‘Un Sanctuaire Inviolable’?: Domesticity and the Interior in Édouard Vuillard’s Work of the 1890’s

Francesca A. Berry

University College London

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Abstract

Édouard Vuillard’s work of the 1890’s is categorised under the art historical rubric of *Intimisme*. It is a term deployed as the means to describe a particular mode and style of painting the domestic interior that has increasingly been identified with Vuillard’s work of this period. As the term *Intimisme* has developed into a self-perpetuating art historical category for Vuillard’s early paintings of his ‘intimates’, located in the domestic spaces they inhabited, its semantic relation to the word *intimacy* has been exploited in the drive to construct a narrative of the artist’s privileged, yet objective, identification with his subjects. The employment of an alternative, historically contingent, model of artistic agency which is rooted in the theoretical understanding of Vuillard as a symptomatic psycho-social subject serves to problematise the enduring characterisation of the artist as a coherent and fully intentional author. This study also argues for the historical inaccuracy of the Vuillard narrative in its refusal to acknowledge the extent to which the asymmetrical distribution of gender relations according to the biological laws of sexual difference determined and defined the artistic subject’s relation to all aspects of contemporary social and spatial organisation. This imbalance is redressed with reference to an historically contingent analysis of the paintings’ ideological function in relation to the critical reception that initially greeted their public exhibition and a range of pertinent concepts, including those of ‘intimacy’, ‘the interior’ and ‘domesticity’. Issues such as the pictorial representability of women’s labour, the competing fin-de-siècle notions of the decorative, a son’s repetitive representation of his mother and the interior as a valid metaphor for feminine subjectivity are discussed as part of this study’s timely re-evaluation of *Intimisme* and its capacity to penetrate the ‘sanctuaire inviolable’ of the *foyer domestique*. 
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Introduction

"Le foyer domestique est un sanctuaire inviolable que nul souffle impur ne doit souiller...La rue est la place appartiennent aux hommes, le foyer domestique est à la femme."¹

In the discourses of knowledge and power of early Third Republic France material, symbolic and imaginary space was demarcated and ascribed meaning in accordance with the biological laws of sexual difference. No ideological gendering of space was more pervasive, more integral to the hierarchical organisation of contemporary bourgeois society, than the separation of the spheres of public and private life into respectively masculine and feminine domains. In a manner equivalent to the scientific and social construction of the gendered body, the spaces of masculinity and femininity and the boundaries that separated them were regulated and policed, each charged with the need to display the visible signs of difference. According to the Larousse Dictionnaire du dix-neuvième siècle femininity defines and is, in turn, defined by the private arena of the foyer domestique. In dialectical relation, masculinity defines and is similarly defined by, the public arena of the street where, in the familiar narrative of Baudelaire’s flâneur, he sets up ‘...house in the heart of the multitude’ ² Such was the ideological investment in the gendered division of space that to disturb this biologically determined heterosocial balance was to threaten the entire social and sexual order. This was an anxiety clearly manifested in the metaphorical language of sexual purity and unsolicited sexual aggression that pervades and conveys the bifurcated logic of the Larousse dictionary’s reference to the ‘sanctuaire inviolable’ of the foyer domestique.

To deny, however, that men occupied domestic space and invariably did so with women, is to deny a significant aspect of modern existence. Just as many (predominantly working-class) women necessarily defied the strictures of mid century bourgeois ideology in order to work in public space, so men necessarily inhabited

¹ Larousse, Dictionnaire du dix-neuvième siècle, 17 vols., 1866-90, p. 690.
private space. Indeed, as a result of its feminine identification and the enduring characterisation of women as the natural guardians of tradition, the domestic interior was valued as a sanctuary for the protection and maintenance of sexual difference in a world of increasingly fugitive economic, social and sexual relations. Though regular inhabitants of the same or equivalent domestic space, men and women necessarily approached the concept of the domestic interior from radically different subject positions. The dictionary's metaphor of the 'sanctuaire inviolable' suggests that the dominant perception of the *foyer domestique* was normatively male. For this definition presumes a subject position that is both physically and psychically capable of imagining the domestic interior in the terms of a refuge, a place to return or escape to and as such, a space viewed from elsewhere.

As much as the gendered organisation of social relations was produced and reproduced in the language systems of verbal discourse, so a survey of contemporary modern life painting (a survey that will necessarily generalise) suggests that sexual difference was similarly inscribed in the sign systems of visual representation. By mapping the gendered spaces that feature in the work of artists associated with the Impressionist group, Griselda Pollock has demonstrated the extent to which an iconography of domesticity and the bourgeois family may be identified with the work of women artists. To claim this is not to essentialise women's artistic practice but to acknowledge how powerful social, institutional and even physical restrictions presented the woman artist with a different, often marginal, experience of modernity that may be reproduced in the formal and iconographic properties of their work. When the theme of the domestic interior does operate as a significant subject for male artistic practice, the image tends, nonetheless, to secure an implicitly masculine subject and viewing position. In the notable, though in many ways exceptional case of Gustave Caillebotte, for example, the representation of the domestic interior tends either to critique the repressive strictures of *haut-bourgeois* familial rituals [fig. 10] or to present the interior as a site from which to contemplate and prepare for one's rightful re-acquisition of the public space of the street [fig. 18].

As its title suggests, however, *Intimisme* has been conceived as a late nineteenth-century French style and mode of painting the domestic interior that purported to dismantle the boundaries of gendered artistic practice. Now commonly identified with

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the work of the Nabi artists Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) and more particularly, Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940), the latter's small 1890's paintings seemingly afford the viewer an intimate encounter with the fin-de-siècle urban interior and its occupants that disregards the strictures of gendered space. With their sketchily delineated female figures engaged in routine tasks in shallow, self-contained interiors, where the distinctions between figure, object and ground are registered merely as contrasts of colour and pattern, these small paintings or tableautins appear to mobilise a formal rhetoric of 'the intimate'. Previously deployed as a term to describe a particular lineage of French genre painting that included the work of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and Jean-François Millet, Intimisme has more recently developed into a self-perpetuating art historical category for Vuillard’s early paintings of his family and friends, or ‘intimates’, located in the domestic spaces they inhabited. In the process, Intimisme’s semantic relation to the word ‘intimacy’ has been fully exploited in the drive to construct a narrative of the artist’s empathetic identification with his subjects.

According to the art historical literature concerning Vuillard, the artist unproblematically traversed the boundaries that regulated gendered space and artistic practice. Indeed, much of the Vuillard literature implicitly regards the artist’s gender as a guarantee of Intimisme’s emotive yet privileged and objective access to its subject. The art historical characterisation of Vuillard as Intimiste is not, however, constructed upon the basis of a critical understanding of contemporary social relations, as the concept of sexual difference is largely absent from these texts. It is true that, during the 1890’s, Vuillard was working in a period of increasingly fluid social and sexual relations. As the bourgeois femme nouvelle laid, at least symbolic, claim to the right to pursue non-domestic interests in the public sphere, so the private interior increasingly functioned as a valid subject for (male) scientific, sociological, literary and artistic inquiry. Several recent art historical studies of Vuillard’s work have seized upon such texts as Debora Silverman’s 1989 study of the relationship between the fin-de-siècle cultural phenomenon of ‘the retreat to the interior’ and concurrent neuro-psychological developments in the theory of the mind as justification for a certain reading of Intimisme as an intimate psychological encounter with the interior, from which the niggling problem of sexual difference has been ejected.4 It is not Silverman’s important text that

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4 For the published version of her 1983 doctoral thesis see D. Silverman, Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France, 1989, pp. 75-106.
is problematic in this instance, but the too easily assumed application of its evidence to Vuillard, his work and the concept of Intimisme.\textsuperscript{5} The art historical Vuillard narrative will be studied in more detail in the first chapter, which traces the developing ossification of Intimisme into a self-perpetuating art historical category. Without pre-empting that critique, it is important to highlight the tendency of the art historical literature to avoid certain critical ways of thinking and writing about the artist and his work. This study takes issue with the relegation of gender and the issue of gendered space in particular, to a minor, if not derisory, consideration of even the most recent art historical texts. It will be argued that the concept of sexual difference is integral to both the analysis and significance of these paintings. So too is an analysis and interpretation of the critical reception that accompanied the original moment of their public exhibition and a concomitant understanding of art’s ideological function, its capacity to both reproduce and resist dominant relations of power. There is, therefore, an insistent timeliness to this study, which is rooted in its commitment both to critically review the Vuillard narrative to date and to analyse the latter’s practice in the light of socio-historical and feminist re-evaluations of the relationship between art, artistic practice and gendered space.

It is the political, theoretical and methodological model provided by feminist art history that constitutes the driving force for this study and it is feminist art history, not the traditional Vuillard narrative, that will coax the artist and his work out of the shadows and into the spotlight of critical art history. As well as providing a re-vitalised account of Vuillard’s practice, this is a text that self-consciously enacts a return to the broad historical period and fundamental issues on which feminist art history originally cut its teeth. It was to the neglected work of late nineteenth-century vanguard women artists such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt and the inscription of sexual difference in the representational systems of the period that feminist art historians initially looked in order to provide a critical analysis of women’s relation to the dominant narratives of modernity and modernist painting.\textsuperscript{6} The issue of an asymmetrically distributed gender


\textsuperscript{6} For reasons of brevity it is not possible to detail the wealth of feminist art historical literature concerning mid to late nineteenth-century French art. It is important, however, to acknowledge the significant work of, amongst others, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Kathleen Adler, Tamar Garb, Anne Higonnet, Tag Gronberg and Abigail Solomon-Godeau.
relation to social, institutional, discursive, pictorial, psychic and many other material, symbolic and imaginary forms of historical space was central to these texts. At the core, however, was an understanding of how the ideological division of public and private space according to biological sexual difference determined and defined the gendered subject’s relation to all aspects of social organisation. At the same time, however, feminist art historians acted to deconstruct the hardened logic of binary oppositions that underpinned historical systems of knowledge and power in order to enact readings that would enable a more fluid and complex model of social and spatial relations. More than this, feminist art history recognised in the ongoing inability of modernist narratives to account for women’s artistic practice, the enduring significance of the ideological model of separate spheres that exclusively identified modernity with public urban space and therefore, male artistic practice. In her previously cited polemical essay of 1988 ‘Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity’, Griselda Pollock argued for a revised geographical and spatial model for modernity that would also recognise its manifestation in the ‘interstitial’ spaces of the city. Though still predominantly public, these ‘interstitial’ spaces were nonetheless, places ‘...where class and gender interface in critical ways, in that they are spaces of sexual exchange.’ In an essay concerning Berthe Morisot, Kathleen Adler developed this spatial model whilst proposing a more nuanced and site specific understanding of women’s artistic practice. Adler argued for the historical inaccuracy of the exclusive identification of modernity with public urban or even ‘interstitial’ space, to the detriment of private and predominantly feminine space in the form of the bourgeois suburb and domestic interior. Adler claimed that whilst Morisot’s experience and depiction of modernity was different from that of her male counterparts, in that it failed even to acknowledge the urban or ‘interstitial’ spaces of modernity, it was no less modern, for the suburb and domestic interior were sites of equally complex and shifting economic, social and sexual relations.

It is the findings of these texts, not least their capacity to identify modernity and modern experience in previously neglected spaces which, together with an understanding of the specific conditions of his practice, demand questions of Vuillard’s work. For a male artist, Vuillard’s practice appears to share several unusual affiliations with that of contemporary women artists, such as Morisot and Cassatt. As with these artists,

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Vuillard painted predominantly female figures in ideologically feminine spaces, drawing his subjects, in the 1890’s at least, from his immediate family and circle of close friends, located in the types of domestic interiors they inhabited and frequented. Similarly, Vuillard’s work has been largely absent from, or merely a stylistic footnote to, orthodox and revisionist histories of modernist painting. The reasons for this occlusion vary, though it may be argued that the unusual conditions of Vuillard’s practice and subject matter tend to undermine the dominant narrative of the virile avant-garde artist. These initial parallels between Vuillard’s and women’s artistic practice compel us to consider whether it is possible or even valid to apply the theoretical and methodological premises of feminist art historical analysis to a male subject? Would, for example, the pictorial inscription of Vuillard’s, at least, ideological exclusion from feminine space simply operate in reverse to that defined for women’s artistic practice vis-à-vis ideologically masculine space? How, moreover, does Vuillard’s practice respond to the ambiguities of a subject matter that is ideologically attributed to the feminine yet predominantly defined according to male perception? Was Vuillard’s work able to traverse the boundaries of gendered space and artistic practice in order to penetrate the ‘sanctuaire inviolable’ of the foyer domestique or did it necessarily manifest the symptoms of an escapist fantasy of a space viewed from elsewhere?

Though taking as its subject a single artist, Édouard Vuillard, this text is not intended to function as a monograph, indeed it takes as its premise a critique of the monographic studies that have tended to dominate the Vuillard literature. In accordance with structuralist and post-structuralist theories of authorship and the ‘author-function’ this study refutes the biographical production of Vuillard as a coherent subject that stands outside his work, the text, in direct and fully intentional causal relation to it. Simultaneously, however, socio-historical analysis has realised the need to retain some notion of the artist as an historical agent, produced in and by language and discourse and thereby ideologically positioned with regard to social relations of power, including those of class, gender and race. In relation to this, Vuillard’s work is posited as a series of texts located within an historical system of representation. The formal and iconographic

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properties of these paintings are dependent for significance upon the signs currently circulating within the representational field. Influenced by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminist theory and art history has further argued, as Griselda Pollock does, that ‘...the patterns of themes and syntaxes we recognise in a series of texts, and define by an author name, can be theorised as simultaneously particular and social through psychoanalytical notions of the history of the subject.’ As well as functioning within an historically identifiable system of representation, Vuillard’s paintings are the product of both a symptomatic social and psychic agent, a gendered and speaking subject who is simultaneously produced by and split between conscious and unconscious drives, desires, fantasies and anxieties. In this instance, the monograph becomes a case-study in the Freudian mould, a complex and non-linear account of subjectivity and historical agency that aims to identify ‘...the discursive frameworks in which it is possible to conjecture about strategies and behaviours of artists or writers.’ This is an approach that is particularly pertinent, even critical to, the analysis of Vuillard’s practice. Whilst it is important to consider these works according to the conditions of their original exhibition, that is as genre paintings, it is impossible to ignore their capacity to function as informal portraits of the artist’s family. As well as raising issues regarding the relationship between genre painting, portraiture and the interior in this period, Vuillard’s work of the 1890’s poses methodological problems for art historical analysis. By tempting the art historian to walk an interpretational tightrope between the representation of the social and the personal, Vuillard’s practice inadvertently tests the possibilities of a simultaneously psychoanalytical and socio-historical approach.

A number of key themes will have emerged as the subject for this study, not least the fin-de-siècle relationship between gendered artistic practice and gendered space. As previously suggested, this study begins by analysing the traditional Vuillard narrative with reference to the development of Intimisme as an art historical category. Having argued for the historical inadequacy of this account, the first chapter proposes an alternative mode of analysis that looks beyond the facile claims of ‘the retreat to the interior’ in order to highlight the willful absence of domesticity as both concept and

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consideration in contemporary and enduring notions of the interior and interiority. The following chapter focuses upon Vuillard’s paintings of his mother, suggesting these works operate on at least two symbolic levels, the republican rhetoric of domestic motherhood and the more personal level of a son’s nostalgic pursuit of the maternal body. Whilst Madame Vuillard is the ostensible figurative object of these paintings, who also functioned, in the terms of Vuillard’s description for her wider influence, as ‘my muse’, this chapter argues that it is not his mother’s subjectivity, but the artist’s, that constitutes the real subject of display. Madame Vuillard remains the focus of the following chapter which turns its attention to the representation and relative visibility of certain forms of domestic and professional female labour. By analysing the power relations that underpinned his practice, this chapter dismantles the art historical tendency to equate and conflate Vuillard’s labour with that of the female figures he represents. The fourth chapter proceeds to widen this study’s frames of reference. It takes issue with modernist art history’s use of the Nabi aesthetic to promote a sanitised interpretation of ‘the decorative’ as an aesthetically, sexually and racially pure, proto-abstract pictorial style. The chapter analyses some of the interchangeably complimentary and competing fin-de-siècle uses of ‘the decorative’ and ‘the ornamental’, with particular reference to the curatorial policy and spatial organisation of the Maison de l’Art Nouveau at which many of the Nabis exhibited in 1895-6. Following Vuillard’s developing move away from an iconography of his immediate family to that of his friends and patrons, the final chapter returns to the fin-de-siècle concept of the private interior as an intimate psychological metaphor for the individual. Taking as its subject one of Vuillard’s preferred models, the salon hostess Misia Natanson, this chapter analyses the challenge posed by new definitions of femininity to the artistic production of a domestically located female portrait subject. It is a chapter that poses and provides answers to one of the fundamental questions of this thesis: does domesticity as a site of subjectivity in Vuillard’s work occlude or substantiate the female subject? It is only by asking such questions of Vuillard’s work and practice that it will be possible to locate an historically accurate significance for Intimisme.
Chapter One

Intimisme as Illusion: Domesticity, the Interior and Difference

‘Celle-ci, durant toute la prime jeunesse, s’est abîmée dans la contemplation des fenêtres ouvrant sur la paroi des rues et des répétitions du papier peint des murs. Solitaire dans l’appartement, où sa mère, restée veuve, installa vaillamment un atelier dans lequel des ouvrières travaillent - spectacle précieux pour le peintre - cette sensibilité, isolée dans les couloirs, aussi solitaire dehors, le plus seul dans la foule, occupée moins encore à lire qu’à rêver, cette sensibilité s’endolorit et s’affine. De cet état d’ennui, qui reviendra plus tard le visiter, l’intelligence réussira le moyen de tirer des réflexions dont le bienfait durera. Dès les premiers essais de l’apprenti peintre, elles porteront, avant les fruits, fleurs, fleurs encore moroses, mais leurs fleurs. Et la sève qui gonflera les fruits montera des mêmes racines.’

To Thadée Natanson, writing in 1948, the origins of Édouard Vuillard’s practice were located within the latter’s compulsive, if uneasy and at times monotonous and isolating, yet ultimately propitious relationship with the domestic environment of his youth. Natanson’s emotive search for artistic origins constructs a narrative of the artist’s seemingly professional yet fundamentally personal relationship with the domestic interior, the recurrent subject of Vuillard’s work. Whilst negating any explicit use of the term in this instance, Natanson’s description is predicated upon an uncritical belief in the intimacy of Vuillard’s analysis of and sensitivity towards that intimate place, the domestic interior. An intimate relationship is postulated, in relation to which, it is assumed that Vuillard’s tableautins or small paintings picturing figures in interiors, constitute both testament and effect. The rhetorical deployment of the terms intimacy and intimate is fully intentional. They are called upon in order to evoke the ubiquitous characterisation of both Vuillard and his œuvre, as Intimiste and representative of Intimisme respectively, in the art historical construction and production of this artist.

2 Thadée Natanson was the director and art editor of the fin-de-siècle cultural journal, La Revue blanche (1889-1903). He was also an important early collector and patron of Vuillard’s work. See G. Groom, Édouard Vuillard Painter-Decorator, 1993 for an informative study of the relationship between Vuillard, his early patrons and their commissions for decorative works.
Natanson's retrospective essay 'Vuillard subtil et sensuel' is, for example, peppered with seemingly innocuous and shifting references to some inherently honourable code of intimacy by which Vuillard is said to have lived and worked. Natanson refers, for example, to the 'tendre intimité de la maison' in which Vuillard lived, to the artist's amicable and sensitive 'intimité avec des femmes' and finally, to how, when the artist chose to speak, it was 'jamais que dans l'intimité'.

Natanson was not the first to write of Vuillard in the terms of *Intimisme*. References to Vuillard's status as an *Intimiste* and his work as characteristic of *Intimisme* have, for some time, though with varying degrees of intensity, been a constant of art historical narratives. Writing in 1921, Camille Mauclair grouped a number of painters, including Vuillard and Jean-François Millet, the artist who the writer believed had demonstrated the greatest understanding of *Intimisme*, under the label of 'Les Intimistes'. Mauclair regarded *Intimisme* as a style of painting with a specifically French heritage, resulting '...en partie de Chardin, de Millet, de Proudhon, de Courbet, de Carrière, pour son sentiment, et en partie de l'impressionnisme, pour son affranchissement complet de l'École.'

Being, to some extent, more direct in his reference to what *Intimisme* was not (it is not 'symbolisme ou le mysticisme' but is 'plus subtil que la vérité superficielle'), Mauclair's description, in which the writer refers to 'l'idéal psychologique', 'une révélation de l'âme', 'la suggestion magnétique', and 'le sens intime des spectacles de la vie', evoked something of the value of *Intimisme*'s ephemeral qualities for art historical discourse. Of Vuillard in particular, Mauclair was rather less forthcoming, briefly stating that he is 'un véritable petit maître' of '...tableautins représentant des intérieurs simples et frais, avec des lingères, des enfants et des fleurs, où parfois passe comme un parfum léger le souvenir du grand Chardin.'

A decade later, the critic Jacques-Émile Blanche re-invoked Chardin as 'l'éternelle référence des intimistes' in his essay devoted to 'Les Intimistes', a text which stepped back a little from Mauclair's 'idéal psychologique' towards a more emphatic invocation of the 'emotional' and 'meditative' effect of the everyday rituals of domesticity.

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3 Natanson (1948), pp. 369, 367 & 374.
6 Mauclair (1921), pp. 112-13.
7 Mauclair (1921), p. 122.
Granting Vuillard a more instrumental role, Blanche claimed that the former invented ‘...le tableau de genre moderne sans autre objet qu’un papier de tenture, une chaise de bambou; des figures de bonnes dames, d’enfants...’.9 Whilst lending more credence to Vuillard’s work and the value of domesticity to Intimisme, Blanche’s text is of particular interest for its recognition of the domestic function and consumption of these works, thus reinforcing the circularity of Intimisme’s modes of reference. In the opening paragraph to his text, Blanche stated:

‘Il n’y eut plus de maison où l’on n’accrochat au mur une petite toile modeste: coin de chambre, d’enfant, salle à manger, voire meubles usagés portant la trace d’un corps.’10

The use of the label Intimisme to describe a particular lineage of French artistic practice waned during the period following the publication of both Mauclair’s and Blanche’s texts. In inverse ratio, its adhesion to Vuillard and his work became more rigid. The self-reflective analysis of what Intimisme’s terms of reference might constitute that had structured both Mauclair’s and Blanche’s texts became, however, increasingly redundant with the term’s almost exclusive application to Vuillard and his work. Biographers such as Claude Roger-Marx, writing in 1945, tended simply to refer to Vuillard with chapter headings such as ‘The Intimist’, proceeding formally to describe the small paintings or ‘intimist pictures’ of the 1890’s.11 This is a trend which has largely continued, structuring recent art historical texts which, though now more concerned with the iconographic properties of Vuillard’s work, have adopted the label with little critical analysis of what these terms, Intimiste and Intimisme (words without dictionary references) actually mean. More than this though, recent art historical narratives have consistently looked inwards, turning away from Mauclair and Blanche’s cultural and stylistic lineage, towards some mutually beneficial relationship between Vuillard, his family and friends, as Intimisme’s exclusive source of meaning. In Anna Chave’s brief article of 1980, ‘Vuillard’s La Lampe’, for example, the author states that ‘Vuillard has been called an ‘intimiste’, because ‘he repeatedly painted his family and close friends’, moreover, ‘...he brought an extreme reticence to the task of depicting his

9 Blanche (1931), p. 119.  
intimates, even as he revealed them, he shielded them.12 Belinda Thomson’s catalogue essay for the South Bank Centre exhibition of 1991, *Vuillard*, is entitled ‘Édouard Vuillard: Intimiste de la Belle Époque’, and is largely concerned with reproducing passages from the artist’s journals and further anecdotal pieces of information that are uneasily juxtaposed with frequently unrelated reproductions of the artist’s work of the 1890’s.13 It is, however, Elizabeth Wynne-Easton, in her book accompanying the 1989 Houston exhibition of Vuillard’s 1890’s works, *The Intimate Interiors of Édouard Vuillard*, who has most wholeheartedly articulated an uncritical narrative of the artist as Intimiste. Wynne-Easton’s introduction opens with the following statement: ‘Vuillard has always been considered an intimist’.14 According to Wynne-Easton this is ‘...not only because he preferred to paint small-scale pictures but also because he concentrated on evocative depictions of family and friends in familiar surroundings.’15 Wynne-Easton’s interpretation of why Vuillard produced these works extends to the inaccurate statement that: ‘Vuillard lived in Paris all his life, only occasionally traveling beyond its closest environs. His was a closely circumscribed world, especially during his formative years, and he grew up obsessed by the microcosm of the world around him.’16 This is a statement which is remarkably evocative of the passage quoted earlier from Thadée Natanson’s essay of 1948. The narrative of artistic origins has hardly shifted in the intervening years.

It seems valid to suggest that the uncritical labelling of Vuillard and his artistic output as *Intimiste* and *Intimisme* respectively, in effect collapsing the one into the other, has allowed art historians to produce narratives of a coherent subject as a single, unified entity for quick and easy consumption.17 The blanket labelling of Vuillard as an *Intimiste* allows art historians to ignore the inevitable anomalies of the painter’s career and artistic output, but more than this, it enables art historical narratives to avoid the complex variety of historically contingent labels applied to Vuillard’s work and exhibiting practices during the 1890’s. These labels included those of *symboliste*, *idéiste*, *synthéiste*, and *décoratif* as well as Maurice Denis’ own title of *néo-*

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Traditionniste often usurps that more secretive and contemporaneously unrecognised yet self-imposed group label of Nabis, a title which art history often confers on Vuillard, at the expense of the former, when wanting to consider his more collaborative efforts. The term Intimiste lends to Vuillard alone a status and originality that would have otherwise been subsumed under the use of these alternative and sometimes contradictory categories. Intimisme alone is useful as a means of fitting Vuillard and his work into a neat and teleological history of Modernist painting, based upon the model of a sequential flow of influential yet antagonistic artistic movements. Its visual and phonetic similarity to that most illustrious of categories, Impressionisme, no doubt adds to Intimisme’s seductive appeal.

Is Elizabeth Wynne-Easton correct, however, in her assertion that ‘Vuillard has always been considered an intimist’? It is certainly possible to trace the systematic application of this term to Vuillard back to Mauclair’s essay of 1921, but as the variety of labels applied in the critical reception of Vuillard’s work during the 1890’s demonstrates, contemporary opinion was considerably less consistent. An extensive study of the contemporary horizon of reception has produced only two instances in which Vuillard was explicitly referred to as intimiste. Reviewing the fifth Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes which opened at the gallery of Le Barc de Boutteville in Paris during October 1893, Maurice Cremnitz referred to the ‘douzes tableautins’ of Vuillard, who in conjunction with Pierre Bonnard, the critic claimed to be ‘...deux exquis intimistes, et qui seront certainement des maîtres demain’. During the previous year, the critic Gustave Geffroy had reviewed the third Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes held, once again, at the gallery of Le Barc de Boutteville at 47, rue Le Peletier. In his review Geffroy specifically referred to four of the seven

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18 See Maurice Denis’ manifesto essay written under the pseudonym of Pierre Louis, ‘Définition du néo-traditionnisme’, Art et Critique, (23 & 30 August 1890), pp. 540-2 & 556-8. See R. Heller, ‘Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of the Surface’, Art Journal, no. 45 (Summer 1985), pp. 146-53 for his analysis of the contemporary critical rejection of a single term to describe ‘subjective art’. It is Michael Marlais, however, who in his important text, Conservative Echoes in ‘Fin-de-Siècle’ Parisian Art Criticism, 1992, traces the development of a ‘new breed of critic’ in the closing decade of the nineteenth century ‘who understood the mechanics of the avant-garde’ and who desired ‘an avant-garde position’. Marlais claims that it is this which lead to the ‘confusion of names, movements, and styles’ that marked contemporary critical writing, ‘all in a fervent effort to toss off some quick ideas on what was new and advanced in the art world.’ (pp. 149-50)
19 M. Cremnitz, ‘Exposition de quelques peintres chez le Barc de Boutteville’, Essais d’art libre, (December 1893), pp. 231-2.
20 Research into the Expositions des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes, fifteen of which were held at the gallery of Le Barc de Boutteville between December 1891 and 1896, and indeed information concerning Le Barc de Boutteville himself, remains cursory. Cécile Guy claims that Le Barc de
works exhibited by Vuillard. These included the *Femme couchée* (presently entitled *Le Sommeil* of 1891-2) [fig. 1], two paintings which Geffroy refers to as *Les Ravaudeuses* (one of which is thought to be *La Ravaudeuse* of 1891 [fig. 2]) and *Le Déjeuner* (presently referred to as *Le Chocolat* of 1892) [fig. 3]. All three oil paintings are representative of Vuillard’s work at this time. Each represents either a single or pair of female figures engaged in a variety of familiar, it might be suggested, mundane domestic tasks (the word ‘activities’ seems overdetermined). They are all oil paintings of similarly small dimensions in which both the size and shape of the canvas may be considered as integral to the horizontal or vertical positioning of the figures in close proximity to the picture plane and the economical framing of these enclosed, compressed and emphatically non-perspectival spaces. These are, furthermore, spaces devoid of an easily defined source of light. They are, in fact, devoid of natural light, which in the case of *La Ravaudeuse* and *Le Chocolat* is somewhat at odds with the routine tasks portrayed, whilst in contradiction, the deep shadow of the horizontal space of *Le Sommeil* is fractured by a brilliant light that is reflected off the, nonetheless, sleeping figure. Comparative analysis between these works also demonstrates Vuillard’s ambiguous use of colour and pattern. Moving between flat, unmodelled areas of colour, in the case of *Le Sommeil*, the juxtaposed planes of colour and pattern which barely suggest both depth and physiognomy in *La Ravaudeuse*, and the internal, sometimes illogical give and take between flat, unmodelled surfaces and exuberant, even jarring pattern of *Le Chocolat*, the viewer is struck by the painterly attention given to the visual and haptic qualities of surface and pattern in these paintings and yet the almost willful, certainly

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Boutteville originally operated as a dealer in old master paintings who, realising the financial potential of contemporary art in the light of the success of, amongst others, the Petit, Boussod et Valadon and Durand-Ruel galleries transferred some of his business to the display and selling of contemporary works. The seemingly ambiguous title of the fifteen *Expositions des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes* at which between thirty-nine and sixty-three artists regularly took part (including those affiliated with the Nabi group as well as Toulouse Lautrec, Gauguin, Pissarro, Guillaumin, Signac, Luce, Cross, Petitjean and Valadon) demonstrates the gallery’s open and opportunistic exhibition policy. Vuillard is known to have exhibited at five (1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th & 6th) of these shows between December 1891 and March 1894. C. Guy, ‘Le Barc de Boutteville’, *L’Œil*, (April 1965), pp. 30-6 & 58-9. See Paris, Galerie Le Barc de Boutteville, *Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes*, exh. cats., 1891-6 and G. L. Mauner, *The Nabis*, 1978, for the individual catalogues and a more detailed account of Nabi participation at these exhibitions.

21 The catalogue to the third *Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes* states that Vuillard exhibited seven works in total, nos. 180-186. These are as follows: ‘Déjeuner, Sous la lampe, Femme couchée, Ravaudeuses, Ravaudeuses, Effet de soir (pastel) and Figure de femme (aquarelle)’. There is some discrepancy as to the accuracy of the catalogue, since it is widely thought that at least one of the *Ravaudeuses* paintings is the Musée d’Orsay work, *La Ravaudeuse* [fig. 2]. It has not been possible to identify the four remaining works.

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frustrating, neglect reserved for the delineation of physiognomic and facial details. In each case, the flesh of both the face and hands has been rendered as an opaque mask of thick, yellowish paint. And yet, the observant viewer will be able to read a distinct similarity of gesture and certainly clothing between the single figure of *La Ravaudeuse* and the central figure of *Le Chocolat*. Nonetheless, the viewer is forced into an ambiguous engagement and physical proximity with figures that, even and in spite of the outward gaze of the central figure of *Le Chocolat*, fail to respond. It is possibly this fundamental ambiguity of familiarity and disjuncture, inscribed within the contradictory physical properties and modes of viewing the paintings, to which Geffroy attributed Vuillard’s ‘delicious sense of humour’ when he begrudgingly claimed that these ‘audacious but summary conjugations of colour and line’ by Vuillard continue:

‘...à affirmer un intimiste d’un humour délicieux, sachant meler la mélancolique et le comique, les dosant d’une main légère, et faisant apparaître un étincellement de couleur, un sursaut magique de lumière, dans les intérieurs aux ombres lourdes. Il tarde de voir mieux que ces croquis, ces taches, ces jets hardis de lignes, - ou plutôt il tarde de voir tout cela, ordonné et approfondi, dans une oeuvre.’

The year 1892, during which Vuillard exhibited these works at the *Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes*, constitutes an interesting period for this study. In a review of the same exhibition, the critic Roger Marx failed to invoke Vuillard as *intimiste* or his work as *intimisme*, though he did make use of the term ‘intimités’ in a critique which, significantly, neglected to register the sense of ambiguity to which Geffroy had referred:

‘Chez M. Vuillard, la perception est spéciale des intimités familières; il excelle à isoler le labeur domestique, à grouper le silence autour de la lampe, à dire le recueillement des êtres et des choses, à fournir intégrale la sensation de l’intérieur paisible, calme, ordonné.’

Earlier in the same year the art critic of *Le Mercure de France* and self-appointed theoretician of symbolist painting, G. Albert Aurier had published the celebrated article, ‘Les Symbolistes’ in which a wash drawing by Vuillard, *La Couture* [fig. 4], was reproduced. Once again, the term ‘intimités’ as opposed to *intimiste* or *intimisme* was deployed, in a general review of Vuillard’s work which, though more poetically

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evocative than Roger Marx’s more materialist references to domestic peace and stability, once again, failed to suggest anything of the ambivalence of Vuillard’s tableautins that Geffroy had implied. Comparing Vuillard’s work to a verse of ‘La Bonne chanson’ by the Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine, Aurier did however, allow himself to suggest that there was a certain ‘ironic’ quality to Vuillard’s representation of ‘the tender feelings of intimacies’:

‘Enfin...je mentionnerai Vuillard, un singulier coloriste plein de charme et d’imprévu, un poète qui saura dire, non sans quelque ironie, les douces émotions de la vie, les attendrissements des intimités.

