1918. The two paintings, we learn, prove that, far from being reclusive, Bonnard was aware of the world around him. How could he not have been? That’s hardly news to anyone who has read the letters he and Matisse exchanged during World War II, when restrictions on travel made studio visits nearly impossible and the combination of the Nazi occupation and the Vichy government filled daily life with anxiety. Similarly, the less-than-riveting *Piazza del Popolo, Rome* (1922, Private collection) appears to have been chosen because Bonnard and Monchaty spent two weeks in the city in 1921, visiting one of Bonnard’s relatives, apparently with Marthe’s full knowledge. Happily, many of the paintings based on landscapes visible from Bonnard’s homes in Normandy and the south of France or at his mother’s home in the north require no special pleading.

The more acute problem with the exhibition is its organization. Because the emphasis is on how Bonnard’s work reflected the events (or non-events) of his life, the show is organized chronologically and concentrates on the gardens and interiors of his homes, on still lifes, and on bathers, with his pitiless self-portraits adding some seasoning in his last years. Each gallery deals with a slightly different period but contains a very similar selection of subjects, which makes it difficult to grasp Bonnard’s evolution or to appreciate fully the various ways he approached the pictorial ideas to which he returned over the years. As a result, the show can seem repetitive rather than revelatory. There has been an effort to vary the rhythms with the inclusion of
photographs and, every once in a while, a group of thematically related images. But for the most part, it is difficult to grasp the differences between paintings of closely related subjects made at different times.

Pierre Bonnard, Nude in the Bath, 1936–38, Oil on canvas, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Still, given the number of outstanding works in the exhibition, it seems ungracious to complain. It takes some effort to track the evolution of Bonnard’s repeated theme of the bathing nude, in and out of the tub, for example, but if we concentrate, it can be done. We can savor the Tate’s own rather small, audaciously cropped Nude in the Bath (1925), with its tilted viewpoint and its fragment of a figure in a dressing gown striding towards the tub, where we see only the extended legs of the bather. With some effort, we can remember this painting when, several rooms later, we come upon the well-known Nude in the Bath (1936, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris), with its aerial view and its flickering pattern of violet and gold tiles dissolving into an all-over pattern. If we keep these images in mind, then the delightful In the Bathroom (ca. 1940, Private collection) seems even more witty—a bather’s-eye view from the tub. Happily, there are other places in the installation where related works are in closer proximity—the haunting self-portraits that Bonnard painted in the 1930s, for example, images notable for their ruthless self-scrutiny and the unshakeable impression that they were inspired by the artist’s reflection in a modest-size bathroom mirror. These fierce, subdued representations are the antithesis of the voluptuous images of Marthe, the never-aging odalisque reclining in her bath. Spend some time with the self-portraits, and even the most sun-dappled views out the window start taking on a flavor of transience and melancholy. No wonder opinions on Bonnard vary so greatly. Even for those of us wholeheartedly on the plus side, he remains a mysterious and elusive artist, the author of paintings at once seductive, joyous, and melancholy—impossible as that might seem. That’s probably why he remains so fascinating, and probably why he and Matisse got on so well. But that’s another matter.

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