“Le foyer, la lueur étroite de la lampe,
La rêverie avec le doigt contre le tempe,
Et les yeux se perdent parmi les yeux aimés,
L’Heure de thé fumant et des livres fermés,
La douceur de sentir la fin de la soirée,
La fatigue charmante et l’attente adorée,
De l’ombre nuptiale et de la douce nuit...”’

Would it therefore, in the light of these three critiques, be legitimate to suggest that it was to this particular moment of 1892 and the confluence of references to Vuillard as intimiste and his representation of ‘intimités’ that art historians looked when seeking to characterise the artist and his work? This is unlikely since much of the Vuillard literature fails to make adequate reference to the contemporary ‘horizon of reception’ and more specifically, gives inadequate attention to the inconsistencies of the notion of intimacy invoked by these critics. Whilst Marx and Aurier both employ the term ‘intimités’ in order to evoke the artist’s emotive and seemingly unproblematic portrayal of the apparent peace and stability of the domestic interior, Geffroy confers uponVuillard the label of intimiste in a review that highlights the artist’s playful construction of formal ambiguity in these works. Rather than cement the origins of Vuillard’s practice, these critiques open up disjunctures between the recognised subject of his paintings, the domestic interior, and the formal means of their representation. More than this, the early moment of reception serves to problematise the too easy assimilation of Intimisme with intimité, highlighting instead, a crucial inconsistency in the historical epistemological relationship between these two terms which has been masked by their textual and phonetic similarity.

The coherent labelling of Vuillard as *Intimiste* further occludes the shifting emphasis art historical literature has attributed to the function of the domestic interior in the artist’s work. It is possible to highlight three general strands of interpretation which are broadly aligned with the methodologies of either a formalist, psycho-biographical or iconographic approach. Their development over the course of the intervening century has tended to reflect the contemporary interests of art historical discourse and its development as a discipline. The psycho-biographical method of approach, for example, appears to have developed as a result of art history’s increasing desire to read the personal into these images, a move paralleled by the application of new, more personal, titles to the paintings. These methodologies are based to some extent, upon an initial reading of Vuillard’s works as either genre or portrait paintings, a dichotomy which requires further analysis, but which, this study will demonstrate is based in each instance upon a resistance towards, or rejection of, the concept of the domestic.

To a formalist approach, the specific quality of the domestic interior as the subject of Vuillard’s paintings is precisely its interiority, or presumed existence on the margins of or even outside the realms of culture, modernity and by association, meaning. Rooted in a shared trans-historical and essentialist fantasy, formalist accounts have, in effect, celebrated the significance of the domestic interior’s insignificance. Implicit within most formalist accounts is the belief that the domestic interior constituted an empty vehicle, a convenient yet integral backdrop for formal experimentation and progress. This is certainly true of George Mauner’s 1978 publication of his 1967 doctoral thesis, *The Nabis: Their History and their Art, 1888-1896*. Though concerned, in the notably final chapter of this text entitled ‘The Subjects’, with an account of Nabi art in general, a significant percentage of Mauner’s argument is illustrated with and makes reference to paintings by Vuillard. According to Mauner, the Nabis constituted an important stage in the move towards abstract art, as the opening statement of the chapter confirms:

‘The Nabis contributed to the eventual disappearance of the subject, but they themselves never abandoned it. On the contrary, it was through the choice and manipulation of subject matter that they exerted their greatest influence.’

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It was not, for Mauner, simply the interior’s ability to act as ‘a buffer against the distracting sounds of an active world outside’, but the specific value of its given occupant, the female figure, ‘well suited to express the Symbolist silence’, which ensured the domestic interior’s pictorial value for the Nabis’ pursuit of artistic autonomy.²⁶ Mauner proceeded to cite the example of a painting of 1891, now commonly referred to as La Robe à ramages [fig. 5]. Through its compressed arrangement of female figures who are bent in isolation and apparently intense concentration over the large pieces of cloth dispersed across the surfaces of the space, this is a painting which, more than many of Vuillard’s images of women sewing in interiors, implies a professional as opposed to domestic activity. But Mauner simply attributes to these figures, ‘the hypnotic trance of ritual’.²⁷ Indeed, terms such as ‘ritual’, ‘withdrawal’, ‘immobility’ and ‘silence’ are consistent features of Mauner’s description of the limited significatory function that is attributable to the behaviour of the female figure in these paintings. Though less explicit in their analysis of the (in)significance of the interior to the Nabi aesthetic, formalist monographs devoted to Vuillard clearly share Mauner’s view that the domestic interior functioned solely as an unintrusive backdrop to artistic experimentation. A number of Vuillard monographs actually cite both the convenience and cheapness of the domestic interior as the defining factor for its artistic significance.²⁸ For the formalist approach, Intimisme as a practice clearly constitutes a legitimate assertion of artistic creativity over, at the expense of and possibly, in spite of female subjectivity. At the same time, the art historical application of the term Intimisme returns to Vuillard the authority, creativity and it may be argued, masculinity which the artist’s immersion into the feminine space of the domestic interior might threaten to usurp.

Where formalist accounts of Vuillard’s work have tended to undervalue the significatory role played by the domestic interior and by association, the female figure, more recent psycho-biographical approaches have tended to consistently overvalue its status. As the opening passage quoted from Natanson’s 1948 text demonstrates, psycho-biographical explanations for Vuillard’s unfailing interest in the domestic interior as a pictorial motif, have enjoyed a significant period of credibility. The public release of

²⁸ See, for example, Roger-Marx (1946), p. 47.
Vuillard’s journals in 1980 has, however, recently galvanised the psycho-biographical approach; encouraging those texts, such as Elizabeth Wynne-Easton’s book (1989) and Belinda Thomson’s South Bank exhibition catalogue (1991) to locate the origins of meaning within a narrow psychological field. In these instances, the paintings of domestic interiors become the visual equivalent of the journals; the documentary evidence of Vuillard’s analysis of those now justifiably identifiable people to whom it is assumed he was most sympathetic, the mother and sister of the artist. Intimisme is assumed to constitute the personal product of the artist’s privileged physical and psychological access to his subjects. In this version of Intimisme, however, the interior continues to function as much ‘as a buffer against the distracting sounds of an active world outside’ as it had in the formalist accounts. Despite the renewed attention granted to the iconographic properties of the paintings, meaning is prevented from escaping the narrow confines of Vuillard’s biography.

One painting in particular, the c. 1893 Mother and Sister of the Artist [fig. 6], has gained an unprecedented status in psycho-biographical accounts of Vuillard’s work. According to Wynne-Easton, Vuillard’s sensitivity towards the strained relationship between these two people (for which there is no documentary evidence) is grounded within the tensions of the pictorial space and the submissive/dominant gestures of the two figures. It is these same tensions, of ‘simultaneous compression and isolation’, which Susan Sidlauskas highlights when she deploys this painting to explore the psychological interior of late nineteenth-century French painting in a recent essay, ‘Psyche and Sympathy: Staging Interiority in the Early Modern Home’. Sidlauskas’ approach does, however, differ from Easton’s in a number of significant ways.

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29 Paris, Institut de France, Journal of Édouard Vuillard, MS 5396, 2 carnets, 1890 and 1890-1905. Also MSS 5397-5399 relating to the period from 1907 to 1940; South Bank Centre (1991); Easton (1989).
30 According to Easton (1989), the psychological authenticity of Vuillard’s paintings of his mother and sister in interiors developed from the artist’s psychological analysis of himself in a number of early self-portraits. Easton’s text opens, not as one might presume with a chapter focusing upon some aspect of Vuillard’s representation of the interior, but with a chapter entitled ‘Beyond the Mirror: The Self-Portraits’ and the proclamation that: ‘A more intimate genre is scarcely imaginable than one in which subject and creator are one.’ (p. 8) A few paragraphs later, Easton’s interpretation of the close-knit relationship between the journals and paintings becomes explicit: ‘Vuillard’s earliest extant works, from about 1888, coincide with his first entries in a journal. His development as a painter therefore can be examined both through his painted works and his written record. Although he painted many still lifes and genre scenes in the late 1880s and early 1890s, none of these reveal his personality as do his portraits of himself.’ (pp. 8-9)
Undoubtedly influenced by the important research of Debora Silverman into fin-de-siècle notions of the interior as the individual’s sole refuge for authentic aesthetic and psychological experience, Sidlauskas looks to the contemporary cultural milieu in her search for the origins of Vuillard’s work.33 Citing the art criticism of Émile Duranty, the psychological ruminations of Symbolist literature and the domestically located Scandinavian plays currently favoured by vanguard Parisian theatre, Sidlauskas steps away from Vuillard’s biography as the source of his artistic concern with the interior.34 Rather, Sidlauskas positions the production and consumption of Vuillard’s work firmly within the context of the late nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon most succinctly described as ‘the retreat to the interior’.35 Vuillard’s paintings of interiors did not, according to Sidlauskas, simply reflect the new conceptualisation of interiority, they ‘...enacted the instabilities that were its consequence.’36

Clearly, Sidlauskas regards the problematising of normative gender relations as a significant aspect of Vuillard’s modern approach to the interior. Returning to the painting, *Mother and Sister of the Artist*, Sidlauskas expands the argument of this earlier essay in an article of 1997, ‘Contesting Femininity: Vuillard’s Family Pictures’. Referring, once again, to the ‘reductiveness’ of the body of the lefthand figure in comparison to the ‘assertive posture’ of the figure in black, Sidlauskas argues that a number of Vuillard’s works of the early 1890’s which specifically present the mother and sister together ‘...depend not on an adherence to some notion of the feminine...but on an explicit, even aggressive, subversion of its signs.’37 Sidlauskas develops her argument with reference to a series of contemporary discourses concerning the expressive and gestural ambiguities of the female body.38 Sidlauskas ascribes to Vuillard the painterly role of externalising the ambiguities of the feminine unconscious through

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33 Silverman (1989).


36 Sidlauskas (1996), pp. 65. It should be noted that Sidlauskas’ reference to the staging of instability is made in reference to a diverse collection of paintings of interiors, it is not exclusive to Vuillard.


38 These include Charles Hacks’ manual of 1892 ‘Le Geste’, in which the author promoted his theory of the female body’s duplicity, its varying capacity for authentic gestural expression. Other sources include the asexual gestures of female marionette’s deployed in the Symbolist puppet theatre and the La Salpêtrière photographs of women enacting the poses of a range of neurological disorders, including hysteria. Sidlauskas (March 1997), p. 109.
the aberrant gestures of the female body. The origins of Vuillard's sympathetic approach to the female subject is however, ultimately located by Sidlauskas in the artist's personal experience. Having critiqued the consistent feminisation of Vuillard, Sidlauskas proceeds to re-inscribe the artist's affinity with femininity, invoking some unconscious yet privileged understanding of its contemporary condition, seemingly enabled by the artist's physical and by association, psychic proximity to the subjects he painted:

'The painter's suppressions of the feminine were likely less programmatic and more unconscious: an activation of widely held anxieties about female sexuality as experienced through the complex intimacies of a female-dominated family.'

Both of Sidlauskas' texts constitute a critical and thought provoking approach to Vuillard's work in which his artistic practice is emphatically located within contemporary cultural currents. These essays further demonstrate the writer's commitment to the analysis of the representation of sexual difference which, despite the consistency of the subject matter of Vuillard's paintings, has largely been considered irrelevant. There are, however, a number of problems which may be highlighted in Sidlauskas' account. Firstly, in her commitment to demonstrating Vuillard's pictorial realisation of the inconsistencies of the contemporary interior, Sidlauskas tends to focus exclusively upon those works that appear to foreground psychological drama, to the detriment of the many paintings which do not. Secondly, in spite of Sidlauskas' commitment to an historically contingent understanding of Vuillard's practice, Intimisme continues to constitute a practice of seemingly authentic psychological expression, similar to that of the psycho-biographical texts. This authenticity is rooted in the duality that guarantees Vuillard's status as a male artist and detached observer whilst mythologising his seemingly privileged physical, emotional and psychological access to

40 Though Gloria Groom's 1993 study of Vuillard's decorative projects constitutes an invaluable contribution to the Vuillard bibliography, it is more concerned with the history of these projects and Vuillard's relationship with his patrons than a critical analysis of the works' iconography. See Groom (1993).
41 See, for example, M. Kozloff, 'Four Short Essays on Vuillard', Artforum, no. 4 (December 1971), p. 65, in which the writer states in relation to the artist's personal and professional relationship with his mother that: 'In the end, there was a harmony between the painter and his sitter that gender did not obstruct any more than age.'
42 The opening phrase to the title of the 1996 essay 'Psyche and Sympathy' implies something of Sidlauskas' belief in the psychological authenticity of these works.

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his subjects. Thirdly, Sidlauskas locates Vuillard and his practice within 'the retreat to the interior', the contemporary cultural phenomenon identified with literary and artistic Symbolism that appeared to renew its interest in and re-evaluate its relation to, the neglected arena of the domestic interior. However, and as this study will argue, 'the retreat to the interior' describes a fin-de-siècle phenomenon in which masculine subjectivity and creativity was, and has continued to be, valued at the expense of feminine subjectivity and the material relations of domesticity. Like 'the retreat to the interior', it will be argued that Intimisme historically and enduringly constitutes an illusory mode of psychological access and authentic artistic expression.

This study has thus far demonstrated the extent to which different methods of art historical analysis have lead to shifting interpretations of a single categorisation, Intimisme. The overall effect of these interpretations has been to suggest that Vuillard's Intimisme was a product of the artist's physical and thereby psychological proximity to the subject he painted, the domestic interior and its inhabitants. Interpretation of the paintings has inevitably looked to the personal relationship between Vuillard and his subject matter. Despite the problems identified with this approach it is not, nor should it be, possible to reject the personal aspect of these paintings altogether. The personal relationship between the artist and his subject matter is of inevitable significance, but a significance that must value Vuillard as a psycho-social subject, a symptomatic yet subjective product and reproducer of the materially and historically contingent conditions of production and consumption of his time. A critical and feminist history of art should aim to locate the meaning of these paintings within the historical context of their critical reception which, in this instance, necessitates moving away from those iconographic approaches which draw exclusively and directly upon the aesthetic concerns of the contemporary cultural milieu to a more semiotic approach. Semiotic theory enables art historical analysis to consider the work of art as a sign functioning within a complex network of other, not necessarily integral, signs. These should include, as the contemporary critical response suggests, those signs pertaining to the ideological and patriarchal space of the domestic interior. Art historical interpretation has for too long ignored what it actually meant for Vuillard consistently to have represented the domestic interiors in which he lived. It has failed to analyse even the

spatial and technical practicalities of such a project, let alone the power relations and possible psychic desires involved or how these conditions of production might be inscribed within the physical properties of the paintings.

Psychological narratives of identification, emotional plenitude and objectivity have, it has been suggested, formed a consistent art historical approach to Vuillard and his subject matter. Being implicitly, as opposed to explicitly, psychological, these accounts have either avoided aligning their approach with any specific methodological strand of psychology or have looked to contemporaneous developments within the late nineteenth-century discipline of neuro-psychology for the origins of Vuillard's 'authentic' analysis. Once again, this study does not intend to reject the psychological context of these paintings. It does, however, intend to disrupt the fundamental conceits upon which these psychological narratives have been based. Where Charcot's experiments into the origins of neurological diseases might serve in one instance as a possible source for Vuillard's representations of the female body, so the contemporaneous development of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories of sexuality and the unconscious, rooted in his case-study analysis of bourgeois individuals, may serve in another instance as the basis for a critical approach. As Mark Poster has stated in his important text of 1978, *Critical Theory of the Family*, Freud did 'not theorize self-consciously about the family', nor did he explicitly link the emotional intensity and psychic ambivalence of the modern bourgeois family to the economic and social relations that produced it. Freud did, however, as Poster argues, provide the basis for an historically contingent model of the patriarchal bourgeois family's unconscious production of the symptomatic subject of European capitalist society. The unprecedented levels of domestic privacy that resulted from the (at least ideological) separation of the spheres of public and private under the capitalist economic system afforded the isolated relationship between parents and child a new level of intensity in which parental authority alone was deemed absolute. Without any conscious intention and by structuring their relationship through intense feelings of both love and hate that

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44 Though the publication of Freud's theories of childhood sexuality (1905) and the unconscious (1912 and 1915) effectively stem from the early decades of the twentieth century, he had trained with Charcot in Paris during the 1890's and was undoubtedly developing his theories of the psychic structure of bourgeois identity during this period. The Oedipus complex was, for example, first referred to by Freud in a letter to Fliess of 1897. See M. Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family*, 1978, p. 17.
46 Poster (1978), pp. 167-78
were internalised in the child's feelings towards its own body, the parents were able to instill in that child the ideological values of bourgeois society:

'The bourgeois family should be understood not simply as a progressive, morally beneficial nest of love and domesticity, the "wish to be free" and individualism, but as constituting a particular emotional pattern which served to promote the interests of the new dominant class and to register in a unique way the conflicts of age and sex. In the bourgeois family, new forms of the oppression of children and women arose which were dependent upon critical mechanisms of authority and love, of intense ambivalent emotions.'

Though the art historical literature concerning Vuillard has tended to invoke the artist's physical and psychic proximity to his subjects as the source of the sympathy and authenticity of his expression, psychoanalytical theory demonstrates that it is actually the intensity of familial relationships that serves as a barrier to identification. While those texts which invoke psychological access tend to foreclose ambivalence and misrecognition, psychoanalysis allows, even enables, the problems of subjectivity, identity and sexual difference to arise. Positing Vuillard as a psycho-social subject obviates the need for an iconographic search for textual origins whilst simultaneously allowing art historical analysis to rupture the complicity of the imaginary relationship between the Intimiste and the predominant subject of his work.

An assessment of the art historical literature concerning Vuillard has demonstrated the significance attributed to the interior in the construction of the artist as an Intimiste and modern artist. The interior has not, however, always been identified as the only subject matter available to the Intimiste. In a review of 'Le Salon de 1879' the writer and critic J.-K. Huysmans deployed the term in relation to an unidentified watercolour exhibited by Jean-François Raffaelli, Le Chiffonnier. Praising Raffaelli for both the integrity of his subject and the emotive candour of his approach, by which the isolation of the figure is thrown into sharp relief against the vast expanse of the landscape, Huysmans made the following claim:

'Eh bien, M. Raffaelli est un des seuls qui aient compris l'originale beauté de ces lieux si chers aux intimistes. Celui-là est le peintre des pauvres gens et des grands ciels! - Son chiffonnier, seul, avec sa chienne, et prêt à picorer dans un monceau de détritus, a grand allure; il est pris sur nature et hardiment dressé. Comme devant les tableaux de

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Huysmans’ reference to the term ‘intimistes’ is ripe with possibility. The review suggests that Huysmans applied the term to Raffaelli as a means to define a Realist mode of painting recognisable figurative types against their most appropriate and thereby evocative setting. A prior use of intimiste(s) as a critical term has yet to be found and it remains unclear as to whether Huysmans was deploying the term for the first time or using it to compare Raffaelli to a pre-established category of artists. Employing ‘intimistes’ in order to praise Raffaelli in response to the artist’s portrayal of a chiffonnier is nonetheless significant for the extent to which the term’s frames of reference differ fundamentally from later, previously cited, instances of its application. It suggests that Intimisme’s enduringly exclusive identification with a domestic iconography only resulted from a subsequent, though persuasive, conflation between art, artistic practice and the interior. For Raffaelli had portrayed an instantly recognisable yet marginalised figure and by-product of Parisian modernity, the rag-picker who traded in, survived off and lived amongst the city’s waste. Raffaelli’s emotive figure of a chiffonnier, the ultimate signifier of urban poverty, is situated within and against the marginalised space of Paris that formed his place of work but, most significantly and ironically for the subsequent Intimiste agenda, his emphatically un-intimate ‘home’, the suburban wasteland.

Huysmans’ critique of 1879 did little to deter the subsequent development of Geffroy and Cremnitz’s use of intimiste as a positive label with which to describe Vuillard or, in an alternative though contiguous and contemporaneous use, as a particularly desirable aspect of the modern interior. A newspaper article published during the late 1880’s entitled ‘La Maison d’un Moderniste’ by Maurice de Fleury, for example, featured the term ‘intimistes’ as an adjective with which to describe the artistic qualities of the modern house of the future. Describing the house of the ‘duc de X...’ itself as ‘une œuvre d’art’, with walls adorned by the work of recent and contemporary artists including Degas, Forain, Caillebotte, Whistler and Monet, de Fleury claimed:

‘La tentative n’est certes pas un absolu chef d’œuvre, et laisse beaucoup à trouver, au point de vue surtout de la forme, mais l’emploi de matériaux jusqu’à présent peu usités, le goût de coloriste qui a présidé à

48 J.-K. Huysmans, ‘Le Salon de 1879’ repr. in L’Art Moderne, (1883), 2nd ed. 1903, p. 84.
49 See M. Nesbit, Atget’s Seven Albums, 1992, pp. 165-75 for information concerning the chiffonnier.
la conception d'ensemble, certains détails ingénieux - outre qu'ils nous promettent, pour l'avenir, de charmants quartiers lumineux et intimistes - en font, mieux qu'une curiosité, une œuvre d'art.  

In the late 1880's, de Fleury's vision of the future promised 'charmants quartiers lumineux et intimistes'. This dream of the modern house appears, however, to have faded by 1906 when the art critic Camille Mauclair deployed the term 'intimisme' several times in an article riven with nostalgic longing for the 'L'Ame de la maison française'. In this instance intimisme was invoked as a particular quality or feeling captured within the 'lignes simples et logiques' of the traditional French house. It was the 'intimisme' of the house which, according to Mauclair, had been allowed to escape as a result of technological developments such as electric lighting which is 'cold' and 'banal', and the growth of the modern railway system:

'L'élimination de l'intimisme de la maison est une des nombreuses conséquences du nouveau système vital. Tous les faits sociaux se tiennent. Quand on ignorait les chemins de fer, la difficulté et la rareté des voyages conférait au home plus d'importance.'

Despite the contradictory instances of their use, both de Fleury and Mauclair's texts demonstrate, in conjunction with the critical response to Vuillard's work articulated by Geffroy and Cremnitz, that the terms intimisme and intimiste were being deployed in order to ascribe to their referent a quality of specific and current cultural value. Whether called upon to describe a particular quality of aesthetic or psychological experience located in the imaginary space of the interior or as a means of categorising Vuillard as an artist who had pictorially evoked something of this experience, their occurrence was profoundly implicated in the fin-de-siècle relationship between the discourses of art, the individual and the interior. This discursive nexus, which may be subsumed under the more general cultural phenomenon of 'the retreat to the interior' describes the contemporary cultural investment in the interior as the sole legitimate site of authentic aesthetic and psychological experience for the individual.

52 C. Mauclair (February 1906), pp. 243 & 245
The most intense relationship between art and the interior during this period was undoubtedly that pertaining to the modes of display and consumption which had blossomed in direct relation to the development and expansion of the bourgeois art market. In her important study of ‘Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions’ Martha Ward has demonstrated how the private exhibition space, decorated and arranged in a manner directly evocative of the private interior, came to be appreciated as the site of authentic aesthetic experience and contemplation in direct contrast to the bustling and heaped-up commerce of the public exhibition space. Though no less reliant upon the market than the large salons, these independent spaces took great care to exploit the ideological binaries connoted by ‘the separation of the spheres’ and the concomitant belief in the private interior as a refuge for the individual, in order to present the illusion of a non-commercial space catering to the refined visual sensibilities of the visitor. By transforming the given modes of display, the invocation of the private interior in the independent exhibition space necessarily effected changes to the modes of viewing the works on display and by association, their reception, meaning and value. Of particular interest are the genres and styles of art object that were deemed to be most effectively displayed in these private as opposed to public spaces. Delicate works on paper and watercolours were, for example, deemed to be viewed most appropriately in the large yet plushly decorated and delicately lit space provided by the gallery of Georges Petit. Ward’s research into the Impressionist exhibitions and their critical reception further demonstrates, for example, how these domestic or domestically evocative spaces were deemed to be particularly favourable to the display and viewing of small easel paintings with sketchy finishes and matte surfaces executed in the informal

54 As Ward’s article demonstrates, the use of spaces that explicitly invoked notions of the private sphere in direct opposition to the large public exhibition spaces, developed in a variety of ways during the early decades of the Third Republic. Though easily categorised under the label of ‘independent exhibitions’, exhibitors varied from conservative artistic societies and cercles, such as the Cercle de l’Union Artistique of the 1870’s and 1880’s, to the Impressionist exhibitions held in a number of different locations between 1874 and 1886, to the consolidation of the independent exhibition space during the 1880’s and 1890’s with the small private galleries set up by dealers such as Georges Petit and Durand-Ruel. M. Ward (1991), pp. 599-622. For further information concerning the exclusive sociability of the cercles see Garb, Sisters of the Brush, (1994), pp. 32-41 and M. Agulhon, Le Cercle dans la France bourgeoise, 1810-1914, 1977.
55 E. Cardon, ‘Aquarellistes chez Petit’, Moniteur des Arts, (18 January 1889), p. 1: ‘L’Art de l’aquarelle a des seductions qu’on ne saurait subir dans la cohue du Salon annuel; c’est un art délicat, intime, aimable, qu’on ne peut bien apprécier que dans un milieu de choix, élégant, distingué; il demande quelque soin et un peu de mise en scène: il lui faut une lumière discrète; le grand jour de la rue ou de la place publique ne lui convient pas.’
mediums of pastel and gouache. Similarly, the responsive use of coloured frames and sheets of glass to muffle the reflective glare of the oil surface was considered by the exhibitors and sympathetic critics alike, as strategies appropriate to the domestic context and decorative effect of the exhibitions. Though the modes of display and decoration deployed by the different exhibition spaces tended to vary between, for example, the crimson velvet drapery of the Petit gallery and the brightly painted walls (yellow in Degas' case) of the Impressionist exhibitions, the intended and resultant effect upon the viewer appears to have been similar. The association with the private interior leant to the private exhibition space and the viewer's experience of it an illusion of authenticity and integrity. This conferred upon the works a pictorial value seemingly refuted by their rejection of both traditional medium and subject matter, whilst instilling in the viewer the work's desirability as a decorative, domestic object. Compared to the crowd mentality and noisy sociability of the large salons the independent exhibition space coaxed the viewer as an individual into a subjective, contemplative and physically engaging appreciation of the individual work. This encouraged a seemingly more personal, even intimate and authentic relationship between the viewer and the modern life painting which increasingly catered to the sentiments and desires of contemporary bourgeois taste.

The consolidation of the private exhibition space, its modes of display and consumption, may be evidenced, for example, in a review of the first Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes of December 1891. In his review of the exhibition where works by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro were shown alongside those of relatively unknown artists such as Maurice Denis and Vuillard, the critic and historian Charles Saunier claimed that the present exhibition was not 'une oeuvre de combat' but simply a testimony to the evolution of public taste, for:

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59 It was, for example, the simultaneously personal and decorative function of art objects that Mme. Louise d'Alq invoked in her guide to domesticity of 1879. Though not referring to the work of artists affiliated with Impressionism or other independent exhibition groups, Alq cited the domestic role of art as 'un embellissement indispensable' for the interior, proceeding to articulate its personal as opposed to 'intrinsic value'. Mme L. d'Alq, Le Maitre et la maîtresse de la maison, 1879, pp. 69 & 73: 'Dans ces pièces intimes où nous vivons pour nous-mêmes et non pour le monde, il nous est permis de ne pas considérer la valeur intrinsèque de l'objet, mais seulement celle, bien plus précieuse, que lui a acquis à nos yeux, l'heure de mélancolie ou de joie qu'il nous rappelle!'
'Dans les coquets appartements d’aujourd’hui, les radieuses toiles impressionistes, orées de cadres blancs, comme une soie ramagée l’est de dentelles, n’ajoutent-elles pas à la gaîté du luxe moderne?'

Though very little is known about the arrangement and decoration of the early spaces in which Vuillard exhibited, it is clear that, unlike his fellow Nabi painters Denis and Bonnard, for example, Vuillard chose not to show at the intentionally public and antagonistically large space of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. The Exposition[s] des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes, which were held in the ground floor space of the Le Barc de Boutteville gallery, contained no more than between one-hundred-and-fifty and two-hundred works, compared to the four-hundred to seven-hundred regularly displayed at the Indépendants. Reviews of the Le Barc de Boutteville shows suggest that the space was regarded as a petit salon equivalent to the more established galleries of Durand-Ruel and Georges Petit. In a review of the second Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes of 1892, in which the critic reproduced his preface for the show’s catalogue, G.-Albert Aurier invoked the now familiar binary opposition between the artifice of the public salons, ‘ces grands bizars nationaux’, and those private spaces where ‘genuine artists’ showed their ‘misunderstood works’:

‘...loin des mercantiles préoccupations, loins des salopes usines de patchages et maquillages à la mécanique de leurs prétendus confrères, il est, certes, des artistes véritables qui...travaillant glorieusement à des oeuvres méprisées...’

As Aurier’s statement suggests, Vuillard’s works were exhibited within an institutional context that acquired credibility, projecting this onto both the artists and their works, by virtue of the private exhibition space’s aesthetic, spatial and ideological affiliation with the domestic interior. As paintings produced in order to be viewed within the context of

61 For information concerning the Neo-Impressionist artists’ rejection of Impressionist exhibition strategies see Ward (1991), pp. 618-22.
63 See, for example, C. Morice ‘Salons et salonnets’, Mercure de France, vol. 49, (January 1894), pp. 62-70. Morice categorised the Le Barc de Boutteville gallery as a salonnets. He then proceeded to claim that the space was too small for its exhibitions and to disclaim the illusory tactics of the private galleries which were, Morice claimed, as much a part of the establishment as the large salons, and similarly dedicated to the commodification of art.
the interior and as works that simultaneously picture the interior, it was an affiliation
between art, the individual and the interior that would have been rendered doubly
apparent to viewers of Vuillard’s work. It is not, however, simply the context of their
display in conjunction with their subject matter that would have helped to locate the
significance of these works within the context of fin-de-siècle notions of interiority. For
the physical properties of the paintings tends to structure a particular mode of viewing
their imagery that would have and, it may be suggested, have continued to invite the
viewer to believe in the authenticity of their expression.

Analysis of the contemporary exhibition catalogues in conjunction with an
understanding of how these works would have been displayed within an institutional
context suggests that the viewer would have been presented with a series of small and
informal images representing the recurrent theme of the interior. Both the sketchy
informality of these works, some of which were executed on a primed cardboard surface
in a distemper, watercolour or pastel medium, and their repetitive iconographic theme
seem to lend a cohesive integrity to their vision. Whilst there would have been an
overall simultaneity of presentation, the small dimensions of Vuillard’s works of this
period would, in addition, have drawn the viewer into an exclusive physical proximity
with the individual work. Craning their neck in order to view, for example, the twenty-
eight by thirty-six centimetre oil on cardboard painting of the 1890’s entitled, Après le
repas [fig. 7], the individual viewer’s head and gaze would have been forced into an
intimate relation with the work and its painted surface. In her analysis of the metaphoric
properties of miniature objects, Susan Stewart has suggested how the exaggerated
interiority of the miniature offers a transcendent image of the world which acts as ‘...a
metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject...’. But it is a
transcendent image which may only be realised through the process of looking, since in
holding the miniature object, ‘our bodies erupt into a confusion of before-unrealized
surfaces’, which de-materialise the boundary between body and object, contaminating

65 See, for example, the catalogue to the third exhibition held at the Le Barc de Boutteville gallery in
November 1892. Vuillard exhibited seven small works, including a pastel and a watercolour alongside
the five other representations of interiors, some of which were executed in oil on cardboard. See, for
example, catalogue number 183, entitled La Ravaudeuse of 1891 [fig. 2]. Galerie Le Barc de
Boutteville, no. 3 (1892), p. 16. In his previously quoted review of the exhibition, Gustave Geffroy had
bemoaned the informality of these ‘croquis, taches, ces jets hardis de lignes’. Geffroy (1893), p. 382.
Vuillard’s works with the smaller dimensions of the miniature, the diminutive size of these paintings
suggests that parallels in modes of viewing may be drawn.
the self-enclosed purity of the miniature world.67 The physical proximity of the viewer’s head and gaze required in order to view a work such as *Après le repas* would, it may be suggested, have effectively removed the viewer as a larger corporeal integrity from the compositional space of the painting whilst simultaneously reinforcing their visual and unconscious identification with the imaginary world of the image.

As Stewart’s account suggests, the framing of the miniature object plays an important role in both determining the direction of the subjective gaze and maintaining the integrity of the image. A survey of Vuillard’s journals from this period will perhaps demonstrate the consistency with which the painter enacted a process of framing and containing the exuberant plenitude of the miniature interiors he sketched. A page [fig. 8], for example, from the first *carnet* contains three small sketches of interiors in which the framing opportunities provided by internal structures such as doorways and windows are explored to evocative effect whilst these simultaneously echo the forceful containment of the sketches upon the material surface of the page. It is, significantly, the nude or semi-draped form of a voluptuous yet lightly drawn female body that foregoes containment in this instance, constituting a whimsical visual and possibly connotative, juxtaposition to the insistent containment and delineation of the sketches of interiors. The act of framing an image, as Stewart further suggests, is also necessarily an act of exclusion. A survey of Vuillard’s painted works of this period will demonstrate initially, how full the spaces of the paintings appear and subsequently, the extent to which this intensity tends to preclude the viewer from realising the interior’s spatial relation to the material and imaginary world that is excluded. It may be argued, however, that the spatial compactness and perspectival blindness of a painting such as *Après le repas* would actually have rendered this image profoundly evocative to the contemporary viewer. For the exclusionary framing of the space of the image would have refuted the realities of urban existence, rendered explicit in the cross-section engravings of the *Le Magasin Pittoresque* [fig. 9], and played instead, to the city dweller’s illusory desire for a living space that was isolated as much from those apartments which surrounded it as it was from the public and chaotic space of the city.68

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68 Reviewing Vuillard’s solo exhibition held at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in 1908, two critics made similar references to the ‘completeness’ of Vuillard’s small paintings compared to his large decorative panels. F. Monod, ‘Chronique, exposition de M. Vuillard’, *Art et Décoration*, supplement, vol. 23 (March 1908), p. 3; C. Morice, ‘Revue de la quinzaine, exposition Vuillard’, *Le Mercure de France*, vol. 72 (March 1908), p. 358. See also Paul Frantz Marcou’s description of ‘The Modern House in
It has been suggested that the diminutive dimensions of Vuillard’s paintings necessitate the physical proximity of the viewer’s gaze. It is however, a significant ambiguity of Après le repas and other paintings that as the viewer draws closer in an attempt to gain a better view, the clarity of the image is increasingly foreclosed by the materiality of the painting’s formal arrangement. The stippled density or broad opacity of the matte brushwork refuses to coalesce into illusionistic form, an effect which is heightened by the arbitrary manipulation of light and shade which telescopes the planes of the pictorial space into individual and barely descriptive layers of colour and pattern. The gaze is forced to wander slowly across the dense, non-perspectival surface of the image, attempting in turn to focus upon one discernible area of heightened colour or contrasting pattern in order to gain a solid understanding of what it might signify. But this is a process which simultaneously absorbs the viewer’s gaze and confuses it, for in attempting to focus upon one particular point, one which seems more discernible than the others, those that surround it fall away into formlessness. Though the viewer is aware that these individual patches of colour and pattern refer to something different from those that surround it, that they may even signify something quite specific, the shape of a figure to the left, a table and its contents at the centre or an open door to the right, these refuse to materialise into a discernible and satisfying whole. It might, at this point, be interesting to compare the opaque materiality of the pictorial surface of Vuillard’s Après le repas to the transparent illusionism of, for example, Gustave Caillebotte’s 1876 painting, entitled Déjeuner [fig. 10]. Both images draw upon the ritualistic iconography of food and its consumption and, by association, the theme of physical and psychic sustenance. The contradictory formal treatment of a similar subject leads however, to fundamentally different significatory effects. In the Caillebotte image, the deep three-dimensional illusionism of the pictorial space and the diversity of its

‘It is there that at the present time we meet with the real type of Parisian residence, combining every modern comfort and convenience, all the numerous arrangements to charm the sight and make life pleasant, to isolate each tenant from contact with those above and beneath, to separate him also from the family living alongside him on the same landing, to make him forget that in one of these horizontal slices of house superposed like a chest of drawers, he is not entirely chez lui, and, in a word, to produce as far as possible the illusion of being in his own house, while sparing him the burdens and cares incident upon a house-owner.’

69 Yve-Alain Bois has suggested that, like Matisse, Vuillard turned ‘pattern into a brake, a shock absorber, like the soft pedal on a piano.’ Y.-A. Bois, ‘On Matisse: The Blinding’, October, no. 68 (Spring 1994), p. 89.
surfaces and textures are rendered immediately tangible by the transparency of the painted surface. This is a painterly transparency that is echoed in the cold light reflected off the surface of the table and its glass contents which point to the material wealth of the space and its occupants at the same time as they render the icy austerity of the figures’ psychic and physical connection immediately present to the irrevocably implicated viewer.\textsuperscript{70} The transparent quality of the painted surface serves, in effect, to render the connotative significance of the painting instantly and acutely apparent. As such, the physical and psychic austerity implied by the Caillebotte image and its transparent surface constitute an interesting foil to the physical and psychic plenitude suggested by both the title of \textit{Apres le repas} and the complex materiality of its surface. When the opaque formal arrangement of \textit{Apres le repas} is combined with the painting’s paucity of narrative content, signified by the impassive outward gaze and stance of its female figure, all sense of the image’s temporality is arrested. This effects a dual response. The viewer is both seduced into an ‘entropic’ contemplation of the painting’s formal properties at the same time as they are invited by the generic familiarity of its subject matter into a subjective search for meaning which, as Yve-Alain Bois has suggested, appears to lie ‘below the threshold of perception’.\textsuperscript{71}

The physical properties of Vuillard’s \textit{tableautins} tend to direct the viewer’s gaze to the interior, drawing attention to the interior as their subject through the miniaturised interiority of the object itself, its capacity to frame the interior by a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, the density of their formal arrangement induces the viewer to see the interior as a site of familiar yet subjective experience, seducing them into accepting the psychological authenticity of Vuillard’s expression, whilst reassuring the viewer of the value of their own subjective response. Their physical properties would, therefore, certainly suggest that the \textit{tableautins} of this period


\textsuperscript{71} Bois (1994), p. 89. It is Bois who has most evocatively noted the seductive formal properties of Vuillard’s work:

‘Vuillard’s art assumes an entropy of the gaze: I slow down, I take more and more precautions as I move around the decorative lacework, little by little the figure emerges from its dense milieu, and I end up plunging with it into the soft depths of the carpet. Or again, as André Gide remarked...Vuillard “speaks almost in a hushed voice, as if confiding in someone, and...you have to lean over to listen to him.” Vuillard’s painting forces you to concentrate; it absorbs you and lets you know that it is doing so; and once you’ve discovered the figure in the carpet, there is no way of ignoring it.’ (p. 90)
were both produced, exhibited and received within the context of contemporary notions of the interior. This was the cultural investment in the interior as the site of authentic aesthetic and psychological experience that reached its climax in the years between de Fleury’s optimistic and ‘modernist’ application of the adjective ‘intimistes’ in the late 1880’s and Mauclair’s reproachful use of ‘intimisme’ as an instrument of nostalgia in 1906.

In her influential book of 1989, Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style, Debora Silverman traces the fin-de-siècle cultural phenomenon of ‘the retreat to the interior’ and its appropriation of pre-revolutionary political and stylistic ethics to the de Goncourts brothers. Having claimed in relation to the devastation wrought by the Second Empire building development of Haussmanisation that ‘the interior is dying’ and that ‘life threatens to become public’, the de Goncourts had by 1869 installed their vast collection of eighteenth-century rococo objets d’arts into a private mansion at Auteuil.72 In 1881 Edmond de Goncourt published his two volume work La Maison d’un artiste, in which the aesthete listed, in conjunction with a series of commissioned photographs, detailed descriptions of the aesthetic superiority and decorative arrangement of the individual objects and furnishings adorning this house.73 Influenced by the de Goncourts, ‘the retreat to the interior’ constituted a cultural phenomenon that developed in a variety of artistic, decorative and literary contexts over the course of several decades, culminating most explicitly in the 1890’s with the organic and febrile forms of Style Moderne and Art Nouveau.74 Though the de Goncourts had taken care to emphasize the individual and personal qualities of the interior over the anonymity of public existence, an ethic that structured the majority of ‘the retreat to the interior[’s]’ cultural manifestations, it was well-publicised developments in the field of contemporary psychology that leant a public impetus and specifically modern aspect to notions of interiority during the final decades of the nineteenth century.75 At the same time, however, the psychologie nouvelle rendered, in

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72 Silverman (1989), p. 20
73 E. de Goncourt, La Maison d’un artiste, 2 vols., (1881) 1931.
74 In the interests of brevity, the intricacies of the development of the ‘retreat to the interior’ are acutely summarised here.
75 Silverman (1989), p. 75. See, for example, J. Bois, ‘Les Guérisons par la pensée’, La Revue, vol. 35 (October 1900), pp. 29-30, in which the writer seeks to explain recent developments within the discipline of psychology by reference to ‘unwelcome visitors’ in the ‘mental chamber’. Bois recommends the following steps as a means of maintaining mental health:
theory at least, the boundaries between public and private, exterior and interior, unstable. Portrayed as a refuge from nervous diseases, such as neurasthenia, that were thought to plague modern urban existence, the powerful fluidity of such diseases coupled with the new found suggestibility of the human psyche, proposed that the interior like the mind itself, was profoundly susceptible as a site of sensorial overstimulation and psychic projection.\textsuperscript{76}

It is ‘the retreat to the interior’ and the significance awarded to this space as a visual and psychic representation of its occupant and site for authentic aesthetic and psychological experience which has been taken up by more recent studies of Vuillard as the cultural and iconographic impetus for his work.\textsuperscript{77} The validity of these arguments is, to a greater extent and as this study has demonstrated, undeniable. The historical evidence pointing to the significant role played by the Naturalist art theories of Émile Duranty, most notably those expounded in his essay of 1876 ‘La Nouvelle peinture’, has for example, been justifiably well documented.\textsuperscript{78} It was in this essay that Duranty promoted his belief that painting should draw its subjects from modern life whilst deploying new stylistic techniques in order to portray the atmospheric and pictorial effects of vision and subjectivity.\textsuperscript{79} Duranty further stated that painting should situate its subject within its most suitable environment, paying attention as much or even more, to

\begin{itemize}
\item 1. Retirez-vous chaque jour dans un appartement tranquille et demeurez seul dans le silence. - 2. Prenez la position la plus reposante possible, dans un fauteuil commode, par exemple... - 3. Fermez la porte de votre pensées au monde extérieur...
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{76} See the chapter Silverman devotes to the \textit{psychologie nouvelle} and specifically, Charcot’s influential status as both a medical psychologist and decorative arts enthusiast, for a more detailed exploration of these theories. Silverman (1989), pp. 75-106. For contemporary theories of neurasthenia and the chaos of urban existence see M. Manacéine, \textit{Le Surmenage mental dans la civilisation moderne}, (1885), trans. 1890; Dr. F. Levillain, \textit{La Neurasthénie}, 1891; M. Nordau, \textit{Degeneration}, (1895), trans. 1913.

\textsuperscript{77} Sidlauskas (1996), p. 73. Also see Sidlauskas, Ph.D. dissertation, 1989 and N. Forgione, ‘Édouard Vuillard in the 1890’s: Intimism, Theater, and Decoration’, Ph. D. dissertation, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, 1993, pp. 216-57 in which Forgione argues that Vuillard held the same ‘pre-occupation with milieu’ as the de Goncourts, J.-K. Huysmans, Symbolist theatre and music, as well as the new psychology.


\begin{quote}
‘In real life views of things and people are manifested in a thousand unexpected ways. Our vantage point is not always located in the center of a room whose two side walls converge toward the back wall [...] Our peripheral vision is restricted at a certain distance from us, as if limited by a frame, and we see objects to the side only as permitted by the edge of this frame.’ (p. 45)
\end{quote}
the background as to the figure since the ‘...language of an empty apartment must be clear enough to enable us to deduce the character and habits of its occupant.’\textsuperscript{80} It is this theory of the independent and individualistic characteristics of the interior that has gained particular currency in relation to Vuillard’s work. Duranty’s proclamation that the ‘very first idea’ of \textit{la nouvelle peinture} was ‘to eliminate the partition separating the artist’s studio from everyday life’ should, however, be considered more evocative of the spatial and material relations that governed and determined Vuillard’s practice.\textsuperscript{81}

Whilst the credibility of Vuillard’s status in relation to ‘the retreat to the interior’ may not be refuted, the latter’s claims to metaphorically represent the individual and the beliefs upon which this and the art historical response to it have been based may, however, be contested. For neither the bourgeois ideology of domesticity nor the discursive inscription of the material and psychic relations of class and sexual difference may be divorced from ‘the retreat to the interior’ and its modes of representation. The notion of an individuality located outside the ideological conditions of society is as much an \textit{illusion} as ‘the retreat to the interior’ constituted an \textit{illusory} identification with domesticity. More than this though, ‘the retreat to the interior’ describes a gendered experience; its masculinity is implicit within the title ascribed to it. ‘The retreat to the interior’ was dependent upon an ability ‘to come and go’. It assumed and continues to assume, a freedom to traverse the boundaries between public and private, exterior and interior, at the same time as it presumed a masculine subjectivity able to project the interior as a new site of cultural interest and a place of refuge.\textsuperscript{82}

Though Duranty’s text of 1876 articulated the writer’s belief that the pictorial representation of an individual and their environment was also and necessarily, an indication of their social position, the subject both in front of and behind the canvas was also implicitly male.\textsuperscript{83} It could be argued that Duranty was simply applying his theory to the male subject as a metaphor for the human subject in general, his belief that a person’s individuality may be expressed through the decorative arrangement of their home was, nonetheless, implicitly gendered. Research has shown that during the period

\textsuperscript{80} Duranty in Moffett (1986), p. 45.
\textsuperscript{81} Duranty in Moffett (1986), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{82} For the artistic effects of the asymmetrical distribution of gendered spatial relations see Pollock (1988), pp. 50-90 and Adler (1989), pp. 3-13.
\textsuperscript{83} Duranty (1986), pp. 43-4:
‘What we need are the special characteristics of the modern individual - in his clothing, in social situations, at home, or on the street...It is the study of the relationship of a man to his home, or the particular influence of his profession on him...’

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of the 1880’s interior decoration was increasingly thought of as a representation of the self, in addition to the previously established bourgeois ideologies of family, class and nation. The self was, nonetheless, necessarily gendered. Male guides to interior decoration focused upon the banality of post-Haussmanisation apartments and the need for the interior to reflect the tastes of its inhabitant, so much so that the worn hollows of a favourite armchair would function as an indexical sign of its absent owner. Texts aimed at bourgeois women, even those written with the intention of encouraging them to become more creatively involved in the decorative arts movement, tended to portray the interior as another female accoutrement, a cosmetic extension of and referent to her irrepressibly present body. By association, the notion of a feminine self as a purely aesthetic object tended to structure those texts that appropriated contemporary psychological theories in order to explore the relationship between the feminine psyche and interior decoration. Rejecting any notion that feminine subjectivity might be projected onto a woman’s interior, these texts consistently focused upon the detrimental effects that unsympathetic decoration and exuberant colouring would have upon women’s already fragile nervous systems. Indeed, the obliteration or objectification of feminine subjectivity in the name of masculine creativity was integral to ‘the retreat to the interior’. Many artists and writers of the fin-de-siècle were influenced, for example, by the heroic decadence of fictional literary figures such as J.-K. Huysmans’ ‘des

84 See L. Auslander, Taste and Power, 1996, for information concerning the development of bourgeois taste during the course of the nineteenth century. See L. Auslander, ‘The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France’, V. de Grazia (ed.), The Sex of Things, 1996, pp. 79-112 for a more concise study of the gendering of consumption during this period. Auslander argues that adding the representation of the self to those of family, class and nation constituted a reflection of the political and social environment at the same time as it purposefully increased and renewed consumer demand for interiors that looked similar yet different from one other. (p. 98) 85 See, for example, E. Cardon, L’Art au foyer domestique, 1884, p. 23: ‘Au première vue, un excellent physionomiste peut se faire une idée générale de la personne qu’il envisage ou dévisage; il y a des signes certains qui révèlent un caractère ou des passions. Avec un peu d’habitude, à l’inspection même superficielle d’un intérieur, on peut de même préjuger ce que vaut l’habitante, le caractère délie beaucoup plus qu’on le pense sur le milieu dans lequel on vit, le fauteuil sur lequel on s’asseoie journellement se modèle sur vos formes et révèle quelque peu vos habitudes.’ 86 See, for example, G. Larroumet, ‘L’Art décoratif et les femmes’, Revue des Arts décoratifs, vol. 16 (April 1896), p. 100: ‘Surtout, vivant chez elles plus que nous, elles s’arrangeront le cadre le plus commode, le plus agréable et le plus flatteur, celui qui conviendra le mieux à leur beauté, celui qui dirigera vers elles et concentrera sur elles le regard et l’attention.’ 87 See, for example, Dr. Foveau de Courmelles, ‘Névroses et couleurs’, La Grande Dame, supplement, vol. 4 (May 1896), p. 11: ‘Ce sont là des faits dont doit tenir compte la femme, et au point de vue de sa nervosité propre que les couleurs vives ne feront que surexciter et au point de vue de sa personnalité charmeresse qu’elle ne peut que diminuer en négligeant les lois des contrastes et couleurs!’
Retiring from the debased sexual encounters of public life into a fantastical and womanless interior created through his own autoerotic consumption and decoration, Huysmans’ obliteration of feminine subjectivity through its appropriation was rendered complete when des Esseintes’ absolute submersion into this space causes him to develop the physical and mental symptoms of a nervous disorder. In an essay of 1902 concerning the celebrated decorative painter Albert Besnard, Frantz Jourdain compared Besnard’s dream of his own retreat to an ideal interior to that of des Esseintes. Women did, however, form a part of Besnard’s emphatically heterosexual and as Jourdain notes, ‘more healthy’ dream; as the ‘mute’ and servile agents of the painter’s silent refuge:

‘Son rêve serait de vivre dans une maison dont les portes sans serrures s’ouvraient silencieusement...Des tapis moelleux s’étoufferaient le bruit des pas; des tentures épaisse arrêteraient les sons extérieurs. Le service serait fait par des femmes blondes, muettes et vêtues d’étoffes roses...Toute la vie passée ainsi dans un reposant silence, dans une lumineuse clarté, enveloppée voluptueusement par les calmes tiédeurs du foyer, loin du vacarme de la rue qu’on oublie, qu’on ignore, tout à l’art qui vous berce et vous enivre de ses hypnotisantes hallucinations.’

It may be argued that femininity as anything more than an aesthetic fantasy was largely excluded from ‘the retreat to the interior’ in its diverse cultural manifestations because women were considered to be too closely identified with the non-transcendental arena of the domestic in its ideological and material form. ‘The retreat to the interior’ could, in effect, only gain validity through the repression or exclusion of the domestic as both an ideological instrument of the bourgeois state and in its material form as a locus of familial relations, domestic labour and sexual difference. It is possible to propose, therefore, that the Third Republic supported two coexistent categories of domestic

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90 The gendered ‘separation of the spheres’ that differentiated public from private, exterior from interior and masculinity from femininity within nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology and society has been documented to such an extent that compiling a comprehensive list of references is difficult. Useful primary sources that mark its consolidation during the Second Empire include: P. Janet, La Famille, leçons de philosophie morale, 1856; Mme. Romieu, La femme au dix-neuvième siècle, 1858; A. de Margerie, De la famille, leçons de philosophie morale, 1860. For a more republican sense see the bibliography for texts by Jules Simon or A. Fouillée, ‘La Psychologie des sexes et ses fondements physiologiques’, La Revue des deux mondes, vol. 5 (1893), pp. 397-429. For secondary sources see J. F. McMillan, Housewife or Harlot, 1981 and B. G. Smith, Ladies of the Leisure Class, 1981. For feminist challenges to the ‘separation of spheres’ see: K. Offen, ‘Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France’, American Historical Review, vol. 89, no. 3 (June 1984), pp. 648-76 and Silverman (1989), pp. 63-74. For the artistic effect see Pollock (1988), pp. 50-90 and Alder (1989), pp. 3-13.
interior. The first, the ‘domestic’ or foyer domestique, the site of the material and ideological relations of bourgeois society. The second, the ‘interior’ or intérieur, an externally developed fantasy which flourished under the repression of the former. Operating in relation to the spatial demarcations and radically different subject positions produced by the bourgeois ideology of the separate spheres, this distinction was inscribed in the language of contemporary dictionary definitions. These distinguished between the feminine space of the foyer domestique and the more gender neutral and implicitly masculine concept of the intérieur. While the intérieur constituted a non-material or imaginary space, the liberated subject of aesthetic, literary and psychological discourse; the foyer domestique remained its all too real other.

Highlighting a disjuncture between these two gendered notions of the fin-de-siècle interior demonstrates the extent to which art historical interpretations of Vuillard’s work have, in turn, repressed ‘the domestic’ in favour of ‘the interior’. The effect has been to construct an illusion of Intimisme as psychological access and authentic expression, the material evidence of the artist’s sympathetic yet objective identification with his subject. An illusion is most simply defined as a sensorial, usually visual, deception enacted through a process of masquerade. It is tempting to argue that art historical interpretation has, in effect, been deceived by ‘the retreat to the interior’[s] illusionary identification with the domestic interior as much as it has been deluded by the seductive physical properties of Vuillard’s small works.

Though functioning within the institutional parameters of ‘the retreat to the interior’, Vuillard’s paintings nonetheless enact a more profound and ambiguous engagement with the ideological and material space of the foyer domestique than the Intimiste illusion has otherwise allowed. An analysis of the contemporary critical response to Vuillard’s early works demonstrates, for example, the extent to which art historical interpretation has undervalued the ideological capacity of their domestic iconography. A number of critics did refer to the subtly engaging qualities of the paintings’ formal properties, the product of Vuillard’s subjective approach. In his preface to the fourth Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes of 1893, at which Vuillard exhibited a single painting entitled Deux fillettes, Camille Mauclair wrote briefly of ‘...l’âme profonde et sourdement passionnée de M. Vuillard...’. In May 1894

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91 Larousse (1866-1890), pp. 690 & 751, Foyer and Intérieur respectively.
92 Galerie Le Barc de Bouteville, 4th exh. cat. (1893), preface by C. Mauclair, p. 8.
Vuillard was amongst a number of Nabi painters who were invited to exhibit at the Paris offices of the newspaper, *La Dépêche de Toulouse*. Vuillard exhibited four paintings, *Réunion électorale* and *Intérieur* as well as two paintings which are likely to have been amongst those exhibited at the third Le Barc de Boutteville show of 1892, *Femme couchée* [fig. 1] and *La Ravaudeuse* [fig. 2]. Reviewing this group exhibition Homoder, the art critic for the *La Dépêche de Toulouse* wrote of:

‘M. Vuillard, un peintre d’intérieurs d’une exquise finesse, d’une vision extraordinairement subtile et douce - témoin son *Intérieur* et sa *Femme couchée* - et qui, par surcroît, est très maître de sa palette et de sa brosse...’

Whilst referring to the personal and evocative qualities of Vuillard’s approach, as G. Albert Aurier had done in his previously quoted review of 1892, labelling Vuillard ‘...un poète qui saura dire, non sans quelque ironie, les douces émotions de la vie, les attendrissements des intimités...’, the critical reception simultaneously refused or failed to respond to these paintings of interiors as representations of individual feminine subjectivity. Instead, the majority of critics received the works as decorative genre paintings, with their many references to the silence of the interiors pointing to the works’ perceived lack of narrative content. For a number of critics the female figure played a role equivalent to the mute women of Albert Besnard’s ideal interior as the silent agents of the viewers’ aesthetic pleasure. In a review of the fifth Le Barc de Boutteville show for example, Maurice Cremnitz cited Vuillard as ‘un artiste uniquement épris d’attitudes féminines’. The critic proceeded to invoke the ‘warm breath [of the female figures which] mists up the twelve tableautins’. In particular reference to a painting of 1893, *L’Atelier* [fig. 11], Cremnitz contrasted the ‘strong’ appearance of the intruding male figure to the subtle decorative effect created by the ‘usual hosts’ of these interiors:

‘Ce sont toujours des femmes en effet dont la tiède haleine embue ces douze tableautins, dont les contours gracieux indiqués en lignes tremblées et comme émues et comme caressantes peuplent ces intérieurs aux tentures mouchetées. Une seule fois, on voit apparaître une forme masculine, mais c’est dans l’entrebâillement d’une porte, et comme demandant pardon de l’illicite intrusion; et encore, cette flexibilité de

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94 Aurier (April 1892), p. 486.
96 Cremnitz (December 1893), p. 232.
taille, l'élegance de ce corps et les longs cheveux encadrant ce visage
l'apparent fort aux hôtes habituels des toiles de M. Vuillard.97

For André Fontainas, reviewing a group show, Les Dix, held at the Vollard
gallery in 1897, Vuillard's approach to his subject absolutely resisted any sense of
activity or psychological drama, provoking instead an archaic fantasy of domestic peace
and stability:

‘Voici, c'est aux toiles de M. Vuillard, les heures s’attendrir
gris en la paix adoucie des chambres de chaque jour, où les meubles se
tassent en des coins familiers, où s’assoupissent d'être reguliers et surs
les même gestes de mèmes gens. Sans doute les lueurs plus vives d’ici,
de là, papillotent et jouent parmi les tapis, les tentures des fenêtres, le
bois luissant des chaises et des tables, flammes soudain ou fleurs riches
d’étincelles. Non! les demeures restent silencieuses sous la torpeur calme
des soirées vieillies, et la lampe éclaire pâle des scènes silencieuses et
graves; des utensiles se groupent en un angle de la cuisine, tout ce qui fait
le charme utile des intérieurs paisibles s’évoque avec tranquilité au
recueillement amoureux du peintre, et tout cela est d’une grâce nouvelle,
discrète et enthousiaste, d’une observation ingénieuse et fine.98

The domestic aspect and therefore potential ideological significance of Vuillard’s
representations of the interior are perhaps, most implicitly contained within the recurrent
uses of the terms ‘intimité’ and ‘intimités’ over intimisme as the critics’ favoured means
of description.99 Earlier in his unusually lengthy critique of Vuillard’s work, Maurice
Cremnitz had referred to both Vuillard and Bonnard as ‘deux exquis intimistes’, locating
their significance within a specific lineage of French painters who looked back to the
work of Watteau and Chardin.100 For Cremnitz, however, the ‘painter of intimacy’ does
not focus upon the interior as a locus of psychic projection and visual hallucination but
as the site of domestic and thereby national stability, peace and order. Citing Vuillard
and Bonnard specifically, Cremnitz claimed:

97 Cremnitz (December 1893), p. 232.
98 Fontainas (May 1897), p. 411.
99 See, for example, Aurier (April 1892), p. 486; Marx (28 November 1892), p. 2; T. Natanson, ‘Un
Denis, Ibels, Hermann Paul, Vuillard etc.’, La Chronique des Arts et de la curiosité, (14 April 1900), p.
140; Fagus, ‘Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Maillol, Roussel, Vallotton, Vuillard’, La Revue blanche, vol. 28
(1902), p. 216; M. Denis, ‘Le Salon d’Automne de 1905’, (15 November 1905) repr. in Du Symbolisme
100 Comparisons to the work of Chardin and Watteau have tended to re-occur. For contemporary
references see T. Natanson, ‘Une date de l’histoire de la peinture française’, La Revue blanche, vol. 18
décoratif, no. 75 (December 1904), p. 230.
'Ce qui nous enchante en leurs toiles, c’est ce qui nous charme en celles de Chardin et de Watteau, c’est ce spécial et délicieux instinct qui fait le peintre d’intimité, c’est qu’ils savent fixer ce bonheur très calme et très doux, insaisissable papillon qui semble voltiger dans l’atmosphère d’une chambre amicale, c’est le chuchottement qui rôde dans les coins de pénombre, c’est la lumière amie et l’abat-jour, la ligne plus souple et plus harmonieuse des objets qui nous sont habituels, ce frôlis d’étoffe et cette gracilité de geste, l’œil effaré du baby et le regard attendri de la mère, la femme qui lit ou qui coud, enfin toutes ces attitudes, qui plaisent, de l’animal en son gîte.'

Creminitz’s emotive yet ephemeral references to intimacy as ‘...ce bonheur très calme et très doux, insaisissable papillon qui semble voltiger dans l’atmosphère d’une chambre amicale...’ is indicative of the term’s late nineteenth-century deployment as a powerful instrument of bourgeois ideology. L. Murard and P. Zylberman have traced the development of intime from its various religious uses in the seventeenth century, as a means to describe the intensity of relationships between divine beings and the human soul or as a solitary and pénitent retreat, to the development of its more subjective and domestic meanings during the course of the eighteenth-century. The duality of its original use remained, however, in the late eighteenth-century deployment of the term intime to describe the Cartesian subject’s experience of the union between the body and the mind and the development of the term intimité between 1760 and 1830 to describe the conception of a new relationship between the close-knit family unit and its appropriately private dwelling place. As Murard and Zylberman argue, the nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of a new term, ‘les intimités familiales’, between ‘la scène publique’ and ‘les liens confidentiels’ which attested to the consolidation of intimacy as an instrument of bourgeois ideology. Divorced from any negative connotations and concomitant with the rejection of corporeal and non-procreative sexual functions as described by Michel Foucault, ‘intimités familiales’ came to represent, more than any other term, the sentiment of modern bourgeois morality. As the many mid to late nineteenth-century texts concerning the morality of the bourgeois family attest, intimacy constituted an ideal state of being within bourgeois domesticity, the apotheosis

101 Creminitz (December 1893), p. 231.
104 Murard & Zylberman (1976), p. 239.
of the bourgeois ideology of the separation of the spheres of public and private life. As such, it was deployed as a simultaneously evocative yet ephemeral means of reinforcing and guarding the differences structuring the binary oppositions between public and private, interior and exterior, masculinity and femininity. It is within this context that Cremnitz and other critics referred to Vuillard as a ‘painter of intimacy’, that is, in effect, as a producer and re-producer of the social and patriarchal relations of bourgeois domesticity. More than this though, the critical reception identified Vuillard as an artistic guardian of bourgeois ideology at the critical historical moment when republican politicians were seeking to defend the stability of the economic, political and social relations of bourgeois domesticity against the reformist challenges of a number of political factions, not least radical political feminism.

Though the majority of critics effected a wholly positive response to Vuillard’s representation of the domestic interior, others dissented. This was not, as recent art historical interpretations might lead one to presume, a reaction against the overt presentation of psychological and gendered tensions in the representation of the domestic interior. Rather, those critics who did respond negatively tended to criticise Vuillard’s paintings for their increasing lack of originality. Reviewing, for example, the sixth Le Bare de Boutteville exhibition in March 1894, at which Vuillard exhibited an unidentified painting entitled *Soir*, Alfred Jarry refused to discuss the work of Vuillard and several other artists because ‘...elles n’ajoutent ni retirent à ce qu’on a vu d’eux.’

A year after his wholly positive review of 1897, André Fontainas critiqued the Nabi group show held at the Vollard gallery at which Vuillard exhibited the, once again, unidentified works *Thé, Cirque* and several *Intérieurs*. Though he claimed that these paintings were ‘délicieuse et parfaite’, Fontainas seemingly reacted against the repetitive insistence of Vuillard’s practice, suggesting that the artist had succumbed to a reprehensible sense of self-satisfaction:

‘C’est pour lui surtout que l’impression remportée cette année est ingrate, non qu’en soi, son exposition n’attache et n’intéresse, mais elle

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106 See, for example, A. de Margerie, *De la famille, leçons de philosophie morale*, (1868), 3rd ed. 1878, p. 163. In a section entitled ‘Devoirs commun des époux’ de Margerie spoke of intimacy in the following terms: ‘La seconde condition, qui devrait suivre naturellement l’amour et la paix, mais qui, par malheur, ne les suit pas toujours, c’est l’intimité, c’est-à-dire la fusion, la pénétration complète et réciproque des coeurs.’

107 For political and familial feminist challenges to bourgeois domesticity see Offen (June 1984), pp. 648-76.

It was not, however, a perceived lack of originality that pervaded one of the more expressive critical responses to Vuillard’s paintings, its was a reaction to their banality. Reviewing the third Le Barc de Boutteville show of 1892 the newspaper *Le Journal* produced a page of cartoons [fig. 12] parodying a number of the works currently on show.\(^{110}\) Three of the seven works Vuillard had exhibited were chosen for caricaturisation, *Le Sommeil* [fig. 1], *Le Chocolat* [fig. 3] and an unidentified watercolour, *Figure de femme*. In each instance the draughtsman Cabriol seized upon the passivity of the female figures in the original paintings as an opportunity for derision. In the caricature of the watercolour [fig. 13], for example, Cabriol draws attention to the static passivity of ‘[u]ne quatrième jeune femme quelconque se laisse froidement dévor er la tête par un crocodile empaillé.’ The latent violence of the draughtsman’s ‘humourous’ response was, however, more forcefully enacted with reference to *Le Sommeil*. In this instance, the body of the sleeping female figure has been cut up in order to become a ‘[f]emme couchée en morceaux’ [fig. 14].\(^ {111}\) The cartoon [fig. 15] parodying *Le Chocolat* effects, however, a less fantastical and certainly more banal response. Having swapped the coffee pot for a vase containing a small broom or duster, the caricaturist responds to the silent isolation of the figures and the impassive gaze of the righthand figure in particular, with sour expressions and the rhetorical question, ‘[e]st-ce bien du chocolat?’

All notions of humour were ejected from Léon-Paul Fargue’s favourable critique of the fifth Le Barc de Boutteville exhibition at which Vuillard is known to have exhibited the 1893 painting, *L’Atelier* [fig. 11]. In his long and evocative review Fargue commented upon the mundane and silent domestic activities of the figures, noting how their actions appear to lack spontaneity as though ‘...chacun répète un rôle et se prépare

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\(^{111}\) Whilst it is valid to suggest that the caricaturist was responding to the formal properties of this painting in which flat areas of colour are emphatically separated from one another, the violent cutting of the female figure is reminiscent of contemporary newspaper headlines concerning the headless remnants of a female corpse recently discovered in an empty Parisian house. See, for example, Anon. ‘La Femme coupée en morceaux’, *Le Voltaire*, (1 November 1892), p. 2.
avec accessoires à une pièce d’existence.’ Fargue proceeded to revel in the ambiguities of the paintings’ formal properties, which the critic referred to as ‘tempérée, ulcérée comme un satin de Liberty en glauque gamme’, and the contradictory effects of their sombre iconography:

‘...des yeux voilés de contacts...l’anime craignant l’inanimé, charme avare des lumières allumées trop tard le soir venant - et une attente lugubre prête à sursauter...’\textsuperscript{112}

It is interesting to note that both those reviews which either criticised Vuillard for the banality of his paintings and the artist’s self-satisfied lack of originality, or praised Vuillard for the formal and iconographic ambiguities of his paintings, tended to suggest that the artist approached his subject with a certain degree of ambivalence. This seems manifestly true of a review of 1892 in which Yvanhoe Rambosson referred to Vuillard’s paintings as ‘un peu déconcertantes’, and more implicitly inferred in a similarly brief review of the same year in which C. d’Hennebaut suggested of an \textit{Intérieur} by Vuillard that it ‘ressort du banal et du convenu’.\textsuperscript{113} Despite its brevity, d’Hennebaut’s almost throwaway comment that Vuillard’s \textit{Intérieur} ‘emerges from the banal and the commonplace’ proposes an interesting problem. For the wording of this phrase provokes the playful suggestion that Vuillard’s practice plotted an ambiguous course, drawing upon the materiality of the domestic as the site of ‘the banal and the commonplace’ yet always striving to maintain its distance and therefore, difference.

A passage from the artist’s journal of 1894 would be useful at this point as a means of gaining insight into Vuillard’s understanding of his relationship to the domestic spaces he painted and in which he both lived and worked.\textsuperscript{114} The passage in question has been of particular interest to recent art historical interpretations of Vuillard’s work. More often than not it is cited as a means of demonstrating Vuillard’s passionate interest in the interior as an artistic subject and as a verbal metaphor for the artist’s visual analysis and pictorial construction of its diverse objects and surfaces.\textsuperscript{115} As the following extract demonstrates, Vuillard’s investment in the decorative and formal

\textsuperscript{114} Institut de France, MS 5396, \textit{carnet} 2, (26 October 1894), pp. 50v-2.
\textsuperscript{115} See, for example, Easton (1989), pp. 77-9. The often illegible nature of Vuillard’s journal entries necessitates the use of the translated reproduction featured in Easton’s text.
possibilities of the interior and its objects may not be disputed. The significance which Vuillard attributes to the perceptual distortions effected by a semi-conscious waking state is also of interest:

'This morning in my bed upon wakening I was looking at the different objects that surrounded me, the ceiling painted white, the ornament in the middle, vaguely eighteenth-century arabesques, the mirrored armoire opposite, the grooves, the molding of the woodwork, of the window, their proportions, the *curtains*, the chair in front of them with its back of carved wood, the paper on the wall, the knobs of the open door, glass and copper, the wood of the bed, the wood of the screen, the hinges, my clothes at the foot of the bed, the four elegant green leaves in a pot, the inkwell, the books, the curtains of the other window, the walls of the court through it, the differences of perspective through the two windows...'

The textual flow between those large objects which immediately fall inside Vuillard’s perceptual range and a more detailed analysis of the decorative and textural properties of the smaller objects and surfaces and the distorting perspectival effects of vision are certainly evocative of the formal properties of a Vuillard painting. It is, however, Vuillard’s interpretation of the personal and artistic significance of these objects and surfaces as outlined in the immediately following section that has thus far received inadequate critical attention:

'Then I was struck by the abundance of ornament in all these objects. They are what one calls in bad taste and if they were not familiar to me they might be unbearable...There I was looking and nothing gave my nerves a shock on the surface, I took interest in each of their qualities, and that was enough to push away distaste. One mustn’t stray into these impressions of a “little master”, as one might have said once; try on the contrary to understand the character; it’s just as difficult, even more so, I think, but very instructive, to understand a vulgar thing (I don’t mean simple), a common thing, as it is to understand a sanctioned thing that has moved you. To thus understand the world was, I believe, the goal originally pointed out by those who first spoke of the modern and of modernity. They were sure of finding in this sincere and unprejudiced study grand emotions and subjects sometimes grand and not always ridiculous...'

The significance which Vuillard gives to the familiarity of the objects and his description of modern life painting as ‘this sincere and unprejudiced study’ would certainly appear

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to support those interpretations that have constructed narratives around Vuillard's objective yet personal identification with his subject. Indeed, it would appear from this extract that it was Vuillard himself who believed in the privileged duality of his professional status as a detached yet familiar observer. But as the above extract clearly demonstrates, Vuillard's empathetic identification with his subject was by no means assured. Indeed, it is clear from this extract that Vuillard's primary concern was one of aspiring to the demands of contemporary modern life painting. Moreover, it was not the strength of the artist's familiarity or identification with his subject that had to be overcome for the purposes of his 'unprejudiced' artistic project. It was the \textit{a priori} presumption of Vuillard's difference and distance from his subject which had to be momentarily put aside in order to realise his familiarity and thereby 'push away [the] distaste' he wanted to feel at its sometimes 'ridiculous' and 'common' vulgarity. The potentially unbearable distaste, even abjection, which Vuillard was initially inclined to feel in front of these objects was a revulsion at their materiality, their banality even, as functional domestic objects.\footnote{See J. Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, (1980), trans. 1982. See New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, \textit{Dirt and Domesticity}, exh. cat., 1992 pp. 21-35 for an interpretation of the relationship between the abject, domesticity and art.} In this way, the act of pushing away distaste, of 'thrusting aside' the abject, may be interpreted as a psychic defense that allows Vuillard to conceptualise the ornamental and aesthetic properties of his subject and thereby regain the integrity of his individuality and professional status.

Though the equation of Vuillard's 'pushing away distaste' with the violent convulsion of abjection may be over-determined in this instance, it brings the previously marginalised possibility of the artist's ambivalence sharply into focus. As Julia Kristeva has stated, the abject in its most elemental form as bodily fluids is '...what disturbs identity, system, order...[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules...[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'\footnote{Kristeva (1982), p. 3} It demonstrates, through the violent yet defensive convulsion of abjection, what the subject must 'permanently thrust aside' in order to gain subjectivity at the same time as it consistently proposes to the subject the perviousness of the social and Symbolic order and therefore, the fragility of subjectivity itself.\footnote{Kristeva (1982), p. 3: 'These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as}
century bourgeois society, the domestic interior in its ideological incarnation as a feminine space and its all too real and repressed materiality (as opposed to the 'emptied out' and appropriated notion of 'the interior'), could present the male subject with a similarly problematic image of the fragility of their own individuality. It was Sébastian Faure, for example, who in 1893 expressed the inexpressible when he launched a vehement assault upon the bourgeois ideology of domestic intimacy in an article entitled 'La Famille'. Faure opened his argument with the statement that '[i]ls sont nombreux ceux qui croient ou paraissent croire que, balotté sur les ondes tempéstueuses de l'Océan sociale, l'esquif humain trouve un asile presque toujours sûr et confortable dans le port "famille".' Rather than provide a refuge for the individual as was commonly believed, Faure argued that it was in '...les langes de la famille que, ligotté, l'enfant contracte des tendances à l'obéissance, des habitudes de servilité.' Seemingly progressive in his criticism of the oppressive power of the family, Faure's theory was however, gendered. For it was the male subject whose 'intellect is atrophied' and whose 'enthusiasm is emasculated' within the institution of the family which '...plus cruelle encore, le guette dans les entrailles de sa mère...l'accompagne, sans le quitter, jusqu'à la tombe.'

In its consistent representation of the domestic interior Vuillard's artistic practice appears to be subsumed into the potentially 'emasculatory' arena of the domestic. At the same time, Vuillard's a priori status as a male artist and the institutional context of his practice presumes to shelter his subjectivity and the integrity of his work. As such, Vuillard's practice deals in ambiguity, plotting an unsteady course between the categories of public and private, exterior and interior, the intérieur and the foyer domestique, masculinity and femininity. By considering the physical properties of the 1893 painting, L'Atelier [fig. 11] it may be possible to negotiate the pictorial inscription of the ambiguity of Vuillard's submersion into and distance from the subject he represents.

L'Atelier constitutes one of the few paintings that depicts the male and female figure together within the space of the domestic interior. As such, it provides a rare and significant opportunity with which to study the formal inscription of sexual difference.

being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - cadere, cadaver.'

121 S. Faure, 'La Famille', La Plume, no. 97 (1 May 1893), p. 203.
122 Faure (1893), p. 203.
As a painting which is also reputed to represent the figure of Vuillard’s older sister Marie Vuillard on the left, and at the centre, the Nabi artist and future spouse of Vuillard’s sister, Ker-Xavier Roussel, it is a painting which also raises the issue of the relationship between the gendering of the representational modes of portraiture and genre painting in Vuillard’s work. More than this though, it is a painting, the product of the artist’s labour, that represents female labour carried out within the private space of the domestic interior, though equally it is a representation of male leisure within this same space. These contradictions are inscribed within the ambiguities of the painting’s formal structure. By taking up the implied viewpoint of the artist in relation to the location of the three figures, the viewer’s immersion into the imaginary interior of the painting appears unequivocal. The viewer is located at the furthest reach from the two points of exit, the central doorway and the large open window to the right. Indeed the viewer is so emphatically implicated within the space that the resolution of the small round table to the immediate right, over which the viewer appears to tower, has fallen away into a blurred mass of brushstrokes. At the same time, however, the complex structural arrangement of the imaginary interior and its objects and the dry and powdery texture of the painted surface foreclose the viewer’s desire for easy visual consumption. Instead, the viewer’s gaze is invited to meander across the surface of the painting focusing, in turn, upon the vertical areas of flat colour or significant pattern that constitute the lefthand female figure, the orange cupboard to the left, the central male figure and the bending female figure to the right. Between these a horizontal expanse of pale blue cloth is the only form which serves to lend a three-dimensional quality to the space. The expanse of pale blue cloth, moreover, constitutes a metonymic symbol of the female figures’ labour. Their conflation is ensured by the reflection of its colour in the face and hands of these two figures. At the same time however, this displacement effectively obliterates the individual physiognomic features of the two female figures. Like the material tools of their labour the female figures have been reduced to papery-thin pictorial motifs, their identity subsumed into the decorative surfaces of the interior. The reduction of the female workers’ identity into surface patterning and the correlation this invokes between femininity, the domestic interior and the pictorial modes of genre painting is juxtaposed by the authority awarded the central male figure. Rendered disproportionately large in comparison to the female figures, the head and torso of the

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male figure cuts emphatically through the decorative pattern of the rear wall and door and, by implication, the surface of the painting itself. As Maurice Cremnitz had inferred in his previously quoted review, the immediacy of the male figure's only fragmentary intrusion serves to break the atemporality of the imaginary interior, announcing the significance of the male figure's difference. It is upon the male figure's more attentively delineated and naturalistic face that the viewer's gaze eventually rests. The exchange of glances between the male figure and the female figure to the left is short-circuited however, by the occlusion of the female figure's gaze, this figure's oblique positioning for the viewer along a more direct axis with the righthand female figure and the centrality of the axis between the viewer's gaze and that of the male figure. It is with the leisurely male figure that the viewer must ultimately identify. Though emphatically implicated within it and despite the authority attained there, the viewer like the male figure, remains an intruder into the imaginary and atemporal space of the interior. Like the male figure, the viewer's and by implication, the artist's ability to cross the threshold into the interior and ultimately, their ability to leave it, remains assured.

It is possible to argue that the connotative meaning of *L'Atelier* is inscribed within the ambiguities of the formal properties of the painting as much as it reverberates between the binary oppositions of late nineteenth-century French society. As such, the ambiguous formal and significatory properties of Vuillard's work may operate as signifiers of the artist's ambivalent physical and professional relation to the spaces he painted. It is valid to assume that Vuillard's pictorial representation of the spaces he both inhabited and worked in reflect something of the artist's familiarity with the physical properties of those interiors and their occupants. Vuillard's perception of his subject was, however, mediated by the social and by implication, spatial organisation of late nineteenth-century French society. Socio-anthropological research has clearly articulated the interdependency of the relationship between the perception of individuals or groups and the physical spaces they occupy.\textsuperscript{125} Art historical research and interpretation has further demonstrated the significatory possibilities of exploring the ideological relationship between spatial organisation, the gendered gaze and visual representation.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{125} See, for example, S. Ardener (ed.), *Women and Space*, (1981) 1993.
\textsuperscript{126} See, for example, Pollock (1988), pp. 50-90 and Adler (1989), pp. 3-13.
The spatial organisation and gendered divisions of the late nineteenth-century domestic interior provoke the suggestion that as much as Vuillard was physically implicated in the interiors he represented, the artist was equally distanced from them. The practicalities of Vuillard’s technical method suggest that by locating his studio in the various Parisian apartments occupied by the Vuillard family during the 1890’s, the artist more than fulfilled Duranty’s desire that *la nouvelle peinture* should ‘...eliminate the partition separating the artist’s studio from everyday life.’ Meeting the demands of modern life painting in such a way inevitably meant subverting the fundamental social and spatial distinction between the domestic interior as ‘private’ and ‘feminine’ and the exterior as ‘public’ and ‘masculine’. This fundamental binary opposition of bourgeois ideology was most vociferously proclaimed during the Second Empire in the highly popular moral philosophy texts of writers such as Paul Janet. In his text of 1856, *La Famille, leçons de philosophie morale*, Janet assigned the man and woman of the household patriarchal titles, ‘le chef de famille’ and ‘la maîtresse de maison’, that defined the separate yet mutually beneficial roles each was intended to fulfill. For the bourgeois woman, the domestic interior was posited as a site of female labour, work that was necessarily domestic and preferably ‘managerial’. More than simply rendering the domestic interior clean and orderly, *la maîtresse de maison’s* function was to produce and maintain the home as a site of male leisure, a benevolent refuge from the hostility and chaos of public life.\(^{127}\) Any potential threat to the paternal authority of the man was ultimately warded off, however, by assigning to *le chef de famille* the supervisory role of approving or rejecting the product of the woman’s labour.

An initial response would assume that Vuillard’s practice subverted the basic organisation of the domestic interior as the site of female labour and male leisure. Though it is known that during the early years of the 1890’s Vuillard shared a studio at *28 rue Pigalle* with Bonnard, Denis and Aurélien Lugné-Poe there is further evidence to suggest that Vuillard most consistently used his own bedroom as a studio.\(^{128}\) As

\(^{127}\) P. Janet, *La Famille, leçons de philosophie morale*, (1856), 3rd ed. 1857, pp. 68-9:
‘Il ne lui faut pas seulement un intérieur bien réglé, ni même un intérieur orné, il lui faut encore un esprit orné. La femme ne doit pas oublier qu’elle est la joie, le charme, la récréation de la famille; le grand principe de la politique domestique est de faire que son intérieur paraisse au mari plus agréable que celui des autres.’

Vuillard became more financially independent, following the turn of the century, the artist used a separate room in the various apartments he shared with his mother, Madame Marie Justine Vuillard, as a ‘studio drawing-room’.129 By dissolving the site of his artistic practice into the spatial environment of the domestic interior Vuillard appears to have rejected the working environment and subverted the codes of the professional male artist. Indeed, Vuillard’s bedroom-studio is more evocative of the working practices and spatial location of amateur female pursuits than the virile and rarefied space of the artist’s studio. The practicalities of Vuillard’s technical method suggest, however, that whilst the location of Vuillard’s practice effectively opened up the more public spaces of the domestic interior to artistic scrutiny, certain barriers remained which ultimately served to protect the artist’s professional status. The majority of Vuillard’s paintings of the domestic interior are spatially located within the public rooms of the apartments: the corridors, the kitchen, the dining-room, the drawing-room and, on occasion, the more private space of his mother’s bedroom. It is in these locations that Vuillard is known to have sketched from life, observing, noting and recording the daily routines of the apartment’s female and, on occasion, male occupants. It was in his bedroom-studio that these numerous and summary sketches were transferred onto the cardboard or canvas surfaces which were to form the easel paintings.130 Opening the wider space of the apartments and their daily routines up to artistic scrutiny did not extend, however, to Vuillard’s own bedroom-studio which, as Jacques Salomon records, remained exclusively the site for the creation and discussion of art.131 In its function as an artistic and predominantly masculine retreat, the relationship between Vuillard’s bedroom-studio and the feminine and more public spaces of the domestic interior as a whole tends to reflect the gendered divisions of the late nineteenth-century domestic interior. Though the fundamental ideological division between the interior and exterior as feminine and masculine spaces remained, republican guides to interior decoration and bourgeois morality increasingly shifted their focus to the domestic interior as a

131 Though it derives from Salomon’s acquaintance with Vuillard during the 1920’s, Salomon’s account of a day spent visiting Vuillard evokes something of the gendered and spatial divides of the apartments. Having borne witness to the creative process of the studio, Salomon tells us that Madame Vuillard announced that lunch was ready: ‘At the first signal telling us that lunch was served Vuillard would whip off his smock, go and wash his hands and promptly join us in the dining-room.’ After the meal the lunch guests would return to the studio-drawing room, while the ‘ladies’ retired to another room with the statement: “We’ll let the gentlemen talk about painting.”’ Salomon in Russell (1971), p. 130.

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microcosmic reflection of bourgeois society as a whole. In doing so, more emphasis was awarded to the gendered divisions within the domestic interior's own internal spaces. Research has demonstrated, however, that as women became more closely identified with domesticity in general, they were increasingly forced to relinquish the private domestic spaces that had traditionally been dedicated to exclusively 'feminine' needs. The boudoir's demise was, nonetheless, the cabinet de travail and the fumoir's gain as men increasingly articulated their desire for a refuge from the 'public' and 'feminine' spaces of domesticity. In his book of 1884, L'Art dans la maison, grammaire de l'ameublement, which became the Third Republic's official guide to interior decoration, Henry Havard referred to the sanctuary of the home and within this space, the relative sanctuary of the different rooms. Comparing the cabinet de travail to the boudoir, for example, Havard noted that the former was devoted to a 'plus élevé' and 'moins futile' use than the latter. As with the other 'masculine' rooms of the domestic interior, the cabinet de travail functioned most notably for Havard as a refuge from the materiality of domesticity, the place in which the man of the house might display his objets d'art and above all, the place where masculine subjectivity was protected:

'...ce soit un lieu aimable où l'on aime à s'enfermer, à méditer, à réfléchir, que ce soit, pour nous, une sorte de refuge intime, un port béni, où il nous soit permis de rentrer en possession de nous-même...'

An early self-portrait of 1888-90, Self-Portrait in a Mirror [fig. 16] suggests something of the ambiguities denoted by the spatial and technical practicalities of Vuillard's method. For it is a painting that explicitly conflates and juxtaposes the spatial signifiers of domesticity with those of professional artistic practice whilst implying Vuillard's simultaneous presence in both. It is a painting which draws attention to the material process of painting a self-portrait by reproducing the artist's own image as it would necessarily have been reflected in a mirror. The mirror in question, with its seemingly mass-produced and non-pretentious bamboo frame, appears to be hanging in an emphatically domestic setting, denoted by the two-tone wallpaper pattern against which it rests. But it is a spatial setting, the material place in which Vuillard is presumed to have painted his own portrait, which seems jarringly at odds with that reflected by the

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133 H. Havard, L'Art dans la maison, grammaire de l'ameublement, 1884, p. 430.
134 Havard (1884), p. 431.
mirror and in which Vuillard’s professional image is reproduced. Wearing an artist’s smock, Vuillard has located the representation and reflection of himself as an artist within the bleak yet more credible space of a professional studio.

To suggest that the practical methods of his approach and the spatial environment in which Vuillard worked allowed the artist to enjoy unlimited yet protected access to his subjects is not to deny the specific circumstances within which these paintings were produced. It is, indeed, the particular environment in which Vuillard lived and worked which enabled him as a male artist to turn his attention to, and produce such a large number of paintings of, the domestic interior. It was this quality which Jacques-Émile Blanche noted in a review of 1904 when he compared Vuillard to Raffaelli, claiming of the former that ‘...il réalise ce qu’avait cherché Raffaelli: l’adresse dans le négligé.’ It was Raffaelli who, according to the (subsequently ironic) terms of Huysmans 1879 critique, had demonstrated the vision of an intimiste with his portrayal of a chiffonnier set against the vast relief of the suburban wasteland. It was the specific circumstances of Vuillard’s practice which enabled him, in comparison, to portray the neglected spaces and female subjects hidden at the very centre of modern Paris. In many ways, it was his female subjects’ location at the heart of the modern city and yet incommensurable ideological, social and physical distance from it, as a painting of 1893 entitled *Madame Vuillard by the Window* [fig. 17] helps to illustrate, that renders Vuillard’s decision to direct his gaze inwards of profound, if ambiguous, significance. Depicted from the side, the female figure’s heavy torso rests on a window sill. Looking down from the apartment, Madame Vuillard’s melancholic gaze is directed with some reticence towards the pictorially absent location of a street or courtyard. In a painting of an equivalent scene featuring a male subject by Gustave Caillebotte [fig. 18], the viewer is invited to identify with the figure’s commanding presence as authoritatively, he surveys the urban scene below. In *Madame Vuillard by the Window*, the surrounding city falls outside the painting’s compositional parameters, though the urban landscape remains acutely present as an absent signifier of Madame Vuillard’s marginal and indifferent relation to it. The viewer’s gaze reaches only so far as the slightly open window of an adjoining room or apartment. Effectively turned inwards, the viewer’s gaze is directed towards the subdued figure of Madame Vuillard which is fixed between the rectangular shapes of this window and the open window to the right.

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possibilities of an urban landscape viewed from the superior vantage point of an
apartment, the viewer is compelled to enact and re-enact the circuitous conditions of
Madame Vuillard's containment. When considering this and similar paintings, it is
impossible to ignore the comparable ease with which Vuillard was able to traverse the
boundaries of gendered space and artistic practice. This was a foregone ideologically
determined freedom 'to come and go' that, it could be argued, is inscribed within
Vuillard's sketchy though self-assured self-portrait of c. 1891-2, entitled *Bonjour M.
Vuillard (Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat)* [fig. 19]. It is a painting that depicts the figure
of the artist wearing the familiar outdoor clothing of bourgeois masculinity. Holding
open a door, the figure eases himself between the realms of the street and the interior.
When considered in relation to her son's relative freedom, Madame Vuillard's pictorial
containment constitutes a fundamental ambiguity of Vuillard's work. It is the primary
concern of the following chapter.

In spite of its romantic rhetoric of artistic origins and creativity, Thadée
Natanson's description of the uneasy yet propitious relationship between the artist and
the domestic interior seems more credible than has previously been warranted. Though
the gendered assumptions of his text may be questioned, the issue of sexual difference,
of the fundamental disjuncture between artist and subject, operates at a significant if
implicit level in Natanson's romantic narrative of Vuillard's artistic practice. But it is
the issue of sexual difference, the binary opposition which structured and determined
every aspect of late nineteenth-century French society, which has been occluded by the
desire to consistently proclaim the *Intimiste*'s privileged, though objective, identification
with his subject, the domestic interior and its occupants. The uncritical belief in
Vuillard's unproblematic physical and psychological access to his subjects has in turn
created an *illusion* of *Intimisme* that has continued to underestimate the potential for
both the concepts of intimacy and domesticity to operate as instruments of the dominant
bourgeois ideology. Introducing the problematics of sexual difference into the critical
analysis of Vuillard's artistic practice does not seek to deny the value or significance of
the consistency with which the artist turned his attention to that often neglected yet
recurrent subject of modernist painting, the domestic interior. Rather, it enables art
historical analysis to focus upon the uneasy relationship between modern life painting
and its repressed *other*, domesticity, within the unusual context of a male vanguard
Vuillard's representations of the domestic interior do not foreclose meaning, they produce and provoke it. They motivate the viewer and art historian to question the particular nature of the relationship between art, the interior, domesticity and the gendered subject within a specific institutional and historical moment. It is between these shifting categories and the binary oppositions which structured them that the significance and meaning of Vuillard's work reverberates.

136 See C. Reed, 'Introduction' in Reed (ed.) (1996), pp. 7-17 for his analysis of the suppression of domesticity in Modernist art and architecture.
Chapter Two

"Maman is my Muse": A Son's Subversive Play

'As the train came into the station he said, with a touching expression: "Maman is my muse."

I never forgot that confession: at our very first meeting Vuillard had revealed his secret. I think that in order to grasp the essential and deeply human quality of his work one must be aware of the tender adoration that Vuillard felt for his mother...'.¹

Originally published in 1953 as part of a posthumous study of the artist written by Vuillard's nephew by marriage, Jacques Salomon, the above quoted extract is of interest for the significance the writer attributed to Vuillard's proclamation, 'Maman is my muse'. Salomon interpreted Vuillard's statement as the artist's 'secret', a confessional admission as to the origins of his œuvre which, Salomon remembers, was revealed to him during his initial meeting with Vuillard in June 1920. The extract is interesting, moreover, for the emphasis which Salomon placed upon his recollection of that first meeting and the significance which both he and Vuillard are deemed to have attributed to the artist's mother, Madame Marie Justine Vuillard, as the originating impetus for his work. If we accept the credibility of Salomon's text, Vuillard's citation of his mother as muse provokes a dynamic conflation of the mythic discourses of artistic origins and motherhood. In both incarnations, as artistic muse or artist's mother, both Vuillard and Salomon appear to ascribe to Madame Vuillard a significant and originating role in the development of the artist's work. It is a role, however, which is rooted in a collective fantasy of emotional indivisibility between a son and his mother and which appears to locate the materially absent Madame Vuillard at the origins of and prior to the 'text'. Idealised as both artistic muse and artist's mother Madame Vuillard becomes

¹ Salomon (1971) p. 125.
doubly inscribed in the self-effacing role of nurturer to, and guardian of, male artistic creativity.\(^2\)

Located prior to the text in her incarnation as *maman*-muse, Madame Vuillard also operated as its *maman*-subject. The paintings which represent the figure of Vuillard’s mother tend to range between the few that are most easily identified as portraits, such as *Madame Vuillard in Profile* of 1898 [fig. 20], and the more anonymous genre scenes representing the familiar figure of Madame Vuillard moving around the spaces of the home. The latter category tends to range between those paintings which portray the artist’s mother at work and those, such as *Le Placard à linge* of c. 1892-5 [fig. 21], which focus more intently upon the figure of Madame Vuillard as a mother. It is the latter category of works which is of present interest because, as will be argued, it is these paintings in which meaning may be seen to function at two symbolic, though related, levels: the public discourse of motherhood and domesticity of Third Republic France and the more private discourse of a son’s repetitive representation of his mother. Whilst *Le Placard à linge* portrays the figure of Madame Vuillard involved in a routine form of domestic labour, it is in effect the female figure’s almost complete absorption into the domestic space and the self-absorption of her mundane activity which pertains most seductively to a powerful symbolic language of motherhood. It may be argued that when the figure of Madame Vuillard is not identified by the painting’s title, as in the case of *Le Placard à linge*, the plump if cropped physical appearance of this figure, and therefore her status as the artist’s mother, is identifiable only to those who are familiar with Vuillard’s work of this period. The key to the figure’s maternal role is, however, located as much in the effacement of the figure’s identity enacted via the painting’s title, which refers neither to the figure nor their activity, as it is inscribed within the physical properties of the work itself. There is a tangible sensuality to *Le Placard à linge*, in which the flat rectangular planes of blurred colour and smudgy pattern which form the painted surface collapse into the imaginary space of the interior, rendering the slow, plump figure of Madame Vuillard immobile and almost indistinguishable. It has been suggested that an individual’s perception of its mother tends to possess an ‘unprocessed quality’ which lends to images

\(^2\) ‘A muse is one of nine sister goddesses in Greek mythology who preside over learning and the arts. They inspire male genius, nurturing rather than generating a creative product.’ J. Bergman-Carton, *The Woman of Ideas in French Art, 1830-1848*, 1995, p. 166.
of the maternal figure a 'uniquely archaic pull'. Though Vuillard's paintings of his mother represent a figure who is mature in age and presumably, no longer 'reproductive', the textural plenitude and physical containment of *Le Placard à linge* provoke comparisons with Mary Cassatt’s contemporaneous representations of women and infants. The smudgy surface and self-contained absorption of the mother and child in Cassatt’s 1891 pastel on paper work, *Baby’s First Caress* [fig. 22] evoke, for example, an equivalent sensuality which, it could be argued, appeals to the most archaic definitions of the maternal body as the child’s primary source of physical and emotional sustenance. In the Cassatt image, of course, the suggested physical, emotional and possibly sexual dialogue between mother and male child takes place within and across the representational parameters of the work. It might be argued that Vuillard’s paintings of his mother articulate a similar though more one-sided phantasmatic dialogue between a son and his mother, but one which also takes place within the process of painting itself, between the artist and his sitter. The effacement of the individual identity of Madame Vuillard articulated by Vuillard’s verbal and visual fantasy of her as *maman*-muse and *maman*-subject, within a creative practice which effectively mythologised the artist’s ability to produce, certainly suggests the prevalence of a powerful fantasy of artistic origins which demands further consideration.

Recent critics and proponents of psychoanalytical theory have explored the relationship between the construction of artistic agency and a metaphorics of the maternal body. In her polemical essay of 1976, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, the feminist intellectual Hélène Cixous sought, through the poetic deployment of parody, repetition and (mis-)quotation, to disrupt the symbolic structures of the phallocentric order’s most oppressive myths of femininity. Both philosophical and psychoanalytical theory has cited femininity as the principle signifier of difference, so it is in the most essential, physiognomic differences of the female/maternal body that Cixous located the visual symbolism required in order to re-inscribe an essential and powerful feminine agency, a site from which to speak. Through allusions to a blissful stage of pre-Oedipal unity

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4 See L. Nochlin, ‘Mary Cassatt’s Modernity’, *Representing Women*, 1999, pp. 201-2 for a brief analysis of the possibly sexual connotations of the provocative glances and gestures of both mother and child in this painting.
5 For a critique of feminist theory’s own nostalgic attempts to recover the memory of the mother, or ‘the “memory” of imaginary oneness with the body of the mother’ see M. Jacobus, ‘Freud’s Mnemonic: Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia’, *First Things*, 1995, pp. 1-22. For a critique of the essentialist topoi in the theoretical writing of Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray see D. C.
between mother and daughter, Cixous developed ‘the maternal metaphor’ as the origins for an ‘écriture féminine’, a means of thinking and writing oneself out of the laws and myths of phallocentrism:

‘Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from “mother” (I mean outside her role functions: the “mother” as non-name and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink.’

Despite its essentialism, Cixous’ metaphorics of the pre-Oedipal child’s (here specifically, a female child’s) sensual relationship with the maternal body may be deployed in order to explore the self-contained sensory communication between the figures of the Cassatt image, Baby’s First Caress [fig, 22]. It is an image which appears to foreground the intensity of the pre-linguistic and pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and infant. Overwhelming iconographic and formal emphasis is placed upon the visual, haptic and possibly olfactory modes of communication as the figures of mother and infant reach out to each other. This sensory indivisibility is rendered most palpable at two of the fleshiest and most sensitive points of the naked child’s body. The female figure gently clasps the child’s pliant left foot in the palm of her hand, the point where the pictorial rendition of flesh touching flesh becomes most indistinct. Simultaneously, the female figure kisses the palm of the child’s hand which, in turn, caresses the skin of the female figure’s face and chin. Displaced onto the textured surfaces of the image, the sensuality of the mother and infant’s self-contained relationship operates across the soft folds and subtle pattern of the female figure’s dress, the smooth and tactile skin of the child and finally, onto the non-descript space which envelops the figures, maintaining the exclusivity of their sensory exchange. The professional and personal impetus for Cassatt’s notably diverse paintings of women and children are the subject of some debate. It is, nonetheless, tempting to suffer the disapproving claims of essentialism for a moment, in order to suggest that the psychic plenitude of the visual and physical exchange between woman and infant in this work specifically, provokes (in the

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contemporary viewer at least) a powerful if simultaneously nostalgic and utopian sense of female artistic agency, a space of difference from which to write an ‘écriture féminine.’

In her formulation of the theory of ‘the Semiotic’, Julia Kristeva deployed a similarly essentialist topography of the maternal body for the purposes of creative agency. In contrast to Cixous, however, Kristeva has developed the theory of the Semiotic in exclusive relation to the subversive potential of male artistic agency. Kristeva’s theory consistently seeks to equate the maternal body’s ‘unsettling of the symbolic stratum’, its uneasy negotiation of the parameters between ‘the Semiotic’ and ‘the Symbolic’, most emphatically visualised in the ‘creative’ act of childbirth itself, with (implicitly male) avant-garde cultural production:

‘The speaker reaches this limit, this requisite of sociality, only by virtue of a particular, discursive practice called “art”. A woman also attains it (and in our society, especially) through the strange form of split symbolization (threshold of language and instinctual drive, of the “symbolic” and the “semiotic”) of which the act of giving birth consists.’

Like Cixous, Kristeva developed a pre-Symbolic, pre-Oedipal and pre-signification phase of intimate connection between the maternal and infant bodies, an imaginary space, the ‘Chora’, where the instinctual drives of the body operate as an archaic language, ‘the Semiotic’. Although the Semiotic must always be superseded by the subject’s entry into the Symbolic order of language and meaning, for Kristeva, the archaic language of the Chora is displayed in its most elemental form as infantile babble or ‘glossalalia’ and within non-infantile speech, in rhythm, intonation, gesture and even silence. Most significantly however, the Semiotic erupts into the Symbolic, even ‘tears it open’ as a subversive act in ‘poetic language’ and avant-garde cultural practice:


K. Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror, 1988, p. 106:
‘Kristeva has been obliged to look rather far afield in her search for these ostensible “feminine” irruptions, passing over all the varied texts to ever have been inscribed with a female signature in favor of the (male) avant-garde.’


...the very practice of art necessitates reinvesting the maternal “chora” so that it transgresses the symbolic order...”13

As with Cixous’ theory of ‘écriture féminine’, it may be difficult to reconcile Kristeva’s theory of the Semiotic with a feminist and critical approach to the history of art. Both writers appear to invest in essentialist notions of feminine difference and the maternal body which threaten to re-inscribe society’s most patriarchal oppositions between masculine and feminine, culture and nature, and so on. Moreover, whilst Cixous exploits the tropes of sexual difference in order to locate a utopian space of female agency, Kristeva seemingly divides society and modes of production into those who ‘create’ culture and women, who also ‘create’ through childbirth. The playfulness of Cixous’ and Kristeva’s methods should not, however, be undervalued. Most notably, their use of fantasy, irony and parody as the means of disrupting phallocentric symbolic structures. Nor should it be possible to undermine their effectiveness in re-dressing the balance of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory which has consistently overstated its concern with the ‘masculine’ realms of the Oedipal and the Symbolic. Despite the immediate similarities of their assumptions regarding the maternal body, there are however, fundamental differences in the conception of the maternal metaphor between the theoretical writings of Cixous and Kristeva. Where Cixous tends to understate the possibility of ambivalence within the archaic relationship between mother and female child, Kristeva foregrounds the maternal subject’s ambiguous and difficult negotiation of the boundaries between the Semiotic and the Symbolic. Rather than romanticise the specific experience of pregnancy and birth, Kristeva refers to the maternal body as ‘the place of a splitting’.14 According to Kristeva, the maternal subject is simultaneously the ‘master’ of a process which cannot be taken away from her and also a ‘filter...a threshold where “nature” confronts “culture”.’ The maternal subject is thereby forced into a conscious/unconscious realisation of the fragility of her position as

13 Kristeva (1984), p. 65. For a more extensive espousal of Kristeva’s theory of the subversive potential of ‘the Semiotic’ see p. 62:
‘Whether in the realm of metalanguage (mathematics, for example) or literature, what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic. This is particularly evident in poetic language since, for there to be a transgression of the symbolic, there must be an irruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of “natural” language which binds together the social unit.’
Kristeva’s theory of cultural production may be deployed as a means of demonstrating the extent to which fantasies of origin, at the expense of maternal subjectivity, are inscribed within the discursive myths of artistic production. Grafted onto the body of his materially absent mother in their collective and nostalgic fantasy of a son’s indivisible relationship with that subject, neither Salomon nor Vuillard were able to entertain even the possibility of the _maman-muse_’s ambivalence, her subjectivity, in fact. The theory of the pre-Symbolic order of the Semiotic and the male artist’s deployment of its tropes certainly provokes comparisons with Vuillard’s citation of Madame Vuillard as his _muse_, the pre-textual and pre-Symbolic nurturer of his artistic talent. It may even be possible to see in the textured and patterned surfaces of a painting such as _Le Placard à linge_ [fig. 21], for example, the eruption of a Semiotic language or glossalalia, displaced from the maternal body onto the formal properties of the work. More than this though, Kristevan theory may be useful as a means of visualising Vuillard’s deployment of his mother, Madame Vuillard, in her dual incarnation as both _maman-muse_ and _maman-subject_, as the repository for a son’s subversive play.

In her important study of the relationship between gender, politics and the avant-garde, itself strongly influenced by Kristevan theory, Susan Suleiman visualises avant-garde cultural practice in the terms of a son’s transgressive use of the maternal body. Invoking Roland Barthes’ metaphor of masculine creativity, across ‘...the body of his mother: in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or to dismember it...’, Suleiman describes avant-garde artistic practice in the following terms:

‘The emblematic subject of male avant-garde practice is...a transgressive son who may, in Roland Barthes’s words, “play with the

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Though Suleiman cites Roland Barthes as the theoretical referent of her ‘playful’ metaphor for transgressive avant-garde cultural practice, Freudian psychoanalysis has consistently drawn links between play and creativity. In a brief essay of 1908, ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ Freud traced the origins of creativity to the imaginative activities of children’s play. Linked by their mutual taste for fantasy, Freud described creative writing as the sublimated continuation of and substitute for the play of childhood. In developing this connection Freud performed his own search for creative origins, stating that it was a contemporary occurrence which awakened in the mind of the creative writer the memory of a childhood experience, re-introducing a hitherto repressed wish which henceforth reached fulfillment via the creative act. According to Freud, therefore, the ‘...work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory.’ Freud’s own search for creative origins seems overly simplistic as a means of describing the creative process. In this instance it does, nonetheless, substantiate the possibility that Vuillard’s paintings of Madame Vuillard constitute an archaic as well as more recent dialogue between a son and his mother. It is however, the repetitive insistence of Vuillard’s practice, the consistency with which he returned to and re-played his subject, which further provokes the suggestion that these paintings operate within the realms of a simultaneously archaic and contemporary discourse. In his essay of 1914, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’ Freud described the compulsion to repeat under the conditions of therapy as the enactment of memories which are repressed. Precluded from remembering an early childhood experience, the patient is impelled to unwittingly and repeatedly act out the experience and its symptoms as a contemporary reality and as a means of working it through. Though cathartic, the compulsion to repeat is necessarily for Freud also a discomforting process.

19 Freud (1908 [1907]), p. 139.
Repetition as a cathartic yet anxiety ridden process was most evocatively theorised in Freud’s essay of 1920, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, though in this instance, with specific relation to the pre-Oedipal child’s perception of its mother. In this essay Freud developed the compulsion to repeat into an instinct which develops in early childhood as the child’s active though anxious response to the absence of its mother. Freud illustrated his theory with an account of the play of a one-and-a-half year old boy, the fort-da game, in which the child endlessly repeated the motion of throwing away a reel attached to a length of string, so that it disappeared into his cot, and then pulling the reel back into view. Each instance of the reel’s disappearance was accompanied by the boy’s utterance of an ‘o-o-o-o’ sound which Freud interpreted as constituting the German word for ‘gone’, ‘fort’, whilst its re-appearance was greeted with the more joyful sound ‘da’, meaning ‘there’. The fort-da game was considered, by Freud, to be a process in which the child made an active response to an experience in which he had previously been passive. By repeatedly staging the process of disappearance and return the child is able to symbolically master the process of his mother’s presence and absence. Freud described the child’s instinct to consistently favour the repeated enactment of the moment of disappearance over that of re-appearance as a painful though ultimately cathartic renunciation of satisfaction which took the psychic purpose of the fort-da game ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. Lacanian psychoanalysis has taken up Freud’s account of the fort-da game as a means of describing the child’s initial and uneasy attempts to enter the Symbolic order of language and meaning. The game of enacting and speaking the mother’s disappearance which initially follows the child’s realisation that his mother, the object, is absent is constituted as the child’s first attempt at symbolisation. A symbolisation which for Lacanian psychoanalysis may only occur following the moment of division, the loss of the primary object, to which the child refers in his game. Enacting this initial moment of loss becomes an ongoing process in the subject’s battle for subjectivity, for the subject ‘...can only operate within language by constantly repeating that moment of fundamental and

22 Freud (1920), p. 284.
irreducible division. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theories are instructive as a means of describing the male child's active though uneasy attempts to master the loss of the primary object and thereby enter into the Oedipal or Symbolic phases. By repeatedly focusing, however, upon the moments of division, loss and their aftermath while neglecting the phase of the pre-Oedipal and pre-Symbolic, both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis have performed their own nostalgic fantasy of the subject's origins which assumes an emotional and physical indivisibility between the young infant and its mother. According to Freud's interpretation of the *fort-da* game the child is willingly and unproblematically immersed into an intense relationship of emotional and physical dependency upon the maternal body, which is only fractured by the mother's absence.

In many ways, both Vuillard's and Freud's fantasy of artistic and subjective origins provoke comparisons with Marcel Proust's literary conception of the narrator's mother in the 'Ouverture' to *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Located at the material origins of the text, Proust's narrator attributes an originating significance to his mother as the nurturer of his creativity and as a guardian of the archaic past, in the present, via memory. More than this however, the maternal figure operates as the primary object of the narrator's childhood. The narrator's most vivid memories of his childhood are of his anxious desire for close physical proximity with his mother which the former describes in terms of a struggle with his father for the exclusivity of her attention. The young narrator refuses to go to sleep without kissing his mother, a brief moment of physical indivisibility between mother and son which the latter anticipates and prepares for in a manner which is equated to the working practice of a portrait painter:

'I never took my eyes off my mother...Mamma, for fear of annoying my father, would not allow me to kiss her several times in public...and as I felt the hour approach, I would put beforehand into the kiss, which was bound to be so brief and furtive, everything that my own efforts could muster, would carefully choose in advance the exact spot on her cheek where I would imprint it, and would so prepare my thoughts as to be able, thanks to these mental preliminaries, to consecrate the whole of the minute Mamma would grant me to the sensation of her cheek against my lips, as a painter who can have his subject for short sittings only prepares his palette, and from what he remembers and from rough

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notes does in advance everything which he possibly can do in the sitter’s absence.\textsuperscript{29}

Though the brief moment of physical union with the object of desire constitutes the narrator’s principle aim, the latter’s anticipation of and detailed preparation for that moment betrays his need to master his mother’s absence and presence in a way which is evocative of Freud’s description of the \textit{fort-da} game.\textsuperscript{30} In a similarly Freudian manner, the narrator strives to delay the moment of the kiss, prolonging the painful period of anticipating the mother’s presence in a renunciation of satisfaction which is intended to stave off the ensuing moment of her absence, which the narrator is similarly unable to control.\textsuperscript{31}

To some extent, however, Proust’s description of the child narrator’s reminiscent feelings towards its primary object suggest that the intensity of this relationship, in which the child ultimately demonstrates his absolute dependence upon the maternal body, produces an ambivalence of its own. Though the narrator feels pleasure in and at the thought of his mother’s presence, these emotions are simultaneously mingled with feelings of fear, at the thought of his mother’s anger, and guilt at having demanded and eventually mastered her presence.\textsuperscript{32} This is not the


\textsuperscript{30} In one attempt to capture and maintain her, at least, mental presence the young narrator sends a letter down to his mother:

‘At once my anxiety subsided; it was now no longer (as it had been a moment ago) until tomorrow that I had lost my mother, since my little note...would at least admit me, invisible and enraptured, into the same room as herself, would whisper about me into her ear, since that forbidden and unfriendly dining-room...had opened its doors to me and, like a ripe fruit which bursts through its skin, was going to pour into my intoxicated heart the sweetness of Mamma’s attention while she was reading what I had written. Now I was no longer separated from her; the barriers were down; an exquisite thread united us.’ Proust (1996), pp. 33-4.

\textsuperscript{31} Proust (1996), pp. 12-13:

‘My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed. But this good night lasted for so short a time, she went down again so soon that the moment in which I heard her climb the stairs, and then caught the sound of her garden dress of blue muslin, from which hung little tassels of plaited straw, rustling along the double-doored corridor, was for me a moment of the utmost pain; for it heralded the moment which was to follow it, when she would have left me and gone downstairs again. So much so that I reached the point of hoping that this good night which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared.’

\textsuperscript{32} Proust (1996), pp. 42-4:

‘Then I saw Mamma herself and I threw myself upon her. For an instant she looked at me in astonishment, not realising what could have happened. Then her face assumed an expression of anger...I ought to have been happy; I was not. It struck me that my mother had just made a first concession which must have been painful to her, that it was a first abdication on her part from the ideal she had formed for me, and that for the first time she who was so brave had to confess herself beaten. It struck me that if I had just won a victory it was over her, that I had succeeded, as sickness or sorrow or
mother’s ambivalence towards the child which Kristeva described but the child’s ambivalence towards the powerful maternal body which Freudian, literary and artistic fantasies of pre-Oedipal mother-infant indivisibility have tended to mask. In her analysis of the very young child, Melanie Klein developed the theory that the newborn baby has two opposing psychic impulses, love and hate, which persist throughout its life but which are initially directed towards its primary object, the maternal body.33 Klein argued that the hate impulse induces the child to fantasize violently attacking the mother’s body and its contents, a fantasy of destruction which the child believes to have actually taken place. This in turn produces intense feelings of fear and guilt in the child, inducing the latter to attempt to enact reparative fantasies towards the maternal body, emotions which persist into adult life.34 Klein’s theoretical analysis of the early infantile psyche is significant in this instance for its refusal to idealise the sometimes violent intensity of the pre-Oedipal relationship between a child and its mother. Equally, Klein’s analysis demonstrates the extent to which the child tends to enact loving and hateful symbolic fantasies of the maternal body which consistently identify the latter as a container, an internal and sometimes even, domestic space which may prompt its own claustrphobic anxieties of entrapment.35 Finally Klein produced her own theory of creative origins, arguing that the creative process and its resultant object constitute a significant means by

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33 M. Klein, ‘Love, Guilt and Reparation’, (1937), repr. in Love, Guilt and Reparation and other Works, 1921-1945, (1975) 1988, p. 306: ‘The baby’s first object of love and hate - his mother - is both desired and hated with all the intensity and strength that is characteristic of the early urges of the baby.’

34 Klein (1988), pp. 308-9: ‘A most important feature of these destructive phantasies, which are tantamount to death-wishes, is that the baby feels that what he desires in his phantasies has really taken place; that is to say he feels that he has really destroyed the object of his destructive impulses, and is going on destroying it: this has extremely important consequences for the development of his mind. The baby finds support against these fears in omnipotent phantasies of a restoring kind: that too has extremely important consequences for his development. If the baby has, in his aggressive fantasies, injured his mother by biting and tearing her up, he may soon build up phantasies that he is putting the bits back together again and repairing her. This, however, does not quite do away with his fears of having destroyed the object which, as we know, is the one whom he loves and needs most, and on whom he is entirely dependent. In my view, these basic conflicts profoundly influence the course and the force of the emotional lives of grown-up individuals.’

which both the child and eventually the adult, attempt to make sublimated reparation towards the maternal body.36

In forging a link between creative origins, artistic agency and the maternal, psychoanalytic theory has focused upon the child’s perception of the maternal body. At the same time psychoanalysis allows for a degree of ambivalence in the child’s perception of that body which is related to variations in the physical and psychic intensity of the mother-child relationship. Something of this ambivalence is expressed in the dependency/mastery dichotomy of Proust’s child narrator who must compete for his mother’s attention and, when able to, watch his mother intently as a means of preparing for the desired moment of physical union. The narrator compares the brevity of these moments and his need to prepare for them to the working method of a portrait painter whose subject is only available for short periods of time. To some extent, however, Proust’s narrator gains creative agency from his ambivalent perception of the maternal body and his memories of it which are located in the archaic past and at the material origins of the text. It is an ambivalence which appears to have no conscious place in Vuillard’s confessional perception of his mother as the originating and nurturing impetus for his artistic practice. It may be that Vuillard’s stated lack of ambivalence derived from the specific context in which he worked and viewed the maternal body. Unlike Proust’s narrator who must compete for his mother’s attention and grasp the slightest opportunity to study the maternal body, the domestic location of his practice and the physical availability of his mother as a subject may have granted to Vuillard the perception, at least, of an advantage which Proust’s portrait painter was unable to enjoy. It may have been this advantage that influenced Vuillard in his choice of subject. The spatial and ideological arrangement of the domestic interiors in which Vuillard worked

36 See, for example, M. Klein, ‘Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse’, (1929), repr. in Mitchell (ed.) (1986), pp. 84-94. In this essay Klein deploys the example of an artist, Ruth Kjar, who Klein describes as attempting to make reparation to the maternal body by painting a number of family portraits directly onto the blank space of a wall in her home. The blank space is described as symbolising the ‘empty space’ within the artist which functions as the sign of her fear and guilt. Klein (1986), p. 93:

'It is obvious that the desire to make reparation, to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself was at the bottom of the compelling urge to paint these portraits of her relatives. That of the old woman, on the threshold of death, seems to be the expression of the primary, sadistic desire to destroy. The daughter’s wish to destroy her mother, to see her old, worn out, marred, is the cause of the need to represent her in full possession of her strength and beauty. By so doing, a daughter can allay her own anxiety and can endeavour to restore her mother and make her new through the portrait. In the analyses of children, when the representation of destructive wishes is succeeded by an expression of reactive tendencies, we constantly find that drawing and painting are used as means to make people anew.'
and the practicalities of his method further suggest that it was Vuillard and not his mother who would have exercised a greater degree of control in determining the artist’s access to the maternal body as an object for artistic study. Nonetheless, if Vuillard did have to compete for his mother’s attention then the practice and apparatus of sketching and painting itself would have granted him a legitimate and protective situation in which to command Madame Vuillard’s presence and to intimately view the maternal body at length. At the same time, however, the intensity of Vuillard’s seemingly unproblematic citation of his *maman*-muse and the repetitive insistence with which he represented Madame Vuillard betray, as Proust’s narrator did, the possibility of Vuillard’s dependence upon and simultaneous need to master the maternal body.

Returning to the c. 1892-5 painting *Le Placard à linge* [fig. 21], it is possible to indicate some of the issues at stake in Vuillard’s portrayal of the maternal body and, moreover, the latter’s symbolic relation to the domestic interior. It may, for example, be possible to interpret the drawn out pleasure of the artist’s gaze in the perceptual slowness required by the viewer in order to decipher the smudgy formal properties of the work. As with the Cassatt image, *Baby’s First Caress* [fig. 22], there is an intensity to the sensory relationship between the child and its mother which appears to be displaced across the surface and in this instance, the parameters of the painting. The viewer is invited to immerse themselves in the visual and textural plenitude of the painting as if to enact and prolong the pleasurable fantasy of physical and emotional indivisibility between the child and its mother. At the same time, however, the visual and textural plenitude of the painting appears contradictorily obfuscatory since more attention is awarded to the domestic interior and its objects than the cropped and barely visible maternal body. It is, indeed, the unwitting self-absorption of this figure as it is fixed by and contained within the objects and surfaces of domesticity which draws attention to the voyeuristic and controlling tendencies of the artist’s gaze. Like Freud’s child in the *fort-da* game who throws his reel into the cot in order symbolically to enact his mother’s disappearance, it could be argued that Vuillard appears to be deploying the objects and surfaces of domesticity in order to play with and master the visibility of the maternal body. The prolonged intensity of the artist’s gaze and the maternal body’s almost complete immersion into the space and surfaces of domesticity suggest a desire to control and contain the maternal body as much as the visual and textural plenitude of *Le Placard à linge* suggests an archaic fantasy of physical and psychic indivisibility. It
is this ambiguous aspect of Vuillard’s maternal iconography which is of particular interest when analysing what is at stake in, and what it means to view and represent, the maternal body in a domestic setting. Might Vuillard have been repeatedly enacting that archaic moment of division, circling around and playing with the primary object as part of an ongoing battle for subjectivity and artistic agency? If these paintings do symbolically enact the construction of artistic agency, then to what extent are ambiguous fantasies of containment and interiority in relation to the maternal body and the domestic interior played out? Do Vuillard’s paintings of the domestically located maternal body foreground a nostalgic desire for immersion in this fantastical space close to the maternal body, as the _maman_-muse statement suggests, or a desire to contain, control and distance its negative connotations? In order to gain a greater understanding of what was and is at stake in Vuillard’s practice it is important to analyse the contemporary discursive construction of the symbolic relation between the maternal body and the late nineteenth-century domestic interior.

An examination of the public discourses of late nineteenth-century French womanhood will demonstrate that the advocacy of motherhood as the apotheosis of bourgeois femininity remained constant from the mid century to the _fin-de-siècle_. As the following statements referring to motherhood as the completion of the cycle and purpose of womanhood, dated 1858 and 1900 respectively, demonstrate:

‘La maternité vient encore agrandir l’influence de la femme et compléter le cycle de son existence, en lui assignent la vraie mission que la Providence lui a destinée.’\(^{37}\)

‘The suppression of love and of the maternal function no doubt modifies the feminine personality on many sides, for a woman who is neither mother nor wife is an incomplete woman.’\(^{38}\)

Contemporary moralists additionally sought to encourage women into motherhood by arguing that it would provide the latter with a powerful means of authority which they would otherwise lack. Though prevalent throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, discourses of biological essentialism and maternal authority reached their ideological and symbolic zenith in visual representations of the Third Republic period. By conflating the representational tropes of traditional Christian

\(^{37}\) M. Romieu, _La Femme au dix-neuvième siècle_, 1858, p. 20.
\(^{38}\) T. A. Seed, _Woman_, adapted from A. Fouillée, ‘Tempérament et caractère’, 1900, p. 98.
imagery with republican representations of the benevolent state as a nursing mother, most effectively represented in Honore Daumier’s *La République* sketch [fig. 23] of 1848, such paintings deployed a seemingly normative symbolic language of natural maternal authority. As Tamar Garb has argued, the natural yet powerful mother was an ideological representational trope that traversed the stylistic and institutional barriers between official and avant-garde artistic factions. It was, for example, equally prevalent in William Bouguereau’s 1878 allegorical painting of a secular Madonna sheltering five children around her statuesque body, *La Charité* [fig. 24], as it was in Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s many *fin-de-siècle* genre paintings of his mistress and future wife Aline nursing their son Pierre, such as *Maternité, ou femme allaitant son enfant* [fig. 25] of 1885. Though less monumentally republican and more overtly sexual in its representation of the male child’s physical response to the fecund maternal body, Renoir’s painting, as Garb suggests, presents an equivalently mythic and ideological image of symbolic maternal power.

Analysis of the many visual and literary texts which espoused the dutiful joys of the maternal function points, however, to a fundamental difference between the symbolic and ideological authority of motherhood and a mother’s actual legal, political and social power. The Third Republican senator, editor of the 1890’s journal *La Revue de Famille* and vociferous spokesman on the political and social status of *fin-de-siècle* femininity, Jules Simon highlighted this difference in an article of 1896, ‘Il faut rester femme!’ In the opening paragraph to a section entitled ‘L’Autorité maternelle’, Simon did refer to the impoverished legal position of mothers but proceeded to negatively compare this inequality to a mother’s absolute symbolic power within the domestic sphere:

‘M. Legouve est l’apôtre le plus convaincu, le plus éloquent et le plus savant de l’autorité maternelle. Il veut que la mere règne et gouverne dans la maison. Vous écririez ce que vous voudrez dans les lois, ce qui est écrit dans les cœurs, c’est la toute-puissance maternelle.’

As Simon’s text appears to suggest, the enshrinement of symbolic maternal power in the late nineteenth century functioned in inverse ratio to legal sanctions against mothers which significantly limited their actual power, even at the level of basic control over their children’s lives. Carol Mossman has theorised this difference between real

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and symbolic power in her study of ‘gynocolinization’ in nineteenth-century French literature, *Politics and Narratives of Birth: Gynocolinization from Rousseau to Zola*. Mossman argues that in post-revolutionary French society the enforcement of a ‘space of difference’ at the level of gender became instrumental as a source of power in a society where difference could no longer be assured at the level of class. Motherhood, therefore, became symbolically enshrined, not as a source of real feminine authority, but in order to ‘maintain a fiction of equality’ in a republican society where democracy was by no means universal:

‘...woman is enshrined in the private sphere where, as mother...she reigns supreme. The enshrinement of motherhood, which hearkens back to Rousseau, becomes necessary in order to maintain the fiction of equality. Woman is equal, but enjoys a separate (domestic) sphere of influence. The ideology of motherhood thus emerges not simply adjacent to, and as if unconnected with, the rise of bourgeois capitalism, but as an attempt to cover over one of republicanism’s fundamental inconsistencies.’

This legal inequality, or ‘fundamental inconsistency’, which sought to lend credibility to the inferior status of women derived from the punitive Napoleonic (Civil) Code of 1803-4 which remained largely intact throughout the course of the nineteenth century. During the early years of the Third Republic, for example, in terms of laws relating to the legal position of married women, the Civil Code continued to insist that wives obey their husbands, that they reside wherever their husbands choose, that they relinquish all financial and property controls to their husbands and defer to their husbands ultimate parental authority.

It was a paradox of the republican construction of a difference between the symbolic authority of motherhood and a mother’s legal authority that contemporary notions of femininity developed in relation to a power that women alone possessed: the ability to reproduce. Developments in biological and medical research carried out during the period of the 1840’s provided evidence of women’s unique powers of reproduction. It was not, however, so much the medical implications of this research, though its significance was great, as the means of interpreting and publicising its significance which had a profound effect upon the legal and social status of contemporary women. For obvious reasons, the fact that women produced or gave

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birth to children was undeniable. But as Thomas Laqueur has demonstrated, the mid
nineteenth-century 'discovery' that female mammals ovulated independently of male
control had quite specific effects upon contemporary and developing attitudes towards
sexual difference.\textsuperscript{43} In 1840, for example, the physiologist Raciborski argued that,
following recent advancements in scientific research, it was no longer viable to propose
that conception occurred according to the dictates of masculine sexuality. An
experiment carried out on a female dog in 1843 further demonstrated that ovulation
'...occurred independently of male interaction with the female in coitus.'\textsuperscript{44} These
findings suggested, and as subsequent research continued to demonstrate, that women
possessed a unique power, proved by menstruation, in the conception of children. As
long-standing hierarchies of male superiority were dismantled, new hierarchies were
however, constructed. These were formulated around the belief that spontaneous
ovulation and menstruation demonstrated the innate weakness and ill-health, as opposed
to power, of the female body.\textsuperscript{45} It was mid century 'progressive' republicans such as P.-J.
Proudhon and Jules Michelet who were most effective in dictating and publicising
their interpretations of such biological 'facts'. As Carol Mossman has argued,
Michelet's particular 'stroke of genius' in highly popular texts such as \textit{L'Amour} of 1858,
was the writer and historian's ability to exalt maternity whilst simultaneously
proclaiming it status as an illness:
\begin{quote}
'...en réalité, 15 ou 20 jours sur 28 (on peut dire presque toujours) la femme n’est pas seulement une malade, mais une blessée.
Elle subit incessamment l’éternelle blessure d’amour.'\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

The consequences of Michelet's discourse of perpetual feminine weakness at the hands
of women's reproductive capacities were far-reaching, not least in the extent to which
women were portrayed as 'slaves' to their ovaries. For republican positivism was
instrumental in fixing a scientific and therefore, indisputable link between the discourse
of motherhood and notions of interiority and containment. Through the effects of
metonymic transference, the category 'Woman' became irrevocably conflated, even

\textsuperscript{43} T. Laqueur, 'Orgasm, Generation and the Politics of Reproductive Biology', \textit{Representations}, no. 14
\textsuperscript{44} J. L. Shaw, 'The Figure of Venus: Rhetoric of the Ideal and the Salon of 1863', \textit{Art History}, vol. 14,
no. 4 (December 1991), pp. 544-5.
\textsuperscript{45} Shaw (December 1991), pp. 544-5.
\textsuperscript{46} Mossman (1993), p. 209; J. Michelet, 'L’Amour', (1858), \textit{Œuvres complètes XVIII, 1858-60}, 1985,
p. 64.

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collapsed into, the womb. As the following extracts demonstrate, this was a pervasive construction of woman as vessel which continued into the next century:

‘...elle aime du fond des entrailles.'47

‘L’homme produit seul le germe qui doit donner naissance à un nouvel être, tandis que la femme n’est qu’un réceptacle, une espèce de vase où ce germe trouve des conditions favorables à son développement.’48

‘...it is with good reason that physiologists and medical doctors have correctly and briefly put it: “Woman is but a womb...a uterus.” Woman is not a brain, she is a sex.’49

The republican rhetoric which sought to conflate motherhood with notions of interiority and containment reached a period of particular intensity during the final decade of the nineteenth century. Texts extolling the virtues of motherhood and true femininity manifested the anxiety felt at the perceived threats posed by the simultaneous decline in the national birthrate and the increasingly vociferous and visible demands of political feminism.50 It is a particular phenomenon of the development of French feminism during this period that republican politicians such as Jules Simon frequently found themselves in agreement with the more popular campaigners for women’s rights, ‘familial’ feminists, whose political motivation was defined as ‘equality in difference’.51 Rather than campaign for universal suffrage, the dissolution of the ideology of the separate spheres and equality regardless of gender, as more radical feminist groups did, ‘familial’ feminists campaigned for greater legal and social acknowledgment of women’s important, if separate, roles as wives and mothers within the domestic sphere.52 As Tamar Garb has demonstrated, cultural production was unable to escape the parameters of this debate, indeed was often deeply implicated in either defending, as Renoir had, the natural and biological destiny of true femininity or in articulating feminism’s potential

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47 Michelet (1858), p. 62.
48 P.-J. Proudhon quoted in Dr. L. Fiaux, *La Femme, le mariage et le divorce*, 1880, p. 76.
50 See Offen (June 1984), pp. 648-76 for an analysis of the political and social implications of the historical confluence of these issues.
51 Offen (June 1984), p. 654.
threat to the stability of domestic life.\textsuperscript{53} The many satirical cartoons depicting the \textit{femme nouvelle} [fig. 26], the most redolent textual manifestation of the anxious response to 1890's feminist activity, consistently focused upon the destructive familial and domestic effects of bourgeois women's increasing desire to escape the spaces of their containment.\textsuperscript{54}

The rise in the practice of the discipline of psychology, most notably under the influence of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot's study of the neurological condition of hysteria at the women's public asylum of La Salpêtrière helped to further compound anxieties about the status of femininity during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Etymologically derived from the Greek term for 'uterus', since it was considered to result from 'a pathological wandering of a restless womb out of its normal position in the body', Charcot's widely publicised practice further helped to pathologise the extent to which women were thought to be 'at the mercy of' their wombs.\textsuperscript{55} It was in the more popular texts of republican psychologist Alfred Fouillée however, that biological 'facts' were conflated with psychological discourse in order to elucidate the fullest expression of natural maternal containment. In texts such as his celebrated essay of 1893, 'La Psychologie des sexes et ses fondements physiologiques', Fouillée particularly favoured the deployment of phenomena derived from the study of non-human species as a means of explaining socially developed characteristics in gendered human beings.\textsuperscript{56} Of particular consistency, was Fouillée's insistence that male beings were biologically associated with notions of exteriority and female beings with those of interiority. Writing, for example, on the subject of the expression of aggressive behaviour in animals, Fouillée noted how aggressive tendencies in females always derived from their maternal instinct, which is 'turned towards the interior':

'...chez la femelle, le courage est d'order maternel, défensif, tourné vers l’intérieur, au service de l’espèce; chez le male, il a une tout autre direction: il est agressif, tourné vers le dehors, au service, de l’individu et de son indépendance.'\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} Garb (1985), pp. 3-15.
\textsuperscript{54} Silverman (1989), pp. 63-74.
\textsuperscript{56} Fouillée (1893), pp. 397-429.
\textsuperscript{57} Fouillée (1893), p. 408.
Similarly, Fouillée described female characteristics in terms of cohesion and unification, in direct and complimentary opposition to the diffuse and divisive tendencies of masculinity:

‘M. Armand Sabatier avait déjà trouvé que le caractère de l’élément féminin est la concentration, l’unification, la cohésion: cet élément tend à rester un et à ne pas se fragmenter, à ne pas se sectionner, tant qu’il est livré à lui-même. Le caractère de l’élément masculin est au contraire “une role de division, de dispersion”.58

The metaphorical language of physiological and psychological essentialism occurred in the texts of other notable republican thinkers. In his journal La Revue de famille Jules Simon, for example, invoked historical precedence as evidence for the different roles ascribed to men and women. In an article of 1889 analysing ‘L’Éducation des femmes, l’épouse’, Simon declared a natural and historically proven link between motherhood and interiority:

‘Quelle est la vocation de l’homme? C’est d’être un bon citoyen. Et de la femme? D’être une bonne épouse et une bonne mère. L’un est en quelque sorte appelé au dehors; l’autre est retenue au dedans. Étudiez l’histoire, vous trouverez cela à tous les âges; parcourez la terre, vous le trouverez sous toutes les latitudes...[l]’homme est fait pour combattre et pour travailler au dehors; la femme pour élever les enfants, pour faire régner l’ordre dans la maison et pour y organiser le bonheur.’59

Such was the strength of the contemporary belief that motherhood constituted a role which was effectively inseparable from a condition of interiority that any deviation signalled the subversion of nature and ultimately, chaos. A story of 1882 written by a young woman known only as ‘Marie-Madeleine’ and published in the women’s journal, Les Causeries familières dwells, for example, upon the destructive effects of her mother’s refusal to stay at home when the narrator had been a child. Though Marie-Madeleine clearly attributes the cause of her tormented childhood to her mother, it was her father’s weak character which had allowed her mother to, metaphorically, ‘portait les culottes’.60 Marie-Madeleine deploys the image of masculine attire and its negative associations of transgression and inversion when applied to the female body in order to symbolise the absolute perversion of the natural order of patriarchy that her mother’s

58 Fouillée (1893), p. 403.

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behaviour is felt to have incited. Marie-Madeleine goes on to describe her early childhood and how her mother '...allait dans le monde, elle aimait danser et chantait dans la perfection.' Once again, the narrator's emotive use of language is explicit, pointing to her mother's abandonment of the home whilst projecting onto this figure the suggestion of the frivolity and debasement normally associated with the 'exterior' life of the fille-publique or demi-mondaine. Finally, Marie-Madeleine tells of how her mother abandoned her to the physical abuse and inadequate sustenance provided by a female servant who used to '...me pinçait et buvait le lait ou le bouillon qui m'était destiné.'

It has, thus far, been possible to explore the legal enforcement and textual conflation of the concept of motherhood with notions of interiority and containment. In her analysis of gendered relations in Victorian America, Caroll Smith-Rosenberg has, however, developed a theoretical and practical model for exploring the means by which women symbolically enacted and responded to the patriarchal hierarchies of nineteenth-century society. Starting from the belief that 'language is not limited to words' Smith-Rosenberg argues that 'symbolic communication' may be enacted non-verbally, through 'shared systems of signs' such as behavioural codes and rituals. More than this though, Smith-Rosenberg argues for a diversity of co-existing symbolic systems within a heterogeneous society. Women, for example, may outwardly project their patriarchal social position by adopting the highly structured symbolic language of the dominant group and at the same time use the marginality of their relation to this group to communicate effectively amongst themselves in a homosocial symbolic system. In her study of the daily lives and rituals of the bourgeois of northern France, Bonnie Smith has deployed an equivalent theoretical model in order to explore the two symbolic languages of contemporary bourgeois womanhood which, she argues, combined to form

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61 Jules Simon expressed something of the bad mother's almost unthinkable transgression of the natural order with the statement 'Il y a de bonnes et de mauvaises épouses, il n'y a que de bonnes mères. Une mauvaise mère, s'il s'en rencontre, est un être contre nature.' This statement is quoted from an extract published in a special issue of Les Annales devoted to 'La Mère dans la littérature et dans l'art', (1 December 1907), p. 1.


64 C. Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 1985, pp. 11-52.


67 See for example, Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of the homosocial context of female friendships in the chapter entitled, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', Smith-Rosenberg (1985), pp. 53-76.
a 'rhetoric of reproduction'. These are the symbolic language of reproduction and 'true' femininity and the symbolic language of domesticity expressed through interior decoration and everyday rituals. The effectiveness of this dual rhetorical system should not be underestimated for, as Smith states, even the smallest of household procedures carried with it 'a multiple significance of which women were often acutely aware':

'Each activity had its functional aspect, but as the thrust of human, as opposed to animal, activity tends toward cultural creativity, so we find webs of meaning, networks of communication, and expressions of human concern overlying many domestic undertakings.'

As Smith goes on to demonstrate, in this highly informative text, even the most insignificant aspects of domestic life 'spoke' of a married woman's most basic function: reproduction. A woman's reproductive capacity could, in effect, be alluded to through even the most mundane aspects of domesticity and, in fact, needed to be communicated in order to demonstrate a bourgeoisie's willing submission to the hierarchical codes by which her life was structured. Within the arena of interior decoration and the material arrangement of the home Smith further demonstrates how a woman, who through age or for medical reasons, was no longer able to demonstrate her reproductive ability in childbirth, might continue to allude to it through the '...reproductive contours [which] distributed themselves throughout the household.' Inevitably, the decorative arrangement of the home spoke of symbolic maternal authority within the domestic sphere whilst offsetting this with a rhetoric of feminine fragility and weakness:

'Every large piece of furniture had its delicate counterpart. Bureaus, tables, buffets, and mantles carried their array of small objects, ranging from clocks and candlesticks to Sévres china statuary and extraneous pieces of silver. Between them lay delicate doillies, embroidered scarves, or some other piece of fragile fabric.'

In her polemical article 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', Sherry Ortner described ritual, even at its most basic level, as a highly significant means by which people demonstrate their ability to transcend nature and its negative connotations. It is surely this belief which Smith draws upon when she asserts that

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68 B. Smith, Ladies of the Leisure Class, 1981, pp. 53-92
through the ritual tasks of domesticity, the everyday pursuit of order and hygiene, bourgeois women of the Nord were able to demonstrate their ability to transform nature and therefore, to conquer their age-old nemesis.\textsuperscript{73} In this way the domestic ‘rhetoric of reproduction’ also constituted a significant means of homosocial cultural expression. The problem with domesticity as a means of cultural expression or symbolic language is however, that the very containment of late nineteenth-century domestic life means that this language is always, in effect, turned back on itself, is limited by its own self-referentiality. Smith compares this self-referentiality, this inability to communicate heterosocially, to the communicative ineffectiveness found in the ‘solipsistic babbling of infants and children’, or glossalalia.\textsuperscript{74}

Bonnie Smith’s description of the domestic life of the \textit{bourgeoises} of northern France is of particular interest for this study, not least because it brings together two important discourses. The discourse of motherhood and reproduction and the discourse of domesticity and the domestic interior of late nineteenth-century France. In doing so, Smith demonstrates the extent to which the domestic interior might be seen to function as a patriarchally maternal space. For the mother projects, disperses and displaces herself and her physical containment onto the surfaces and rituals of this space, this container, which in turn perpetuates and projects back onto the mother her own containment and interiority. Representing the maternal body within the maternal space of the domestic interior necessitates, therefore, engaging with its ‘rhetoric of reproduction’ and containment. This was, however, a simultaneously heterosocial and homosocial symbolic language. The former, the highly structured discourse of late nineteenth century republican ideology, the latter, the more private discourse of late nineteenth century motherhood which was unable to breach the gendered parameters of its own self-referentiality.

Whilst it is not the purpose of this study to engage at length with the biographical details of Madame Vuillard’s life, certain basic facts may be useful as a means of retrieving her status as a subject and understanding the context in which she lived and was represented. In fact, the few biographical details which are available

\begin{flushright}
\textit{...I would maintain that the universality of ritual betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence.}'
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{73} Smith (1981), p. 83.

\textsuperscript{74} Smith (1981), pp. 89-90.
suggest that in many ways Madame Vuillard's experience of nineteenth-century motherhood was simultaneously typical and significant for the particular position of real power which she was able to possess. Marie-Justine Vuillard (née Michaud) was born in 1839. At the age of twenty she married her cousin, a retired army officer turned tax collector who was twenty-seven years her senior. Édouard Vuillard was born in 1868, the youngest of three children. In 1877 the family left the Saône-et-Loire district of France to move to Paris, where Madame Vuillard set up in business as a corsetière. Monsieur Vuillard died in 1884, leaving Vuillard's mother a widow at the age of forty-five. As with many women of the period who married older men at a young age, Madame Vuillard was forced to accept the implications of widowhood and thereafter, the need to financially support herself and her family. Due to the far-reaching effects of legal paternal authority, widowhood could have quite devastating economic effects on the family concerned. In many ways, however, the removal of direct paternal authority often served to protect and improve both the legal and symbolic status of a mother's power. In this way, the already (patriarchally) maternal space of the late nineteenth-century domestic interior becomes doubly reinforced. The father's material, if not ideological, absence appears to be enshrined within Vuillard's many paintings of the various Vuillard family apartments, which maintained only one exclusively masculine space, that of the artist's under-represented bedroom-studio. The emphasis placed upon the decorative and textural effects of the internal surfaces, the near total absence of male figures and the blatant exclusion of references to the outside world in these paintings reinforces their appeal to nineteenth-century fantasies of the home as a maternal space. If, for example, we take a 'visual walk' through two of the paintings of the rue de Miromesnil apartment which the Vuillard family occupied until 1893 it is possible to define their appeal to contemporary discourses of maternal containment. We must visually enter the apartment along a narrow corridor, as portrayed in the 1891 painting, Le Palier, rue de Miromesnil [fig. 27]. The image contains no references to the outside world, instead all focus is directed towards this slightly foreboding, dark tunnel-like space, at the end of which the rear view of a female figure, presumably entering the apartment, is barely visible amongst the deep shadows of the landing. Upon entering the

75 Russell (1971), pp. 11-12.
77 Perrot (1990), p. 207.
apartment, each image forces the viewer to focus upon the overwhelming visual and
textural effects of the patterned surfaces of the rooms, but none more so than the 1892
painting, entitled *La Cuisine* [fig. 28], from which all ‘distracting’ figures have been
removed. The eye is unable to rest upon any single surface when viewing the shallow
composition of this painting. Rather, the pointilliste patterns and starkly contrasted blue
and white tones of this minute rendering of a corner of the kitchen dance before the eye
like a frieze. The painting evokes a sense of containment, through its warm light and
deep shadows and the proximity of its objects which are too large to fit the surface area
of the canvas. There is also a sense of the self-sufficiency of domestic existence in the
pictorial rendition of the functional space of the kitchen, the place in which ‘natural
matter’ is ritualistically transformed into its cultural product, food.

Returning to Vuillard’s painting of c. 1892-5, *Le Placard à linge* [fig. 20], it is
possible to suggest that, despite its seeming banality, there are many symbolic references
to a domestic ‘rhetoric of reproduction’. Indeed, by focusing upon the ritualistic
(in)significance of the female figure’s self-absorbed activity of storing linen in a
cupboard it is a painting which appeals, on one level, to the republican discourse of ‘true
femininity’, the installation and upkeep of domestic peace, order and stability. On
another, though related level, Madame Vuillard’s ritualistic activity demonstrates the
maternal figure’s cultural transformation of her home and by extension, her self. At the
same time, the centrifugal arrangement of the various patterned surfaces, including the
folding screen, which gravitate around the maternal body, provokes comparison with
Alfred Fouillée’s characterisation of sexual difference in terms of ‘la concentration,
l’unification [et] la cohésion’ of the ‘feminine element’. 78  Similarly, the pictorial
rendition of the arrangement of the domestic space with its juxtaposition of solid objects
and delicate patterns appeals to a symbolic language of domestic maternal power offset
by feminine fragility. More than this though, each surface, whether maternal body or
domestic object, is treated with an equal decorative and textural value so that the
maternal body is rendered almost indistinguishable amongst the contours and surfaces
onto which it is displaced and which, in turn, project back and perpetuate the symbolic
language of maternal containment. It is this rhythmical displacement of the maternal
body across the decorative and textural plenitude of the painted surface which, in turn,
provokes suggestions of glossalalia. That is, an innovative, formal language of avant-

78 Fouillée (1893), p. 403.
garde artistic practice and an impenetrable, self-reflexive language which issues from the maternal body at the same time as it obfuscates it.

The sense of an impenetrable formal language is most explicitly evidenced in a group of three lithographs produced during 1897 and 1898 and published as part of an album entitled *Paysages et Intérieurs* in 1899. Once again, the maternal body is firmly implicated within the domestic spaces of the images, which are individually entitled *Intérieur aux tentures roses I* [fig. 29], *Intérieur aux tentures roses II* [fig. 30], and *Intérieur aux tentures roses III* [fig. 31]. In each instance the figure of Madame Vuillard takes up a position either close to or within the opening of a doorway. In respect of *Intérieurs aux tentures roses I* Madame Vuillard acts as the agent of the viewer’s gaze by holding open the door which, as with the other lithographs, leads into further internal spaces. The lithographic technique produces fleshy pink, yellow and scarlet tones and fibrous lines which, in turn, produce the surface effect of a web-like membrane which, it might be argued, evokes the interior space of the maternal body itself. Despite the implied position of the viewer’s looming presence at the centre of the foreground room and close to the febrile and voluptuous forms of the central hanging oil lamp, the shadowy presence of Madame Vuillard remains almost indistinguishable in these spaces which appear suffocatingly, possibly even hysterically, over decorated.

The impenetrable effect of the lithographic membrane and the possibilities of its references to the maternal body’s interior evokes comparison with Freud’s account of the uncanny. In his essay of 1919 ‘The Uncanny’, the psychoanalyst located the origins of the psychic phenomenon of the ‘unheimlich’, which literally translates as ‘unhomely’, in the subject’s ambivalent memories of the maternal body. According to Freud an uncanny response is effected by the return of repressed memories of this ‘former home’. In its related and extended Lacanian incarnation as ‘extimité’, a pun on the word *intimité*, an anxious response is triggered in the subject by the extimate’s inability to observe the boundaries between inside and outside.79 It is interesting to note that psychoanalytical conceptions of the child’s ambivalent relation to the maternal body have mapped an equivalent psycho-symbolic connection between the maternal body and the domestic interior to late nineteenth-century discourses of maternal containment:

‘It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This “unheimlich”’

place, however, is the entrance to the former "heim" (home) of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that "love is homesickness"; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before", we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body.  

The subject's ambivalent feelings towards the maternal body as an internal space return again in Melanie Klein's essay of 1929, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse'. In this instance, Klein draws even more explicit associations between the child's conception of the maternal body and the objects of the home. The first part of the text is given over to the description of an opera by Ravel in which a six year old boy flies into a rage with his mother who is perceived as refusing to accede to the child's demands. The child proceeds to act out a vicious attack upon the objects of the home which, Klein suggests, symbolically represents the child's sadistic fantasies of attacking the (bad) mother's body:

"He jumps up, drums on the door, sweeps the teapot and cup from the table, so that they are broken into a thousand pieces...He swings the tongs like a sword and begins to tear the wallpaper. Then he opens the case of the grandfather-clock and snatches out the copper pendulum."  

It may be overdetermined to draw direct symbolic links between these passages which seek to displace the topoi of the maternal body onto notions of the home and its contents with Vuillard's paintings of his mother. It is, however, possible to argue that the psychoanalytical description of the subject's ambivalent feelings towards the maternal body as a result of its psycho-symbolic association with notions of interiority and containment are of particular significance in this instance. Not least, in relation to the work of an artist who repeatedly portrayed the domestically contained maternal body and who cited his mother as the originating and nurturing impetus for his artistic practice.

In wanting to tease out the more personal aspects of Vuillard's practice it would be useful to compare a painting of the artist's mother, for example *Madame Vuillard cousant* [fig. 32] of c. 1895, with another late nineteenth-century male artist's painting of his mother, in this instance, Gustave Caillebotte's *Portrait of Madame Martial*

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Caillebotte [fig. 33] of 1877. Although their dates of execution are separated by almost two decades the similarities of subject matter and spatial setting are unequivocal. Whilst the Vuillard painting lends less attention to the recording of physiognomic characteristics, both may be seen to operate at some level within the conventional parameters of portrait painting. Both paintings, moreover, seek to situate the maternal body within its 'natural' setting, its respective home, and absorbed into its 'natural' activity, embroidery or sewing. The overt differences between the two paintings appear to operate at the level of class, most explicitly read through the surfaces and objects of these two different domestic spaces and in the small variations of their activities. Whilst the Caillebotte painting depicts the painter’s mother working on a small and dainty piece of embroidery, the Vuillard image makes no attempt to shy away from the social connotations involved in portraying Madame Vuillard in the process of carrying out functional repairs to a mattress. It is these differences which are, nonetheless, the starting point for a variety of less overt, yet infinitely significant, differences between the two paintings which relate to the specific practice of painting one’s mother.

Turning in more detail to the Caillebotte painting, Portrait of Madame Martial Caillebotte, we can see how this image functions within the boundaries of the more conventional norms of portraiture. A strong sense of the sitter’s identity is articulated by the detailed execution of the figure’s facial features and hands, which are highlighted by the cold light falling across them, and the figure’s sombre attire. The painting’s strong attention to physiognomic details, the sitter’s authoritative location within its spatial surroundings and the social status implied by the domestic setting render this an unemotive and unsympathetic representation of the maternal body. It is the implied emotional distance between the artist and his sitter which points to the difference between the Caillebotte and Vuillard representations of the maternal body. Whilst the Caillebotte painting seems specifically to refer to his mother’s economic status, the Vuillard painting appeals more to the sitter’s status as a mother, that is through a more emotive and in many ways, more archaic, language of physical indivisibility and containment. Like Madame Caillebotte, Madame Vuillard’s head is bowed in concentration, the viewer is, however, given little evidence of the sitter’s facial characteristics. Vuillard has reduced the form of the maternal body to the now familiar pictorial motif of corpulent stoicism. Similarly, the figure is contained within only a small area of the pictorial space, is indeed fixed within the confines of this space which
threatens to overwhelm and absorb the maternal body. Whilst the specific details of Madame Vuillard’s appearance are obliterated in this painting her presence is not, however, denied. For her physical, if symbolic, presence is endlessly reproduced across the textures, patterns and colours of this space. The most elemental physiognomic details of the figure find their decorative equivalent throughout the painting. The figure’s white blouse is, for example, replicated in the solid form of the door against which the maternal body is placed. As the mattress is folded back over itself it threatens to overwhelm the maternal body at the same time as it finds its pictorial equivalent, in terms of sheer physical density in the body of the figure itself. In another instance, the muted flesh tones of the pattern picked out across the blue wallpaper appear to replicate the dimensions and tonal effects of the figure’s vaguely rendered hands. The overwhelming emphasis placed upon muted and soothing tonal variations, textures and patterns in the painting is particularly resonant of a symbolic language of mother-infant containment, as described in psychoanalytical theory. Of particular relevance, in this instance, is the correlation that Melanie Klein drew between the restful furniture of the home and the physicality of the maternal body as it operates in pleasurable infantile fantasies:

'We find that things to sit and lie upon, as well as beds, occur regularly in children’s analyses as symbols for the protecting and loving mother.'

The particular appeal which the painting makes to the primary senses of sight and touch in relation to the maternal body also seem to find their psychoanalytical equivalent in Kaja Silverman’s description of infantile fantasies of containment within the environment of the maternal voice. In her book, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema Silverman demonstrates how the trope of the maternal voice ‘...grows out of a powerful cultural fantasy which turns upon the image of infantile containment - upon the image of a child held within the environment or sphere of the mother’s voice.’ As one of the earliest sensory environments the infant experiences, the maternal voice functions as a metaphor for the subject’s containment and interiority. However, as Silverman states, psychoanalytic theory has demonstrated that, even though these fantasies are shot through with notions of mother-infant

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82 Klein (1929), p. 89
containment they denote for the subject (the infant) both intensely positive and intensely negative connotations of interiority. On the positive side, the maternal voice may function as an ‘emblem of infantile plenitude and bliss’, the site of pre-Oedipal and pre-Symbolic unity between mother and child, and on the negative side, as an ‘emblem of impotence and entrapment’, the site of the infantile subject’s discursive impotence and lack of verbal authority. In her description of the child’s positive fantasy, Silverman evokes metaphors of sensory fulfillment when she describes the maternal voice as wrapping the child ‘...in a soothing protective blanket.’ This is a phrase which provokes comparison with the soothing textures, patterns and tones, symbolic of the maternal body, of Madame Vuillard cousant [fig. 32]. Although the maternal body in this painting is almost occluded by the forms that surround it, the viewer retains an overwhelming sense of physical proximity to the ‘protective’ maternal body through the soothing textures, tones and patterns which constitute the painted surface. The painting retains a vivid sense of the pleasure the artist took in studying and representing his mother within a domestic setting. It is a pleasure that is re-enacted in the perceptual slowness of the viewer’s gaze which absorbs and is absorbed by the maternal body as it is displaced across the painted surface. It may even be possible to draw an analogy between the invocation of sensory pleasure in this painting and the sensory and indeed sensual pleasure which a son takes in the maternal body of another ‘reassuring’ image of late nineteenth-century motherhood, Renoir’s Maternité, ou femme allaitant son enfant [fig. 25] of 1885. It is with this painting that Renoir emphasises, even eroticises the sensual pleasure taken by both mother and male infant in their physical unity by appealing to the primary sense of touch. The central focus of the painting is given over to the meeting of infant and maternal body at the site of the breast, which the mother holds out to the child’s lips. Though Vuillard’s representations of his mother focus upon the maternal body and not maternity itself, it seems valid to suggest that they operate at some level with these essentialist notions of motherhood, locating the past in the present via memory and nostalgic fantasy. The belief that the maternal body continued to operate as a life-long sanctuary for the adult child was not uncommon

during this period, nor were nostalgic fantasies of infantile pleasure at the maternal breast. Deploying the familiar republican rhetoric of biological essentialism Michelet, for example, claimed that the ultimate pursuit of life was to return to the maternal breast:

‘...après avoir traversé les faux bonheurs de ce monde, nous retournérons volontiers vers le paradis maternel! Sortis du sein de la femme, notre ciel d’ici-bas n’est autre que de revenir à son sein.’

It is a particular aspect of nostalgic fantasies of origins however, that they seek to deny the ambivalence which is central to the subject’s relationship with the maternal body. It is to this ambivalence that Kaja Silverman refers when she describes the ‘sonorous envelope’ of the maternal voice as operating for the infant subject as both ‘an emblem of plenitude and bliss’ and an ‘emblem of impotence and entrapment’. Under its negative guise, interiority turns from being a site of protection to a site of entrapment. By extension, as Silverman states, exteriority becomes associated with discursive potency, with subjectivity and with meaning. In order to attain subjectivity and to enter the Symbolic order of language, which the subject will inevitably do, the subject must not only reject this infant-mother indivisibility (which will henceforth operate within the realm of nostalgic fantasy) but also, and most significantly, substitute the mother’s interiority for the child’s:

‘...since exteriority can be defined only through opposition to interiority, the child’s shift to the “outside” of the “umbilical net” requires that the maternal voice be resituated “inside” - that the “container” become the “contained”.’

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88 See, for example, Anon., *Le Livre de la famille*, 1892, pp. 3-4:
‘La femme étant la tige essentielle de la race, étant le sanctuaire où viennent converger tous les intérêts, toutes les pensées et tous les sentiments de la famille.’
See also, Mgr. Le Nordez, *Le Livre des femmes de bien*, vol. 1, ‘La Mère’, 1900, p. 3:
‘L’enfant grandi, la mère ne le quitte point, son cœur le suit partout, et quand elle est bonne mère et qu’elle a su se faire aimer, à tout âge de la vie, enfant devenu homme cherche encore sa mère.
See, finally, A. Dayt, *Pensees et reflexions d’une mere*, 1905, p. 57:
‘Que l’homme ait 30, 40 où 50 ans, il trouvera toujours refuge et soutien en cette mère, comme en elle il trouva refuge et soutien de son premier jour à ses 20 ou 30 ans.’
89 Michelet quoted in Anon. (1 December 1907), p. 1. See also the following dialogue from Dayt (1905), p. 80:
“Mère! je suis dans tes bras! Sur son sein ma tête repose! J’y suis bien douillettement! Dis-moi pourquoi?”
“Parce que tu reviens d’exil sur un sein de mère.”
“C’est bien doux, un sein de mère! N’en ai-je jamais connu!”
“Jamais! mon enfant. *Un sein de mère est une sanctuaire dans lequel l’homme adore Dieu.*”
In discussing the inevitably ambiguous and indeterminate function of the mother in psychoanalytical discourse Mary Jacobus has analysed the nostalgic origins of the ‘Oedipus myth’ on which the discipline is predicated. In order to do this Jacobus explores the correspondence between Freud and Fliess during the year of 1897. In one particular passage Freud describes to Fliess ‘memories’ from when Freud was two-and-a-half years old in which the latter imagines his mother to be both ‘standing in front of a cupboard’ and then later, to be ‘shut up in this wardrobe or cupboard.’\textsuperscript{92} Jacobus draws upon these ‘recollections’ in order to both highlight the significance of ‘autobiographical memories’ for the origins of psychoanalysis and, as Silverman has done, to illustrate the inevitability of the mother’s interiority for the child’s attainment of subjectivity. Jacobus proceeds to analyse Freud’s ‘recollection’ of his mother’s status as both container and content, by drawing upon the latter’s use of a cupboard as a metaphor:

‘The persistent but unacknowledged punning on insides and outsides points to an indeterminate structure: the mother is both inside the cupboard, its shut-up or repressed content, and the cupboard itself - the “inside” that contains the baby (inside its inside)...The mother is always absent, lost, or sequestered, and always doubly inscribed - both contained and container, both the content of memory and the structure that produces “mother” as its meaning...’.\textsuperscript{93}

Jacobus’ analysis of Freud’s nostalgic fantasy of his mother as both container and contained, illustrated by the metaphorical imagery of the mother shut up in a cupboard, signals interesting consequences for Vuillard’s own nostalgic conception and perception of his mother. In many of the paintings featuring the maternal body, including \textit{Le Placard à linge} [fig. 21], cupboards function as purveyors of meaning at several symbolic levels. In the terms of late nineteenth-century discourses of domesticity the \textit{armoire}, in which the family’s precious linens would be placed, functioned as a symbol of the family’s prosperity but also, of its domesticity. As Aline Valette suggests in her domestic instruction book of 1883, \textit{La Journée de la petite ménagère}, learning how to store and arrange cloth in cupboards constituted an important step in the process of becoming a good housewife.\textsuperscript{94} As such, the \textit{armoire} functioned as a symbol of a

\textsuperscript{94} A. Valette, \textit{La Journée de la petite ménagère}, Paris, (1883) 5th ed. 1898, p. 97:
mother’s obedience to the codes and symbolic rituals of domesticity, but also and by extension, as a symbol of the mother herself. As we have already seen with *Le Placard à linge*, an analysis of Vuillard’s work suggests a certain symbolic affiliation between the maternal body and the cupboard or *armoire*. The symbolic affiliation between the specifically authoritative maternal body and a cupboard operates most emphatically in a painting of 1893, *Mother and Sister of the Artist* [fig. 6]. Though the large chest of drawers is awarded little attention as to the details of its appearance, it dominates the compositional structure of the painting. It operates as a solid and bulky anchor when placed in juxtaposition to the other highly patterned and de-materialised objects of the room. Its physical and symbolic function extends, moreover, in relation to the maternal body which is located directly in front of the cupboard. Maternal body and cupboard appear to match each other in terms of physical density, renunciation of pattern and absence of detail. Both forms are solidly anchored within the pictorial space while the other objects of the room, including the lefthand figure and the floor, collapse into flatness. As Susan Sidlauskas has suggested, the figure of Madame Vuillard appears masculinised in this painting.95 Wearing the colour more closely affiliated with contemporary male costume and holding an identifiably ‘masculine’ pose, the maternal body appears fetishistically sheath-like in comparison to its regular plump and more elderly form, and when juxtaposed with the deflated, even emasculatory, form of the other female figure. Located in front of and in emphatic symbolic relation to the cupboard, the maternal body in this painting appears authoritative, omnipotent, phallic even. At the same time, the viewer’s normally authoritative relation to the pictorial space is undone. The viewer’s gaze, like that of the deflated lefthand figure, focuses upon the sharp upward sweep of the floor which similarly threatens to collapse from under the viewer’s feet.

Whilst a number of paintings tend to signify a symbolic relation between the cupboard and maternal body which point either to Madame Vuillard’s acceptance of her domestic role [fig. 21] or as the authoritative figure in front of the cupboard [fig. 6], others portray the maternal body contained within and by the form of a cupboard. In the painting of 1895 *Woman at the Cupboard* [fig. 34], for example, the container appears

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to have become the contained. The figure of Madame Vuillard is, once again, recognisable by its basic physical appearance alone. As with *Le Placard à linge* [fig. 21] this is a painting which portrays the maternal body in the self-absorbed task of arranging the china and glassware contents of a large kitchen cupboard. Once again the figure of Marie Vuillard is forced into a small area of the composition where, in this instance however, the maternal body becomes physically constricted by the forms of the cupboard itself. As the righthand door of the kitchen cupboard remains only partially open to the left of the figure, the door to the room’s fenestrated partition folds away from the viewer and towards the compositional centre of the painting. Both doors reach towards and across the maternal body, producing the playful visual effect of pushing the maternal figure into the cupboard itself.

The overwhelming sense of Madame Vuillard’s anonymity remains a consistent aspect of Vuillard’s representations of the maternal body. The majority of paintings depict the maternal body from the rear or side and in others the face is either lowered or so summarily delineated as to make recognition difficult. It is an anonymity which pervades all of the paintings of the maternal body but which is most structurally inscribed within one of Vuillard’s more personal representations of Madame Vuillard, *The Yellow Curtain* [fig. 35] of c. 1893. Many of the visual and structural features of the other paintings are reproduced here. The intense tonal, textural and decorative variations, the plump figure of Madame Vuillard who, once again, is contained within a small area of the composition and who, in fact, has to force back the yellow curtain that constitutes the painting’s title, in order to create more space. The maternal body’s containment seems even more forcefully enacted within the construction of this image: by the curtain, the lefthand wall and low ceiling which surround the figure on three sides and finally, by the bed across which the viewer’s gaze reaches. It is, in effect, the spatial constriction which the bed forces upon the maternal body and the distance implied between the latter and the viewer which is of particular significance. It is, moreover, the inclusion of the bed, the informal appearance of the figure’s hair and the low, even child-like, viewpoint which denotes that this is a more private image than those previously cited. Yet it is in the most private representations of Madame Vuillard that the effacement of the figure’s identity, other than that implied by her role as mother, is most emphatically enacted. It is also a painting in which the structure of the gaze, the scopic relationship of power between subject and object, artist and sitter, is profoundly
implicated. There is a tangible sense of the drawn out pleasure and authority of the artist’s and the son’s gaze which is enacted at the expense of the figure’s anonymity and unwitting state of being looked at. This is doubly inscribed in the action of the maternal figure which, in the process of drawing back the curtain, reveals a circular object hanging on the facing wall, a mirror. The mirror has achieved an unprecedented status in psychoanalytical discourse as the initial means by which the child (mis-)recognises itself to be a coherent and individual identity. It is, as Jacqueline Rose has stated, the mirror image which ‘enables the subject to operate as “I”’, that is, as a subject within the Symbolic order of language and meaning. The mirror is constituted as the condition of subjectivity. In The Yellow Curtain however, there is a mirror which, in spite of the maternal figure’s position in front of it, fails to produce a reflection. It is a mirror which is, in fact, blank.

An analysis of Vuillard’s paintings of Madame Vuillard in her maternal function demonstrates the extent to which it is possible to engage with these images at several symbolic levels. As well as functioning within the significatory realm of republican discourses of maternal containment and interiority, these are paintings which operate within the realm of a more archaic and personal discourse of a son’s repetitive representation of his mother. An analysis of these paintings with reference to the theoretical model provided by psychoanalysis and the citation of Vuillard’s confession that ‘Maman is my muse’ suggest that the artist was, to some extent, engaged in a nostalgic fantasy of physical and psychic indivisibility with the maternal body. This may be evidenced in the formal construction of paintings such as Le Placard à linge [fig. 21], which appears to deploy a Semiotic language of mother-infant containment, or glossalalia. Whilst the ‘Chora’ may function as a potentially subversive place from which the artist, as Kristeva has suggested, may mobilise an infantile language or glossalalia, the ability to speak is, however, necessarily enacted at the expense of female subjectivity. Absorbed into her maternal function in these paintings, Madame Vuillard’s identity is obfuscated by and contained within the impenetrable and self-reflexive parameters of both a public and psychic rhetoric of motherhood and domesticity. Thus provoking the conclusion that whilst the avant-garde artist may speak a semiotic language, may ‘play with the body of [its] mother’, it can never imagine its ‘mother

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playing'. It is not so much therefore, the creative process and its product which, in this instance constitutes in Kleinian terms, the son's reparative act, as it is Vuillard's nostalgic fantasy of his *maman*-muse which denies any possibility of the son's or mother's ambivalence. Whilst attributing to his mother a nurturing significance in the development of his practice, Madame Vuillard remains, nonetheless, prior to the text. That is, at and as the origin of artistic agency but beyond the realm of subjectivity.
Chapter Three

Working Mothers: Domestic and Professional Labour

‘...l’ouvrière pique le corset, s’il n’est pas déjà; elle le monte, le bride, l’entoure, le rabat, bâtit et pique les galons ou les rubans dans lesquels elle enfile les baleines. Elle les arrête, pose le busc et les ressorts, éventaille le corset, le borde, met les coussins s’il en faut et pose les garnitures.’

In 1891 Édouard Vuillard produced a painting entitled Les Couturières [fig. 36]. The painting’s title and both the viewer’s implied closeness to the activity depicted and the defining tools of that activity, suggest that this is both a generic and uncomplicated representation of that most ‘feminine’ of nineteenth-century female pursuits, dressmaking or sewing. It is, however, as yet unclear as to whether the activity in which the two figures are portrayed as engaged is either domestic (unwaged) or professional (waged) work. This is a lack of clarity and a blurring of the boundaries between public and private labour that was particularly pertinent to the activity of sewing and its representation in the nineteenth century, but which has been fundamental to the way in which women have more generally tended, and been enabled, to negotiate entry into the public arena of work. It is a confusion which is compounded rather than clarified by the painting’s historically ambiguous title, Les Couturières, which could be a term used to describe both non-professional needleworkers in general and more specifically, those professional workers who specialised in dressmaking and couture in particular. The ambiguity of the term les couturières may be compared to the more consciously professional and class specific titles for contemporary waged seamstresses then in common usage. These include terms such as ouvrière de l’aiguille or ouvrière de la couture and the more trade specific descriptions which come under these rubrics, those of modiste, brodiste, corsetière and so on.

Whilst it may seem spurious, even trivial, to wrangle over the exact inferences of the painting’s title and how it might function within a wider network of possible signifiers, its ambiguity starts to appear misplaced when we come to realise that one of the figures depicted is identifiable as the painter’s mother, Madame Marie Justine Vuillard. Recognisable from portraits (both painted and photographic) as well as the artist’s pictorial exploration of the iconography of domesticity, to which the real and imaginary figure of the painter’s mother is central, Madame Vuillard continues to play a leading, if somewhat silent, role in the painter’s images of work within the domestic interior. An examination of the Paris business directory, the *Didot-Bottin*, and archival material, including a form letter sent out to prospective clients in 1879 [fig. 37], tells us that Madame Vuillard continued to work, indeed owned and managed a business, within the Parisian garment trade between the years of 1879 and her retirement in 1898.² Where Vuillard’s pictorial description of his mother’s trade appears strangely equivocal, the *Didot-Bottin* is more direct in its assertion and registration of Madame Vuillard’s trade as that of a professional *corsetière*. As Elizabeth Wynne-Easton has pointed out, the corset industry was divided into a variety of categories and levels of production that were reproduced within the pages of the *Didot-Bottin*.³ In the 1879 entry, for example, Madame Vuillard was listed for the first time under the category of *corsets en gros*, meaning wholesale production whilst the 1895 directory listed the business as having shifted to the category of general corset production (*corsets [fabr. de] et en détail*) which entailed the manufacture of ‘made to measure’ goods.⁴ Again, as Wynne-Easton states, whilst the general category of *corsets (fabr. de) et en détail* could very well include the possibility of dressmaking and other more general forms of garment production, it nonetheless indicates a specialisation in and overall propensity towards corset-making.⁵

Given that Madame Vuillard was not only a professional seamstress but a corset-maker in particular, it seems strangely anomalous that Vuillard should produce such a large number of paintings during the 1890’s which take the seamstresses’ work and atelier as their iconography and yet produce only one painting which makes a direct

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reference to the profession of corset-making, *L'Atelier de la corsetière* [fig. 38] of c. 1891. This is a painting which deploys a similar motif of two women working together at a table, yet it differs from *Les Couturières* in a number of significant ways. Whilst the viewer’s closeness to the figures in the latter image and the decorative treatment of the painting’s surface renders the spatial location of the activity largely unintelligible, the viewer’s distance from the activity of *L'Atelier de la corsetière* and the more naturalistic treatment of the subject allows for a far greater consciousness of the functional space of the domestic atelier. Moreover, where the sinuous and monochrome forms of *Les Couturières* tend to fuse the objects, surfaces and figures of the image into a harmonious and decorative whole, any such sense of structural homogeneity dissolves amid the geometric forms and barren spaces of *L'Atelier de la corsetière*. No longer united by some shared symbolic and physical investment in the aesthetic and textural qualities of cloth, the two women in the latter painting have been pushed to the margins of the painting’s spatial arrangement where each is left to the isolation of their work.

Moreover, whilst the tools of the seamstress’s trade may be located at the compositional centre of both paintings, in *Les Couturières* taking the form of its more obvious signifiers, the spool of thread and a pair of scissors, in *L'Atelier de la corsetière*, the functional language of mechanisation has been introduced in the form of the small, possibly pneumatic, object which perches at the table’s edge. It is the particularly utilitarian function of this object which provokes the viewer to question the validity of the scene in *Les Couturières*. The tools which had previously appeared to define the work being carried out here now appear as little more than the means of suspending the viewer’s disbelief. Although, for example, Madame Vuillard is seemingly depicted in the process of cutting an expanse of red cloth, the exposed strip of table which meanders across the form of the material clearly suggests that this is a process which has already occurred. The juxtaposition of these two very different representations of the tools of the seamstresses’ trade prompts the assertion that Vuillard produced two paintings of the same subject which employ respectively the diverse pictorial rhetorics of Symbolism and Naturalism to fundamentally different effect. In the perception and representation of *L'Atelier de la corsetière*, the authority of the naturalistic gaze has been called upon with the unique effect of rendering both the spatial location and professional status of Madame Vuillard’s actual trade visible. In *Les*
Couturières, however, this gaze has been refused in favour of a Symbolist pictorial rhetoric which more emphatically demands an attention to the sensual and aesthetic pleasures of the decorative surface. Suggesting, in effect, that the demands of the Symbolist aesthetic necessitated the occlusion of, or possibly, was inadequate to, the representation of the material conditions of productive labour.

To suggest this, however, is to go against the grain of the majority of recent art historical literature concerning Vuillard. Art historians have tended to find it difficult to resist the easy conflation of the artisanal labour involved in the seamstresses’ cutting and stitching together of cloth with Vuillard’s own artistic creations in the form, colour and texture of paint. It has been a fundamental cliché of the Vuillard literature to talk of the painter’s youth being spent in idle observation of the sewing atelier and the obvious influence of this early exposure to colour and pattern on both his subsequent decision to become a painter and the formal appearance of the paintings. Whilst Elizabeth Wynne-Easton has recently given extensive coverage to the iconographic significance of Vuillard’s atelier paintings, most inconsistencies, including that of the apparent irrelevance of Madame Vuillard’s actual trade, tend to be either covered over or quickly explained away. The final paragraph of a chapter dedicated to ‘the sewing paintings’ actively deploys a metaphorical rhetoric that collapses the work of the artist and his chosen subject into an unfalteringly plentiful relationship of creative identification:

‘The sewing paintings are icons of inwardness that informed Vuillard’s personal approach to Symbolism...Pattern is the unifying visual characteristic of these compositions, as might befit a body of work that has as its subject the working of cloth...These pictures also serve as metaphors for Vuillard’s concept of himself as a painter. In depicting women conjoined with their surroundings much like the patterns of the objects they sew, Vuillard in some way reflects the union between the artist and the work he creates.’

This is a discourse of creative identification between mother and son which, nonetheless, maintains the rigid hierarchy of the period that sought to normalise and institutionalise a difference between the professional status of ‘feminine’ craft and

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6 Kozloff (1971), p. 65:
‘...it is plausible to speak of his painting comportment in terms analogous to this sewing activity: Vuillard stitches, crochets, knits, embroiders, and laces pigment in patterns that are thatched shrewdly together, as if he were nest-building his art, much as his mother had preserved his home.’

At the same time, the reader is presented with the anomalous image of an artist who emphatically identifies with the artisanal labour and productivity of the seamstresses’ atelier and yet who appears to transform that labour into an empty vehicle for formal artistic experimentation. More than this, the exclusive investment in the unfalteringly plentiful relationship between the professional labour of both Vuillard and his mother tends to ignore the relevance and productive capacity of the latter’s unwaged domestic labour. This suggests that, in spite of the many paintings which Vuillard made of his mother’s domestic labour, whether sweeping, cooking or even sewing [figs. 39, 40, 41], there are only certain types of female labour with which the artistic subject may identify. Much as capitalist society has tended to ignore the productive capacity of unwaged domestic labour so art history has tended to ignore the relevance of Vuillard’s images of this labour. Subsuming domestic labour into a broad account of the Intimisme of Vuillard’s interiors undermines its relevance as productive labour in its own right and as a significant visual archive of a largely under-represented subject matter, but also its relevance for an analysis of the painter’s images of professional labour.

Recent Marxist and Socialist Feminist theory has, as Michèle Barrett writes, convincingly argued that ‘...the oppression of women in capitalism resides in the contradiction between their roles as wage labourers and as domestic labourers’. It is this duality of women’s relationship to capital, that is as both wage labourers and reproducers of (their’s and other’s) wage labour, which will necessarily inform this study’s analysis of Vuillard’s images of both professional and domestic labour. This duality provokes questions concerning the representability or visibility of different types of female labour during this period, the meeting of domestic and professional labour across the female body and the extent to which an ideology of domesticity mediates the representation of professional labour. It is the purpose of this chapter to consider the paintings’ ideological function in relation to a variety of late nineteenth-century discourses. Those regarding domestic labour, the political status and discursive construction of the contemporary seamstress as well as debates regarding professional work carried out within the spaces of the home. For it is important to state that more than just a blank canvas primed for formal experimentation like the seamstress’s

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8 For a general analysis of this hierarchy see R. Parker & G. Pollock, Old Mistresses, 1981, pp. 50-81.
unprepared length of cloth or a banal metaphor of artistic creativity and production, these are paintings that construct contemporary meanings as much as they do reflect and indeed, resist them. Whilst this study is not ultimately concerned with discovering why it is that Vuillard consistently portrayed his mother and the workers of the atelier as seamstresses as opposed to corsetières, this anomaly may be taken as a useful starting point from which to enact a critical analysis. It may function as a point of resistance and inconsistency with which to prise apart and problematise a too complacent interpretation of Vuillard’s identification with, and deployment of, his subject.

If one was to employ an analysis of Madame Vuillard’s class status which took as its basis the family as a single economic unit, it would be defined in relation to her husband’s relationship to the means of production. As a member of a family who owned a textile factory and the wife of a retired soldier turned tax collector, it is easy to assume that Madame Vuillard enjoyed a comfortable and, to some extent, leisurely existence. The analysis would end here with a statement about the wife’s relationship to capital and bourgeois society being mediated through her husband’s position as the head of the household. It was, however, when her youngest son Édouard had reached the age of eleven and some five years before the death of her husband that Madame Vuillard entered into paid work with the acquisition of a Parisian corset-making business. It is, significantly, Madame Vuillard’s entrance into the public world of business ownership prior to the apparent necessity of being widowed and whilst her children were still significantly dependent that has tended, once again, to be ignored.10 A narrative of economic independence borne out of struggle is evidently more palatable than one which tells of a gradual and fully-conscious move for self-determination. It was undoubtedly through widowhood however, that Madame Vuillard gained the greatest financial independence, as both owner of the means of production and as the new economic and authoritative head of the Vuillard family. But in taking on, as Engels might describe it, the ‘bourgeois role’ in the family unit, that which is normally reserved for men, Madame Vuillard needed to assume and negotiate a variety of contradictory roles that ordinarily

10 John Russell clearly assumes that Madame Vuillard was widowed before purchasing the business. Russell (1971), p. 12.

‘Vuillard’s father had been born in the year of Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow; and in 1884 he died. It was a difficult moment, but Madame Vuillard at forty-five was not too old to adapt herself to the change in her circumstances. With nothing much in the way of a pension, and nothing much in the way of an income of her own, she clearly had to shift for herself.’
would have been rigidly hierarchised and gendered according to the contractual arrangements of the marriage agreement. As such, Madame Vuillard’s status constantly shifts between that of owner of the means of production, the manager of a small company employing up to three members of staff including her daughter Marie and mother, Madame Michaud, and that of unpaid reproducer of both her and her family’s (including Vuillard’s) labour for the maintenance of the capitalist system. Under the auspices of the family wage system Madame Vuillard’s own economic independence is, in effect, constituent upon her own economic dependence and visa versa. Paradoxically, she represents not only the aforementioned duality of women’s relationship to capitalism, as both paid and unpaid worker, but also the duality of gendered roles within the bourgeois family and as such, the fundamental dialectical relationship of capitalist society, that between bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is this conflict of experiences and the fluidity of such a relationship to the means of production which highlights what feminist political theory has regarded as the inadequacies of deploying the family as a single economic unit that negates the specificity of a gendered relationship to capital. More than this, it demonstrates the extent to which, even in the physical absence of its most patriarchal of members, the father, the family continues to constitute ‘the privileged place of the operation of ideology’ in capitalist society.

Having written of the tendency of the Vuillard literature to over-emphasise a correlation between Vuillard’s artistic practice and the professional work of the seamstresses’ atelier it is valid to propose, in fact, that the relationship between Vuillard’s practice as an artist and his mother’s domestic labour is more concrete than has previously been warranted. Writing on the relationship between the production of literature and domestic labour in the nineteenth century, Marion Glastonbury suggests that ‘the maintenance of the writer’s workplace and the divisions of labour within it are far from irrelevant’ to a materialist history of modes of production. Identifying the

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11 F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (1884) trans. 1972, p. 137: ‘In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family he is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat.’


writer’s workplace typically as the domestic interior, Glastonbury proceeds to suggest that it is a particular condition of this space, seemingly protected from the normal constraints of alienated labour, that effectively sets ‘his’ work apart:

‘His working conditions are his domestic arrangements, his relations of production are personal relations, and the way in which these are structured is a ‘natural’ way, sanctioned by love, in marked contrast to the cruel divisions of workshop and marketplace...His life is not split between work and leisure, public and private bonds, and indeed this intact sensibility and sense of freedom is what he has to sell. It is the basis of his ideological usefulness.’14

Glastonbury sets up an interesting and relevant relationship between the specific, even spatial, conditions of the writer’s productivity and the reproduction of that labour through another’s domestic labour. As one of the sites of his productivity the domestic interior was also, during this period at least, a consistent source of Vuillard’s iconography. That is both the domestic labour carried out there and significantly, the product of that labour, the suitably intimate domestic interior. It is also, and this is invariably connected to the iconography of Vuillard’s paintings too, the source of the painter’s escape, refuge and re-invigoration, the place where his labour power was effectively reproduced. Though both socially useful and beneficial to capital it is, as Annette Kuhn has argued, a significant aspect of domestic labour that it is

‘...performed within an arena of social relations in which these economic relations are displaced onto and take the appearance of personal relations...The wage, because it is apparently given as a return for work performed outside the home, is seen as the property of the wage-earner, and that part of it which is passed on to the housewife then appears as a gift.’15

By implication, woman’s domestic labour appears to be given as a gift that is the product of personal relations and as such its function within the capitalist mode of production is mystified. Its real productive and economic value is negated by complex personal relations and psychic desires which are themselves mediated by the historically contingent ideologies of femininity and domesticity. Produced, therefore, in relation to a range of social, economic, personal and psychic relations as well as functioning as texts within a wider discourse of domesticity Vuillard’s representations of his mother’s

domestic labour should be analysed for their ideological function, the extent to which they manifest or obscure the material relations of production.

One of the greatest significances of a painting such as *Femme balayant* [fig. 39], is the extent to which it actually figures a subject matter, domestic labour, which has remained largely under-represented within nineteenth-century artistic culture. Generally restricted, as with Berthe Morisot’s painting of 1880, *In the Dining Room* [fig. 42], to its manifestation as professional labour and tending therefore, to operate more as a signifier of bourgeois identity than of working class experience, identifiably private domestic work has been conspicuously absent from visual representation. This is in direct contrast, and possibly as a result of, its prevalence in the profusion of mid to late nineteenth-century texts concerned with the rules and conventions of domestic management. Texts such as Jules Brisset’s undated, but identifiably mid century *physiologie*, ‘La Ménagère parisienne’. This was an essay which described, though not without some sympathy, the everyday duties of a Parisian housewife who lived without the means of employing a domestic servant. Whilst making it his project to describe some of the tasks the housewife should carry out at specific times of the day and thereby render such duties visible to the reader, Brisset stresses that by the time the husband returns home to ‘the angel of his poor house’ all such work must be completed and thereby rendered invisible to the husband’s view, except that is, as its finished product, domestic comfort:

‘Cependant, l’heure du dîner s’approche...Le maître va bientôt rentrer, il faut qu’il trouve tout en ordre, et que sa femme, libre de tout soin du ménage, soit alors entièrement à lui.’\(^{16}\)

The notion that the home should visibly demonstrate the work carried out there during the husband’s absence without actually displaying that work is a consistent theme of such texts. But it is also a theme which, very much like the style of mid nineteenth-century domestic management texts themselves, intentionally posits the man in a supervisory role. This was a relationship in which significantly, the power of the gaze and who possesses it is clearly implicated according to the conventions of sexual difference. For the man returning home must, in effect, appreciate what he sees in order for the wife to gain her ‘reward’, whether it be financial, emotional, or manifested only

in his willingness to return home.\textsuperscript{17} This is a concept that was taken up in Paul Janet’s popular book of 1856, \textit{La Famille, leçons de philosophie morale} in which the author explained how \textit{le chef de famille} is unable to concern himself with the ‘mille détails de la vie de chaque jour’ because he has enough to do both outside the home and inside, in the activity of ‘la surveillance générale’.\textsuperscript{18} Janet proceeded to remind \textit{la maîtresse de maison} that she is ‘la joie, le charme, la récréation de la famille’ and that ‘...le grand principe de la politique domestique est de faire que son intérieur paraisse au mari plus agréable que celui des autres.’\textsuperscript{19}

When it comes to the description of the tasks involved in domestic labour it is possible to separate domestic management texts into two types. Those which described only the most basic though fundamental tasks and those which, employing the \textit{fin-de-siècle} discourse of the new discipline of domestic science, broke each day down into a series of periods and appointed tasks that are described in great detail. The socialist feminist leader Aline Valette’s 1883 book, \textit{La Journée de la petite ménagère} is an indicative example of the latter. Like Brisset, Valette adopted an authoritative tone in relation to the reader, but one which was more akin to that of educator-confidante than Brisset’s husband-supervisor. The text is divided into three parts according to the times of the day and, within these, into chapters according to task. Whilst the evening is given over to conversation, the afternoon to laundry, storing linen and needlework, the morning is devoted to the most elemental tasks of cooking, cleaning and tidying the home. Valette’s ‘lessons’ take the form of a banal conversation between a young woman ‘Madeleine’ and her ‘tante Marthe’. The aunt initially teaches the former to light the fire to the stove, to prepare hot drinks and lunch, and in the second chapter, to make a bed, sweep the floor, dust furniture and to clean various other household objects.\textsuperscript{20} Although Valette’s book is an almost unbearably painful read due to its patronising format and excruciating detail it might be proposed, certainly in comparison to the cursory style of Brisset’s text, that by breaking the day down into a multitude of

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, Cardon (1884) p. 37:
‘Inconsciemment, la plupart de temps, l’homme se trouve mal chez lui et il va au cercle où il trouve le confort et l’art qui le réjouissent, si ce n’est au cercle, c’est au café où, incontestablement, dans le décororation somptueuse, tout n’est pas à louer, mais où souvent l’art se manifeste.’

\textsuperscript{18} Janet (1857), p. 56.

\textsuperscript{19} Janet (1857), p. 69.

\textsuperscript{20} Valette (1898), pp. 11-21.
tasks that appear to warrant expansive explanation Valette was keen to identify domestic labour as not only work but work that is both productive and skilled.

Whilst lending more detail to some of the problems of poor living conditions and the housewife’s isolation, Jules Brisset’s text, by contrast, gives little detailed attention to the specific tasks which domestic work entailed. Although he, like Valette, divided the day into morning, afternoon and evening, again allocating the most important tasks for the morning, Brisset reserved his descriptions for the most important and obvious tasks associated with domestic labour, those of cooking and cleaning or tidying the home. Such descriptions, however, are little more than cursory evocations of women’s innate capability for cleaning, tidying and caring:

‘Le balai, le plumeau en main, elle range, remue, nettoie; elle époussette et frote avec amour chacun de ses meubles dans lesquels elle se mire; elle les soigne avec un sentiment de reconnaissance, car tous font partie de son bonheur.’

When compared to Valette’s identification with the role of educator-confidante, Brisset’s perception of domestic labour as skilled work appears to have been informed by the role of the husband-supervisor. In describing what amounts to very similar tasks it is the perception and conception of those activities as either naturally acted out or as domestic science and therefore skilled labour, that accounts for the differences of these texts. Though it would be erroneous to equate Vuillard’s agenda as an artist with that of Brisset or Valette it is interesting to realise the tendency of Vuillard’s pictorial depiction of his mother’s domestic labour to reverberate between these two modes of perception and representation. Given the variety of activities and physically demanding tasks that were an obviously common part of domestic labour prior to the advent of modern labour saving devices, it is surprising to realise the extent to which the artist limited his perception and representation of housework to the same few basic tasks. Those tasks which Brisset identified as the most elemental and representable duties of domestic work, preparing food, sweeping and tidying. In appearing to adopt a supervisory role akin to Brisset’s, Vuillard seems to have missed a rare artistic opportunity to explore a range of complex spatial arrangements and most significantly, the female body enacting a variety of unusual poses. At the same time however, and

21 Brisset (n.d.), p. 91
despite the symbolic language of natural maternal duty implied by Madame Vuillard’s containment within these spaces, Vuillard’s paintings of the ageing maternal body lack the sense of joyous facility with which the young housewife of Brisset’s or Janet’s text eagerly fulfilled her natural domestic function. Though lacking the detail of Valette’s text, Vuillard’s representations of domestic labour evoke an equivalent acknowledgement of the housewife’s dutiful though productive and infinitely significant observance of mundane yet symbolic domestic rituals. Vuillard’s paintings of domestic work are significant, therefore, in that they suggest a modern and increasingly prevalent form of petit-bourgeois domesticity. A domesticity which continues to reflect the natural skills and domestic status of la maîtresse de maison but only through that same woman’s adoption of the now declining role of the professional domestic servant.

Vuillard produced several images in a variety of mediums, including the 1899 lithograph La Cuisinière [fig. 40], which portray a solitary female figure located within the confined yet orderly and hygienic space of an urban kitchen. In this particular work the viewer is presented with the familiar maternal body of Madame Vuillard, wearing an apron and absorbed into the mundane task of drying crockery. In many ways the figure’s self-effacing absorption into the space and ritualistic task invokes a symbolic rhetoric of maternal containment. More than this, the maternal figure’s insertion into the space of the kitchen suggests the artist’s interest in a subject matter of greatest susceptibility to fantasies of personal relations which are based on acts of gift giving through love as opposed to the economic relations of production. At the same time, it is an image that emphatically points to the productive capacity of the female figure. Portrayed in the process of drying a plate, the figure is surrounded by objects that constitute the material evidence of her labour. To the right of the figure a group of washed plates are laid out on a white cloth and next to these, a frying pan, saucepan, and baking tray similarly await the figure’s attention. Behind and to the left of the figure an open cupboard proudly displays the clean, dry and tidily arranged products of the figure’s labour. Whilst avoiding any notion of a physically strenuous activity it is an

22 See, for example, Janet’s description of women’s innate affinity for detail and dislike of abstract thought. Janet (1857), pp. 58-9: ‘Le ménage doit donc être pour la femme un devoir agréable, elle doit s’y plaire, s’y livrer avec sérieux et enjouement; elle y est admirablement propre; son esprit ami des détails, peu fait pour les idées abstraites, se déploie et se joue heureusement dans les mille soins de l’administration intérieure.’

image which lays great emphasis upon the process involved in the completion of a seemingly innocuous task. It is this attention to an easily overlooked activity and the figure’s silent dignity in the conscientious achievement of it which lends a reverential air to the representation. A viewer who is otherwise unaware of the figure’s identity could be forgiven for interpreting this lithograph as a representation of professional domestic labour. This is an ambiguity that is compounded by the lithograph’s title, *La Cuisinière*, which implies a professional as opposed to private status. The inclusion of such a title provokes us to wonder whether Vuillard used the necessarily anonymous figure of his mother as the physical model for the representation of a professional domestic cook or whether the artist was seeking to acknowledge his mother’s fulfillment of a range of otherwise professional roles in her maternal function as an unpaid domestic labourer. It is the attention to the duality of the modern housewife’s simultaneously productive and skilled yet unpaid and ritualistic domestic labour which renders this image particularly interesting. At the same time, and despite the reverential attention paid to the activity of the figure, the viewer maintains an authorial, possibly even supervisory, high viewing position in relation to the diminutive female figure.

The activity of sweeping forms another task favoured by Vuillard in his representation of domestic work. This is demonstrated in the c. 1899 painting *Femme balayant* [fig. 39], which represents the almost static and rotund profile of Madame Vuillard surrounded by the comfortable objects and surfaces of a dining room. In choosing to depict his mother in the act of sweeping Vuillard employed a familiar metaphor for domesticity that was well established in the visual culture of genre painting. Images such as Camille Pissarro’s representation of professional domestic service, *The Little Country Maid* of 1882 [fig. 43], in which the activity of the young female figure, the walls decorated with small works of art, the circular dining table and the viewer’s high viewing position mark a striking pictorial similarity to Vuillard’s *Femme balayant*. Indeed, the Vuillard painting seems to invoke the visual codes of professional domestic labour as represented in the Pissarro painting, though transformed into a more consciously urban setting and projected onto the non-professional and ageing maternal body. Like the female figure of the Pissarro painting, the figure of Madame Vuillard is absorbed into her task, with eyes lowered in sombre yet compliant concentration. The figure in *Femme balayant* evokes an equivalent sense of
temporality to that of the Pissarro painting. Neither work suggests that this is a rapid sweeping action which has been frozen in a fragile instance of time and space. Rather, both paintings focus upon the slow, meditative motion of the broom in the dutiful and proficient hands of its operator. Although the identity of the female figure is imparted by the title of the Pissarro painting, her professional status may equally be read into the functional country clothing and neckscarf that contrasts with her comfortable surroundings and the smart blue outfit of the small blonde child to the right. By contrast, the non-professional status of the figure in *Femme balayant* may be evidenced by the older figure’s more comfortable insertion into the domestic space and more complicit absorption into her ritualistic domestic task. The play of circular and linear forms and patterns in muted tones of black and reddish brown that constitute the stoical and ageing maternal body are displaced across the surface of the painting. They are, however, most rhythmically echoed in the shiny wooden and soothingly patterned surfaces of the room: the circular shape of the table, the rectilinear forms of the open door, the bulky solidity of the large chest of drawers, the pregnant forms of a lacquered vase or lamp which is placed on top, and the dappled pattern of the wallpaper. The stoical female figure is the experienced creator of order and cleanliness, capabilities reflected in the warm and shiny surfaces of the domestic space which she occupies with such ease. It is a significant aspect of this and other paintings, especially those in which this constitutes the material source of Madame Vuillard’s labour, that dirt remains pictorially invisible. Conceptually manifested by the title and activity of the figure in *Femme balayant*, dirt operates as the invisible if unconsciously present ‘by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter’ and therefore as an invisible signifier of efficient domesticity.\(^{24}\) As with the more ambiguous figure and representation of *La Cuisinière* it is the conflation of the representational codes of professional domestic service with the discourse of natural maternal duty which renders this painting a particularly modern image of non-professional domestic labour. These are images that point to the moral and social significance of the housewife’s productive capacity whilst upholding the ideology of separate spheres and the sexual division of labour. These are not, moreover, images which seek to render visible the strenuous physicality demanded

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of professional domestic workers as described to unique effect in the verbal and photographic (self-)representations of the English domestic servant Hannah Cullwick [fig. 44]. They steer a similarly clear path past the moral anxieties encoded in the dirt and disorder lurking beneath the illusory façade of the bourgeois household as described, to remarkable satirical effect, in Émile Zola’s 1884 novel, *Pot-Bouille*.

A final activity which features strongly within Vuillard’s representation of domestic labour is that of sewing or mending clothes. Such paintings, including the 1891-2 oval format painting entitled *Woman Mending* [fig. 41], may be differentiated from Vuillard’s paintings of the atelier by both the titles and the physical isolation of the figures portrayed. Sewing as domestic work or, in its more historically accurate description, as a domestic duty holds a significant place in contemporary domestic manuals, including those of Valette and Brisset. Both texts, amongst numerous others, lent to the activity of non-professional sewing a particular cultural significance as an indicative and familiar signifier of ideal feminine duty and domesticity. More than this, in describing the ideal daily routine of the domestic woman, both Valette and Brisset allocated to the activity of sewing a time slot during the late afternoon, employing it to demarcate the period between the more strenuous tasks of the morning and the leisurely activities of the evening. As such, it comes to signify the successful completion of the morning’s essential duties, giving way to the afternoon period of waiting for the return of the *chef de famille*. It is this period which is represented in the illustration to Brisset’s text [fig. 45], in which a young woman is shown dutifully sewing by a window opening onto the roofs of Paris. This is a reassuringly familiar image which helps to perpetuate fantasies of women literally waiting for the return of the other household members.

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26 Contained within Zola’s description of the differences in appearance between the kitchen and the public areas of the apartments is a critique of the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality in which dirt is used to symbolise the double standards on which the illusion of bourgeois respectability is based. It is the close proximity of order and disorder, material dirt and hygienic appearances in the bourgeois household which are particularly effective. E. Zola, *Pot-Bouille*, (1884), trans. 1953, p. 26: ‘She was gradually working herself up. She upset plates and dishes with her arms all white with rice-powder and bedizened with gold bracelets. She trailed her red skirts through all the filth till they caught in pans shoved under the tables, at the risk of spoiling all her elaborate finery with the greasy garbage.’

27 E. O. Hellerstein has focused upon the importance of observing ‘precise time-marks as well as space-marks’ as a significant means of women creating and maintaining domestic order, even when nobody else is present to observe such rituals. E. O. Hellerstein, ‘French Women and the Orderly Household, 1830-1870’, *Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 1976, p. 382.
whilst simultaneously maintaining the invisibility of strenuous domestic work. Indeed, it is likely that by timetabling it as an activity suitable to the late afternoon, domestic needlework actively helped to guard against the anxiety of *le chef de famille* returning home to see his wife engaged in strenuous domestic labour, thereby reinforcing the notion that domestic labour should barely register as work at all. It was Brisset who pointed to the symbolic meaning of this activity as a signifier of order, stability, piety and domesticity, the essential traits of bourgeois femininity:

‘Il y a dans cette occupation des idées d'ordre, d'avenir, de durée: ce sont là les premiers fondements matériels d'une bonne maison, ce sont là les œuvres simples et graves de la femme forte de l'Écriture.’

Such a description encapsulates the trans-historical investment in the symbolic language of needlework as a signifier of femininity which, Roszika Parker has demonstrated, reached its apotheosis during the nineteenth century when the discourses of embroidery and femininity became ‘entirely fused’. Embroidery’s ideological significance was as a signifier of difference. It marked the exclusion and seclusion of the realms of bourgeois femininity and domesticity, an illusion of class and sexual difference that was enshrined in embroidery’s exclusion from the economic modes of functional use and exchange.

However, Brisset’s verbal description of the activity of domestic sewing was significant in that it raised the spectre of a radically different, though equally pervasive image of femininity, that of the working class seamstress. This was implied with reference to the functional, though in this instance still strictly non-professional, uses of sewing. By claiming that her innate and multiple talents enabled the housewife to be ‘à la fois couturière, lingère, modiste, brodeuse, ravaudeuse et quelquefois tailleur’, Brisset invoked a variety of female trades which inevitably highlighted the fine, though instrumental, line between the non-functional pursuits of bourgeois femininity and a significant form of waged labour for working class women. The narrative constructions of the non-professional bourgeois seamstress and the professional working class seamstress diverged in a number of critical ways, many of which, including the real economic differences, were justified. Such a rigid demarcation between the supposedly separate spheres of work and leisure played out across the boundaries separating the

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28 Brisset (n.d.), p. 93.
30 Brisset (n.d.), p. 93.
home from the workplace were rarely so rigidly defined in late nineteenth-century France. Whether consciously or not, Brisset’s text highlighted the fragility of such boundaries, indeed the fragility of femininity as a discourse, by speaking of an ideal bourgeois femininity to which the housewife should aspire whilst simultaneously entertaining the idea that this figure shared an affinity for working class trades. Brisset further contradicted his idealised perception of bourgeois femininity by suggesting that the housewife sews ‘avec une patience laborieuse, avec une agilité presque mécanique’. This was an analogy that introduced into the hermetically sealed private sphere and onto the female body in particular, the language of mechanisation normally reserved for narratives of the working class seamstress.31

Vuillard’s depiction of his mother’s non-professional sewing in such paintings as Woman Mending [fig. 41] of 1891-2 implies some of the problems of a fixed category of femininity that follows either the model of the bourgeois or working class seamstress. Whilst Madame Vuillard is depicted carrying out non-professional or ‘leisured’ sewing which should signify bourgeois notions of femininity, the formal construction of the painting tends to resist an easy association with the image that accompanied Brisset’s text [fig. 45]. The small piece of material of the latter image has been transformed into a large, amorphous and unrecognisable mass which requires mending, not embroidering, in the hands of Madame Vuillard. The obviously domestic and well ventilated space of the Brisset image has become the compressed and ambiguous space, reinforced by the painting’s oval shape, in which the figure crouches in the Vuillard image. And finally, whilst the Vuillard painting deploys the seamstress’s familiar pose of head lowered in concentration, like that of Brisset’s image, Vuillard has exaggerated the pose almost to the point of caricature. Madame Vuillard’s head is bent so close to her work that it threatens to disappear inside her collar, a vivid reminder of the debilitating physical effects that sewing could induce over a significant period of time and an emphatic refusal to portray even non-professional sewing as a leisurely past-time. It is with this emphatically ambiguous representation of the non-professional sewing of a professional corset-maker, that the significance of Vuillard’s perception and representation of domestic labour may be located. As with many paintings of both Madame Vuillard’s domestic and professional labour, Woman Mending functions at the intersection of a

31 Brisset (n.d.), p. 93.
nexus of complex and contradictory discourses pertaining to the ‘inseparable categories’ of women, work and the family.32

In their influential study of the effects of industrialisation on women during the nineteenth century, Louise Tilly and Joan Scott have highlighted the way in which women’s relationships to waged labour have been comprehensively mediated by both their own and others’ perception of their primary roles as wives, mothers and daughters.33 Their work has formed part of a wider historical project which has aimed to dissolve the rigidity of history’s investment in the gendered model of the separation of the spheres of work and family under capitalism. The work of Elizabeth Pleck and Patricia Branca has, for example, been instrumental in opening up new ways of thinking about women’s relationship to waged work.34 Both historians have broached their subject with an initial critique of history’s investment in the model of separate spheres which conflates men with the public world of work and relegates women to the non-productive household. The basis for such a critique stems from the realisation that whilst the historical model of separate spheres offers a useful means of understanding the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity, this model takes as its basis an experience which is exclusively bourgeois and male. Both historians turn their attention to the domestic sphere as a site of constant productivity during the nineteenth century, not in some nostalgic search for unchanging pre-industrial relations of production, but as a modern and complex site of ‘considerable economic activity’ which declined only gradually and at intermittent stages.35 Vuillard’s paintings of both his mother’s domestic labour and the waged labour of the corset-making atelier, activities that take place within the same domestic spaces, stand as testament to the household productivity which these historians have described.

Whilst the bourgeois ideology of separate spheres failed to reflect the complex working lives of many women, its binary oppositions, including the absolute division between home and workplace, were integral to the thinking of many nineteenth-century social commentators. In a text exploring debates concerning the woman worker during

the 1850’s and 1860’s, Joan Scott has highlighted the widespread anxieties this figure was able to induce. Already an anomaly in the minds of many political commentators writing during the period of 1858 to 1860, when the issue gained particular relevance, the woman worker was the subject of particularly virulent textual assaults when her work required that she go out to work, in a debate which consistently pitted the symbolic language of the factory against that of the home. Whilst the home could signify a moral order which respected natural differences and feminine purity, the factory (especially those which employed a mixed gender workforce) signalled the potential for sexual ambiguity and depravity. Scott notes, however, a shift in the rhetoric after 1860, moving from an anxiety which used as its moral barometer working class women’s sexuality, most notably located in the ‘ambivalent figure of the femme isolée’ (either single wage earners or clandestine prostitutes) to texts such as Jules Simon’s L’Ouvrière of 1860, which aimed to re-focus public attention on working women’s roles as mothers. This was a shift in focus from what was perceived to be a deviant and largely uncontrollable sexuality to a more all encompassing approach, the protection of motherhood and the family in line with bourgeois morality, that further served to increase the rhetorical divide between factory and home.

Women who worked outside the home were transformed in Simon’s text from sexually depraved creatures into unwilling victims of a system which wrenched them from their natural and satisfying domestic function as mothers. According to Simon, it was only within the home that the natural laws of sexual difference were respected. Women who were forced to go out to work no longer merited being classified as women.

Simon opened his text by claiming that whilst it might be tempting to persuade oneself that misery borne out of poverty had been overcome as a result of factory production there remains ‘...dans notre organisation économique une vice terrible, qui est le générateur de la misère...c’est la suppression de la vie de famille.’ Whilst noting that female factory workers would be in perpetual contact with men and surrounded by people of ‘dubious morality’, for Simon the most significant material effect was the total breakdown of family life, here symbolised by the absolute dissolution of domesticity:

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37 Scott (1988), pp. 139-54.
Quand à sept heures du soir, le père et la mère et les enfants se retrouvent dans l’unique chambre qui leur sert d’asile, le père et la mère fatigués par le travail et les enfants par le vagabondage, qu’y a-t-il de prêt pour les recevoir? La chambre a été vide toute la journée; personne n’a vaqué aux soins les plus élémentaires de la propreté; le foyer est mort; la mère épuisée n’a pas la force de préparer des aliments; tous les vêtements tombent en lambeaux: voilà la famille telle que les manufactures nous l’ont faite.40

The resolution to this problem for Simon was to employ ‘tous les moyens que la liberté autorise pour ramener l’épouse et la mère dans la maison’, even if this necessitated, as a last resort, women performing waged work within the home.41 Simon’s text offered very few real solutions to the fundamental working class problem of economic necessity, made more acute for women by the inequalities of the supplementary and therefore, lower female wage. Simon’s approach, which placed bourgeois notions of moral well-being over economic survival, deploying as its evidence a form of ‘moral geography’ which deepened the perceived rift between home and factory, dictated the parameters of the woman worker debate for at least the next twenty years.42

In her 1996 study of the nineteenth-century Parisian garment trades Judith Coffin, in line with the findings of recent historians of women’s work, has demonstrated that the polarities between ‘home and work, family and market, paid and unpaid labour’ which were so fundamental to Simon’s analysis, actually held very little significance for the professional seamstress.43 Despite the popularity of the seamstress as a metaphor for victimised women workers as a whole in contemporary texts, including Simon’s, which focused upon her visibility on the Parisian streets and exploitation in the large ateliers devoted to couture, the majority of seamstresses actually worked in small apartment based ateliers or alone at home.44 Such historical evidence appears to render Simon’s anxiety over the pervasiveness of women in factory production redundant. The needle trades during the second half of the nineteenth century were one of the largest employers of women, second only to domestic service. Historical analysis of this industry suggests however, that the home as a site of paid work was not the idealised

40 Simon (1861), pp. vi-vii.
41 Simon (1861), p. vii.

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and protective space, removed from the destructive forces of industrialisation and economic exchange, which Simon and others claimed it to be. Nor was it the favoured site for women workers in the garment trades because of some desire to observe the codes of bourgeois morality. Rather, as Coffin states, the resilience of industrial homework in the garment trades during the nineteenth century was directly related to the feminisation of this workforce and the cheapness of the homeworker’s wage.\footnote{Coffin (1996), p. 7.} The rapid expansion of \textit{confection}, or ready-made and therefore cheaper clothing which occurred during the early part of the nineteenth century with the introduction of \textit{magasins de nouveautés} and eventually department stores, further exploited the cheapness of the female wage.\footnote{Coffin (1996), pp. 54-5.} This was a wage made cheaper to reproduce through the establishment of, and rapid growth in, the contracting out system which entailed the use of largely unskilled labour on piecework rates who worked alone at home or in small units, thus reducing the overhead costs of factory production whilst increasing such costs to the worker. Even the introduction of the sewing machine during the 1850’s and 1860’s and its slow dissemination into production methods did not increase factory production. As with many forms of mechanisation, the sewing machine imposed new pressures on the worker by reducing the cost of production and thereby increasing competition. Both those seamstresses who could not afford to invest in a sewing machine and those who did were, according to the official records, forced to increase their working day to an average of ten to twelve hours in order to compete.\footnote{Coffin (1996), p. 63.} Such averages, however, take little account of the seasonal variations which structured the clothing industry, juxtaposing lengthy periods of unemployment with those of excessive activity, necessitating and normalising working days that were considerably longer than twelve hours.

Perceptions of the woman worker problem culminated in the labour reform of November 1892. As well as limiting factory work for children, women of all ages were restricted to eleven hours work per day except, in the garment trade, for sixty days per year at the height of the season, when \textit{veillées} or evening work was still be allowed.\footnote{Coffin (1996), p. 125.} It is a testament both to the moral anxiety that factory work for women induced and to the

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item\footnote{Coffin (1996), p. 7.}
\item\footnote{Coffin (1996), pp. 54-5.}
\item\footnote{Coffin (1996), p. 63.}
\item\footnote{Coffin (1996), p. 125.}
\end{itemize}}
perceived inviolability of the private sphere of domesticity, that family workshops were excluded from the legislation. Rather than limiting the isolation and exploitation of professional seamstresses the law of 1892 actively encouraged the growth of industrial homework and its clandestine nature whilst further accentuating the sexual division of labour. Moreover, the structure of the industry made the law difficult to enforce, with the larger ateliers and factories commonly evading it by sending their workers home with supplementary work to do at the end of their eleven hour shifts. Statistical records of 1900 show a dramatic rise in industrial homework as the material effect of this legislation.\textsuperscript{49} By the end of the nineteenth century one in six French women were categorised as homeworkers.\textsuperscript{50} It is an example of the state’s unwillingness to intervene in the realm of domesticity that it continued to believe that homework almost exclusively entailed artisanal businesses which evoked pre-industrial modes of production in which the relationship between \textit{patronne} and employee resembled that between a mother and her daughter. It was only as a result of both domestic and international pressure that the state was finally forced to commission a series of \textit{Office du Travail} reports on the current state of homework and was thereby forced to acknowledge the existence of a domestically located ‘sweating system’.\textsuperscript{51} This effected a considerable debate during the later 1890’s and the early decades of the twentieth century concerning \textit{travail à domicile}, which actively refuted Simon’s idealisation of the home and profoundly problematised the ideology of separate spheres.

Much like the debates concerning the woman worker problem of several decades earlier those commentators who engaged in the debate concerning \textit{travail à domicile} focused their attention upon the isolated woman worker, most notably the seamstress. The victimised and vulnerable single woman was implicitly and repetitively identified as the subject of these studies. Not wanting to engage too deeply with what were deemed to be personal relations between private individuals, the writers tended to steer clear of the potentially more controversial subject of family workshops. One rare commentator, Paul Louis, did however, refer specifically in 1905 to the \textit{atelier de famille} as an emphatically modern mode of production which ‘eludes all constraints’:

\textquote{Le travail à domicile n’est pas, comme on le pourrait croire, une pure survivance du passé. Si les petits ateliers n’étaient pas que des

\textsuperscript{49} Coffin (1996), p. 127.
\textsuperscript{50} Coffin (1996), p. 141.
\textsuperscript{51} Coffin (1996), pp. 142-3.
simples résidus de l’organisation ancienne et routinière de l’industrie, leur nombre ne s’accroîtrait pas.\textsuperscript{52}

With the majority of texts steering clear of an explicit criticism of family workshops, attention focused upon the destructive effects on domesticity which working at home could produce. During the 1890’s at least, such criticism did not however, reach the point of criticising the moral benefits of homework for women. Writing in 1896 Louis Bonnevay, for example, stated that:

‘On a beaucoup vanté la supériorité du travail à domicile sur le travail en ateliers...Au point du vue moral et sociale la thèse est exacte...Le travail à domicile, c’est la conservation de la famille, le travail en ateliers est sa désorganisation. La femme mariée, la mère de famille, peuvent travailler chez elles, sans que leur ménage en souffre, sans que leurs enfants en pâtissent. Il n’en saurait être de même si elles passent leur journée entière loin de leur foyer!...Mais au point de vue économique cette supériorité est très contestable...’\textsuperscript{53}

Within ten years however, opinion had become more radical, suggesting that the conflation of the spaces and functions of the home and workplace were having detrimental moral effects caused by disorderly and unhygienic conditions. Dirt in the home was finally rendered visible. Such critiques, however, were undoubtedly and exclusively aimed at working class lodgings and their inhabitants, whilst tending to issue from a fear that disease would be spread from worker to customer through the system of commercial exchange. Georges Cahen writing in 1906, for example, clearly expressed such a fear:

‘Et si, comme il advient souvent, il est dû à la maladie de l’ouvrière ou des siens, les draps, les taies, les mouchoirs passeront du foyer visité par la typhoïde, la scarlatine ou la rougeole, dans d’autres foyers qu’ils iront contaminer, propagent l’épidémie jusque dans la cliente confiante qui se précipitera, aux jours d’exposition, dans les grands magasins.’\textsuperscript{54}

Other commentators, such as the Comte d’Haussonville, who published his study of \textit{Le Travail des femmes à domicile} in 1909, preferred to articulate the (perceived)

\textsuperscript{53} L. Bonnevay, \textit{Les Ouvrières lyonnaises travaillant à domicile}, 1896, p. 2.
destruction of domesticity and the sexual division of labour that women carrying out professional work at home could create:

'Une autre reste toute la journée et une partie de la nuit, sans bouger, penchée sur sa machine. C'est son mari, malade, qui fait le ménage et la cuisine. Il faut qu'elle travaille pour deux. Aussi la chambre, jamais balayée, est-elle remplie d'ordures.'

The solution to the travail à domicile problem for Haussonville and other commentators, including Bonnevay and Cahen, was to combat the exploitative effects of the isolated labour characteristic of homework through legislation, a return to the solidarity of the atelier and the greater inclusion of homeworkers in trade unions. The problem with such solutions, however, as both Coffin and Marilyn Boxer have shown, is that these measures tended to ignore the complex ways in which women balanced their roles as wives and mothers, the important contribution that the homeworker's wage made to the family economy and the antagonism which non-gender specific unions tended to feel towards homeworkers. It was perhaps symptomatic of the way in which the travail à domicile debate consistently focused its attention upon the vulnerable and isolated seamstress as a metaphor for homeworkers in general that the idiosyncratic conditions affecting individual women's lives were ignored in the call for legislative restrictions on homework. This is not to deny that homework was a highly exploitative form of labour or that many homeworkers were isolated and therefore ignorant of their working conditions but that what homeworkers tended to fear the most was a reduction in their wages which blanket legislation would have introduced. In her study of the material effects of the 1892 law and the ensuing calls for protective legislation against homework, Marilyn Boxer has shown that, in spite of the secondary female wage, '...in working class families, women contributed significantly more than is generally assumed.' Proposals for legislation against homework received mixed responses from homeworkers anxious to maintain wage levels and therefore an important source of status, identity and to some degree, autonomy within the family. More than this, the

57 Boxer (Fall 1986), p. 51.
58 Boxer (Fall 1986), p. 52.
ability to carry out professional work within the spaces of the home, however exploitative it may have been, enabled women to negotiate the specific parameters of their existence. Coffin has written of a ‘...“marriage bar” [which] structured the female labour market as much as the gender division of labour.’\textsuperscript{59} In the \textit{Office du Travail}’s study of the lingerie industry, the figures for Paris show that of the homeworkers interviewed, 51\% were married, 33\% were widowed and 16\% were single.\textsuperscript{60} That married women formed a higher proportion of homeworkers is a statement of both the material conditions and cultural expectations which shaped their lives. Since factory hours officially ran from ten to twelve hours per day, with the added onus of housework at the end of the day and the continuing belief that married women should remain at home, homework could seem like a viable alternative. It also provided the opportunity for \textit{petit-bourgeois} women to earn whilst maintaining their status or even, because of the invisibility of homework, the illusion that they did not work at all.\textsuperscript{61}

Both the debate concerning the moral and social benefits of \textit{travail à domicile} which issued from the significant increase in such work caused by the ‘protective’ legislation of 1892 and recent historical analysis of how working women negotiated the conflicting responsibilities of their lives through homework, focus upon the space of the home as a site of waged labour. Both discourses, the \textit{travail à domicile} debate and the historical analysis of women’s experience, provide conflicting and ambiguous answers as to how the conflation of the spaces of domesticity and work actually functioned. In the \textit{travail à domicile} texts the spaces do not function at all. The house is not a home nor does it work as a place of work. As with the \textit{Office du Travail} monographs these texts focused upon the tell-tale signs which pointed to the inefficiency of the domestic workspace: signs of dirt and disease, a lack of domesticity symbolised by unswept floors and the long hours spent at the sewing machine. Meanwhile, historical analysis demonstrates the ways in which women coped, their ability to compromise duties and juggle responsibilities within the same space. Vuillard’s representations of his mother’s \textit{atelier de famille}, located within the various apartments the family occupied during this period, interact with these discourses in a variety of interesting ways. These paintings were produced during the period which experienced a rapid statistical growth in

\textsuperscript{60} Coffin (1996), p. 147.  
homework within the garment trades, following the introduction of the 1892 law, but before the travail à domicile debate reached its peak during the following decade. So how does the domestic interior function as a place of work within these paintings? How does Madame Vuillard negotiate the conflicting spatial and even temporal functions of the working domestic interior, as portrayed by Vuillard?

It is necessary to point to a number of ways in which Madame Vuillard’s work and atelier differ as a discursive subject from those described above. To some extent, Madame Vuillard’s exact situation is avoided by the travail à domicile texts. Madame Vuillard does not symbolise the familiar figure of the isolated and vulnerable seamstress, she was, after all, in control of her own means of production. Similarly, records and paintings such as La Robe à ramages [fig. 5] show that Madame Vuillard generally employed at least three members of staff, including her daughter Marie and mother, Madame Michaud, as well as workers who were unconnected to the family. As such, Madame Vuillard’s business may, to a certain degree, be identified as an atelier de famille, a subject matter deemed too controversial to investigate in many of the texts criticising le travail à domicile. The Vuillard apartments also differ from the small, one or two roomed units located in the tenement buildings of working class districts which were favoured by the travail à domicile texts. Although the Vuillard family moved quite frequently within this period and occupied apartments which certainly contained more than two rooms, they remained within the district that formed the focal point of the Parisian clothing industry between the Opéra and the rue Faubourg St. Honore in the north west of central Paris. Moreover, Madame Vuillard’s business was an atelier, though a small one, that was located within the home and as such it more emphatically introduced into the spaces of domesticity the language and relationships of its ‘rival’, the factory.

In the travail à domicile texts the home which is used as a place of work does not function according to either of its uses, whereas in Vuillard’s paintings the domestic interior is able to support both functions. In paintings such as Seamstress (Interior) [fig. 46] of c. 1892-5 the signifiers of domesticity and of work appear to co-exist quite happily. A single figure, wearing the functional clothing and adopting the familiar pose

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63 Gloria Groom provides a map of Paris pinpointing the location of the various Vuillard apartments. Groom (1993), p. ix.
of the seamstress is absorbed in her work at the centre of the painting. The tools of the seamstress's trade, the dressmaker's model and a variety of differently patterned materials function amidst the furniture of domesticity: a small round table, straight backed chairs, a chest of drawers and the highly patterned surfaces of the walls and hangings. Although there is some sense of a disorder created by work, the patterns and textures which form the various materials stretching back and across the horizontal space of the room lose their intensity against the highly decorative surface of the wallpaper and the solidity of the furniture. This is a controlled disorder which is made possible, in effect, by an overemphasis of the signifiers of domesticity. That is, by an indulgence of and in the textures, surfaces and invigorating colours of domesticity, its decorative plenitude which emphatically differentiates it from both the dirt, disorder and lack of housework of the travail à domicile interiors and the mechanised and alienating spaces of the factory. The viewer is not invited to focus too closely upon the exact work which is being carried out. We are distracted by our desire to read the space and absorbed by the sensory pleasure we achieve in its surfaces.

In the 1893 painting, **Interior (Interior at l'Etang-la-Ville)** [fig. 47] all of the elements which studies of homework considered necessary for the efficient and hygienic use of the home as a place of work are present. Although there is a suggestion of the disorder created by garment production this is juxtaposed with the spaciousness of the room, the floor which is free from debris, including pieces of thread or discarded cloth, and the worktable which is uncluttered except for a single expanse of pale pink cloth. The worktable is placed directly next to the window as the most valuable source of light. These large doors are thrown open, allowing what appear to be material particles of light and fresh air to enter the room. A vase of fresh flowers stands in isolation on the foreground table. A clock hanging on the rear wall of the room, though barely perceptible, is compositionally located between the figures of mother and daughter, reminding the viewer of the efficiency of the work space in which both figures fulfill their respective professional roles as supervisor and worker.

During the period of 1891 to 1896 Vuillard produced a number of paintings that relate to the way in which women who worked in the home negotiated the spatial complexities and functional boundaries of that space. Subverting the normal conventions of bourgeois domesticity in which each room is positioned, decorated and used according to a specific purpose, Vuillard produced a number of images which
deploy the same room, whether it be real or imaginary, as the location for a variety of
different functions. It is the room which appears in *Interior* [fig. 48] of 1894 and the c.
1896 painting, *The Vuillard Family at Lunch* [fig. 49], recognisable by the pictorial
use of the same glass panelled wall and door motif, though viewed from a position
which has shifted some ninety degrees to the right. Whilst the professional activity of
the two figures (the dark shape of a figure is just visible at the doorway) in the earlier
painting, *Interior*, is rendered almost imperceptible by both the painting’s domestically
orientated title, complicated surface and compositional arrangement it, nonetheless,
remains an image which depicts the transformation of the family dining room into the
functional space of the professional workroom. In *The Vuillard Family at Lunch* the
viewer is invited to join the circular dining table, heavy with food and drink, in a
composition which deploys the familiar pictorial motif of the à table scene, most notably
reproduced in Caillebotte’s more arid painting of *haut-bourgeois* familial tension,
*Déjeuner* of 1876 [fig. 10]. In the Vuillard painting, the circular table operates as the
compositional and psychological focus of this crowded space of leisure, ritual and
physical satisfaction, anchored as it is beneath a hanging oil lamp. The same circular
table and its corresponding straight-backed chairs have, however, been pushed to the
foreground margins of the pictorial and iconographic space of *Interior*. Here the oil
lamp is left suspended over the now empty central area of the room, almost redundant in
its present location, it constitutes a telling, if subtle, signifier of the room’s ‘proper’
domestic function. At the rear of the horizontal space a long rectangular worktable,
seemingly covered by a decorative length of heavy cloth, supports a variety of different
lengths of material, one of which issues forth in a crumpled heap from the complicated
form of a sewing machine, to the left. At the far righthand end of the table, the familiar,
solid and solitary figure of Madame Vuillard, clothed in a pale blue smock and red
neckscarf, is absorbed into her work.

Vuillard’s paintings of his mother’s domestic work, especially those which
represent the activity of sweeping, start to take on a particular significance as the
material means by which the domestic interior is able to function as both a home and a
place of professional work. This connection between the professional and domestic
labour of the home is, however, largely a product of analysis since the domestic labour
required to retain the home for its domestic function is invisible in the atelier images.
The floors and surfaces of the atelier are always clear from the waste material which accompanied this profession as a matter of course. Instead, images of seamstresses storing cloth in cupboards, *Ouvrières au chiffonnier* [fig. 50] of 1892 for example, and the cupboards themselves start to take on a particular symbolic significance as both the places where the product of the seamstresses' labour is stored and as a temporal demarcator of the transition from work space to domestic space. As the playful actions and joyous facial expressions of the two foreground figures of another painting, again entitled *Ouvrières au chiffonnier* [fig. 51] suggests, the storing of work and the sweeping away of even the notion of disorder may operate as rare moments for celebration and individual expression, moments of freedom in the liminal space between two narrowly defined roles.

In the easy changeover from domestic space to work space as Vuillard represents it, there is therefore, very little notion of many of the real hardships and conflicts which homeworkers faced. Vuillard, as we have seen, tends to avoid the more controversial aspects of such work, suggesting therefore that his images have a certain ideological role to play in obfuscating the relations of production and material conditions of this kind of work. Vuillard's paintings of his mother's atelier resist the negative discourses increasingly being vocalised around the subject of professional homework. His images rarely entertain the idea that the line between artisanal labour carried out at home and the professional homework of exploited workers might easily be crossed. It is only on the rare occasions of paintings such a *Dressmakers Under the Lamp* [fig. 52] of c. 1891-2, which represents the veillé or evening work, that some of the problems of homework are made visible. But it is interesting to note that in this painting the emphatic signifiers of domesticity, the highly patterned wall surfaces, for example, which are such an insistent feature of many other sewing paintings, have been avoided. The sloping sections of wall behind the two figures gives their surroundings an almost attic or even garret like quality, more in tune with the familiar narratives of the exploited homeworker in which domesticity fails to function. A similar obfuscation of domesticity occurs in the one painting which directly represents Madame Vuillard's actual profession, the undated *L'Atelier de la corsetière* [fig. 38], in which the one emphatic signifier of domesticity, the highly patterned wallpaper to the left, gives way to the barren yet functional space of the atelier which is the particular focus of the painting's
The seamstresses who would normally constitute the decorative focus of the paintings’ composition have given way to the mechanical tool that perches on the table’s edge.

Excluding the pneumatic instrument which appears at the centre of *L’Atelier de la corsetière*, those tools normally associated with garment production feature only rarely in Vuillard’s representations of the atelier. Whilst it is possible to find, in images such as *Seamstress (Interior)* [fig. 46] and *A Seamstress* [fig. 53] of 1892-3, representations of limbless dressmaker’s models these are easily subsumed into the objects, surfaces and shapes of domesticity. Because of their form they may quite easily be mistaken for a female body and therefore fail to present much of a threat to domesticity and in many ways, the dressmaker’s model symbolised a physical ideal of femininity to which women aspired. The sewing machine occurs very rarely in Vuillard’s paintings. It is included in *Interior* [fig. 48] where the form of the machine, protected and largely hidden by its wooden cover, is just visible amongst the other pieces of furniture in this representation of professional labour. The sewing machine re-appears in *Interior with Figure* [fig. 54] of 1896 where, once again, the covered and therefore unused machine—with its decorative iron base—is located close to the body of Madame Vuillard in a representation which leans more towards the activity of non-professional sewing.

Barthélemy Thimonnier is generally credited with patenting the first basic form of sewing machine in France in 1829.64 Intending his machine for use in factories or large-scale ateliers that produced simple items of clothing, Thimonnier caused considerable anxiety and political unrest concerning the machine’s effect on skilled labour. Not least because Thimonnier specifically requested that women workers, being the cheapest labour and possessing the dexterity and precision required, should be encouraged to work as the machine operators.65 Already associated with femininity at an early stage in its development, by the end of the century the sewing machine had become concretely identified with women’s domestic production. This came about through technical developments which made the machine smaller, more efficient to run and easier to use, but also through the identification of different stratas within the

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64 Coffin (1996), p. 47.
65 Coffin (1996), pp. 50-1.
potential market. It was the need to overcome the fundamental bourgeois anxiety which, as Coffin states, ‘derived from a nexus of ideas about home, machinery and femininity’ which paradoxically necessitated the development of modern marketing techniques. From the 1850’s onwards the American manufacturer Isaac Merrit Singer produced and exported machines that would appeal to the needs of a wide cross-section of potential customers, including the industrialist and the bourgeois housewife. Realising the potential of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois domestic market, but equally aware of anxieties which the introduction of an industrial machine into the hermeticised space of the home would produce, manufacturers were quick to design machines exclusively intended for this market. As an advertisement for the Singer ‘New Family’ sewing machine [fig. 55] of 1858 indicates, these were machines which could easily be subsumed into the domestic interior as a stylish and feminine piece of furniture. Through the effective marketing strategies which underplayed the machine’s productive potential, the sewing machine eventually functioned as another decorative accessory of domestic yet fashionable femininity, much like the piano or the easel of the amateure (see, for example, a fashion plate of 1867 [fig. 56]). Whatever the actual uses to which the sewing machine was put, and it seems likely that only the bourgeois would have been able to afford to keep one for purely ‘non-productive’ purposes, the barriers between factory and home remained, ideologically at least, relatively well intact.

It was the introduction of hire purchase schemes during the 1870’s which cemented the sewing machine’s desirability for working class women who wanted or needed to work at home. Its potentially destructive or morally beneficial purpose for the working woman and the working class family was, as might be expected, the subject of considerable debate. The effectiveness of marketing and production strategies is demonstrated, however, by the transition of opinion from social commentators such as Jules Simon, who in 1860 had pitted true femininity against the sewing machine, and commentators of the 1870’s, such as Paul Leroy-Beaulieu who regarded it as a renewed source of family based productivity:

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'Quelle peut être l’influence des machines à coudre sur la vie de famille? Elle doit être excellente. Par elles l’atelier domestique, qui était perdu, pourra se reconstituer, au grand profit non-seulement de la morale, mais encore de la situation matérielle et pécuniaire de la famille.'

The liberating potential and moral expediency of the sewing machine for professional homeworkers was muted, however, by the ensuing increase in competition and labour hours and concurrent decrease in labour value which de-centralisation into homework and the increased productivity of the sewing machine caused. Working women were trapped in a vicious circle of production. It became increasingly necessary that they invest in a sewing machine in order to avoid all but the cheapest forms of labour, but this necessitated that they work at least as long as before at the physically more tiring machine in order to compete with the falling value of their work whilst maintaining the hire purchase repayments. By the time of the travail à domicile debate, therefore, the sewing machine had become inexorably linked with the most exploitative and damaging effects of professional homework. Indeed, and as Adolphe Willette’s lithograph of 1898 entitled L’Ouvrière [fig. 57] suggests, it had become the prime signifier of the sweating system in a dynamic which often portrayed the homeworker as an automaton, the unwilling victim of the sewing machine’s endless, whirring productivity.

It would appear therefore, that in rarely portraying the sewing machine, the symbol of modern relations of production, Vuillard’s paintings of the domestic atelier avoid many of the anxieties which the sewing machine’s integral position in the exploitative nature of homework induced. Moreover, in those paintings where the sewing machine is visible, Interior [fig. 48] and Interior with figure [fig. 54], by placing Madame Vuillard close to the machine but not actually working at it the artist was able to exploit contemporary confusion over its domestic use. In a domestic setting the sewing machine could signify a variety of different functions: either a modern bourgeois domesticity where the machine is used for purely ‘non-productive’ ends, the clandestine yet productive labour of the petit-bourgeois woman or the exploited labour of the

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homeworker. In these paintings the machine remains inside its protective cover, it takes on the appearance of, and is barely distinguishable from, the other pieces of domestic furniture that occupy these rooms. Madame Vuillard’s physical proximity to the sewing machine and yet lack of desire to use it more convincingly suggests a relationship of affinity for it as a symbol of functioning domesticity than a relationship of physical enslavement to it for financial means. But in totally resisting the possibility of the latter association Vuillard must ultimately undermine the professional status of its operator. In doing so Vuillard deploys a familiar motif of sewing machine advertising imagery, in which a working class woman wearing functional and sombre clothing, is situated in a comfortable domestic setting [fig. 58]. More paragon of domestic virtue than icon of exploited labour, the working class seamstress’s productivity and position within the economic system of exchange was undermined in the name of an aspirational fantasy of bourgeois domesticity.  

By the 1890’s however, this motif of domestic virtue was having to compete with a new advertising icon that tapped into the belle époque culture of 1890’s Paris. The ‘sewing machine girl’ of the 1890’s was portrayed as a young and modern femme nouvelle, a consumer who used the sewing machine, much like the bicycle, as a source of individual freedom and social transportation, as a means of rejecting the domestic confinement of an earlier generation [fig. 59]. In rejecting such an image Vuillard was also refuting and possibly protecting his mother and the workers of the atelier from the connotations of contemporary medical and social discourse which spoke of the autoerotic sexual arousal women could gain from the repetitive motion of operating their sewing machines. This was a vision of autonomous female sexuality which the advertising imagery for sewing machines of the 1890’s deliberately exploited in its play upon notions of speed, weightlessness, and individual freedom.

The emphasis placed upon the sexuality of the seamstress at her sewing machine in advertising imagery and medical discourse formed part of a wider discursive exploration into the physiognomy and sexuality of the seamstress during this period. The rise of the new discipline of sociology during the latter half of the nineteenth century, characterised by the work of Frederic Le Play and Pierre de Maroussem, who

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favoured monographic studies of the intimate details of the worker’s existence, had become a popular but largely diluted strategy for sociological inquiry by the 1890’s. As Judith Coffin has, once again, demonstrated, the final decade of the nineteenth century witnessed the publication of an unprecedented quantity of studies of the seamstress which claimed to reveal the truth of her existence as a metaphor for working class femininity in its entirety.\(^7^5\) Though the influence of sociological methods of inquiry tended to vary according to the text, the discipline leant a new mode of perception and interpretation to the discursive construction of the seamstress. This was predicated upon the belief that all subjects were ultimately knowable once rendered visible. This legitimised, though to varying degrees of intensity and seriousness, the possibility of making visible the most intimate details of a seamstress’s existence in the name of public knowledge. As a familiar symbol of working class femininity however, such studies generally started from a set of pre-existing beliefs about the seamstress’s sexuality which derived from her involvement in the economic system of commodity production and exchange and the knowledge that many seamstresses earned subsistence wages. Rendering the seamstress visible could often mean exploiting her situation for either moralistic or titillating ends, using the discourse of social science as a legitimising pretext for voyeuristic consumption. Whatever the final results, the research for such studies tended to follow the same model which involved tracking the seamstress across a ‘moral geography’ between her hyper-visibility on the Parisian streets to the harem-like seclusion of the atelier. While the *travail à domicile* debate and the *Office du Travail* studies into industrial homework formed part of the wider inquiry into the seamstress’s existence, the homeworker’s isolation and the presumed inviolability of the private sphere tended to mitigate against using the latter in studies which offered the seamstress’s moral and sexual well-being up for public consumption. Seamstresses who had already rendered themselves physically available to public scrutiny by going out to work were considered legitimate specimens. Not that actual women were the subject of the majority of these texts. Except for the government commissioned monographs which inquired into every aspect of the seamstresses’ standard of living, most texts deployed the authoritative language of popular social science whilst using fictional

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women as their symptomatic subjects. This formed part of a concerted effort to get away from the dry statistical analysis of institutionalised sociological inquiry into a more emotive and popular approach which combined, to varying degrees, the sociologist’s moral right to consume and the voyeuristic acuity of the flâneur’s gaze with the popular language of contemporary urban fiction.

Charles Benoist’s 1895 award winning study, Les Ouvrières de l’aiguille à Paris, serialised in Le Temps during 1893, is an excellent example of popularised social science. The author set out his seemingly unbiased yet sympathetic approach early on, stating that he aims to establish the moral and material condition of the Parisian working woman ‘...en plein sincérité, sans rien exagéérer, sans rien atténuer; non pour récrimer, mais pour faire voir.'76 Despite Benoist’s well-meaning and sympathetic need to expose the seamstresses’ plight, to make, as he claims, the reader ‘feel’ and ‘experience the suffering of human flesh’ his approach ultimately stemmed from the belief that women have ‘moins de résistance’ and ‘se défendent moins bien’ than men, thus legitimising his need to protect them.77 Having chosen as his subject the most vulnerable and emotive of seamstresses, the single woman, Benoist proceeded to assess, at length and with considerable understanding, the relative values of the 1892 law, the issue of veillées and seasonal unemployment, the subsistence wage which he placed at an average of three-francs-fifty per day and many of the other material conditions affecting the seamstress’s standard of living. It was to Benoist’s credit that he was able to make such conditions visible and argue against them in a straightforward way which concretely situated the perception of the seamstress’s dubious sexual morality in relation to the material conditions of her existence. But Benoist used the findings of his research to set up a textual construction of the seamstress in which she must necessarily and eternally play the role of a defenseless victim to her own freedom. For Benoist, the most emotive means of displaying the seamstress’s inability to defend her own morality, is to describe her public visibility and vulnerability upon the alien streets of Paris where he goes to ‘record’ her actions:

‘L’ouvrière est jeune, libre, peu instruite, peu réfléchie, et demeure loin d’atelier. Elle part de chez elle avant le jour, y retourne après la nuit tombée, à pied, par les rues désertes ou à travers la foule, ce qui n’est pas moins dangereux. Elle vient et s’en retourne toute seule, ou

77 Coffin (June 1991), pp. 246 & 13-4; Benoist (1895), p. 17.
It is a paradox of this and many other texts, however, that in describing the public appearance and vulnerability of the seamstress with the detail yet anonymity of the flâneur turned social scientist, Benoist begins to revel in the pleasure of his voyeuristic power, whilst leaving the seamstress more vulnerable to public identification:

'It faut les voir, de midi à une heure, aller et venir tristement de l’atelier à la gargote et de la gargote à l’atelier. Elles passent, rapides et bruyantes en leurs pauvres robes froissées, l’éternelle aiguille piquée au corsage, avec un bout de fil tordu en serpentin... Ne vous laissez pas prendre aux éclats de cette fausse gaieté, à ce rire nerveux, qui est comme une convulsion d’âmes malades. Souvenez-vous plutôt du mot profond et touchant du poète: Joie de rue, douleur de maison!'79

In the absence of legislation, for Benoist the answer to the seamstress’s plight is to overcome her hunger, her flirtatiousness and then to remove all temptations from the streets of Paris, because while ‘[à] quinze ans, la rue attire l’ouvrière; à dix-huit ans, elle l’amuse; à vingt ans, elle la dévore.'80

Benoist’s moralistic yet voyeuristic approach to his subject found countless admirers in the following decade. Works such as André Vernières’ 1908 study of a single fictional seamstress, Camille Frison, ouvrière de la couture, in which the author feels justified in following or accompanying his subject from her house to the atelier whilst recounting Camille’s inevitable downfall. The author admits that ‘[p]ar un sentiment de compassion bien naturel, et aussi un peu, je l’avoue, par curiosité, j’ai résolu de pénétrer le mystère de ces deux existences.’81 To an even greater extreme than Benoist, Vernières called upon his authority and ability to look as justification for tracking his subject at such close physical range:

‘...je cherchais à lire dans un regard le mystère d’une existence, l’inconnu d’un passé, et, j’entrevoyais dans la vie de l’ouvrière, dans son travail, tout un monde à explorer. Évidemment n’étais-je pas un profond sociologue. Mais en somme, ces enquêteurs officiels, ces statisticiens à lunettes d’or qui réduisent tout à des chiffres et à des moyennes, n’étaient-ils pas les gens les plus ennuyeux de la terre? Moi, je n’étais qu’un amateur sans prétention, et je raconterai simplement ce que j’aurai

78 Benoist (1895), p. 118.
79 Benoist (1895), pp. 122-3.
80 Benoist (1895), p. 143.
81 A. Vernières, Camille Frison, 1908, p. 2.
vu et entendu. Après tout, n’était-il pas permis à un fonctionnaire de l’État, qui n’avait pas grand souci en dehors de son bureau, d’utiliser ses loisirs comme il l’entendait, et de chercher à s’instruire en flânant? 82

In other texts of the period, for example Louis Morin’s 1895 study, Les Cousettes, physiologie de couturières de Paris, the writer’s right to see and describe the specific physical attributes of the seamstress is essential to the erotic dynamic of the text. Taking as his subject the ‘cousette’ or thirteen year old apprentice, Morin exploited contemporary interest in his subject in order to titillate his reader. In contrast to both Benoist and Vernières though, Morin did not profess to come to his subject with some profound need to expose the material reasons for her moral degradation. For Morin, the young seamstress’s immoral sexuality and inevitable downfall is physically inscribed and displayed across her body. No longer a victim of circumstance, the cousette openly yet naively courts the interested gaze, pinning up her skirts and inserting fake breasts into her clothing when she leaves home for work, because for her, the work at the atelier is only considered as a transitory phase and a useful means of finding a lover. 83 The familiar image of seamstresses on the street at lunch-time re-occurred in Morin’s text, where it is translated into a drypoint by Henri Somm [fig. 60]. But in this instance it is the seamstress who was considered by Morin to be wholly responsible for ‘...laissant dans le cœur des hommes le vague regret de quelque chose d’exquis que l’on pourrait peut-être avoir, si l’on voulait bien...’. 84

In his highly contested account of atelier seamstresses of 1902, Les Reines de l’aiguille, modistes et couturières, Arsène Alexandre invoked the physical appeal of the seamstress on the street in the opening paragraph, stating that they present ‘...un spectacle dont on ne trouverait l’analogue nulle part au monde...’. 85 Unselfconsciously, Alexandre proceeded to describe how he tends to spend each morning watching the seamstresses from a high vantage point, likening their ‘well-ordered rhythm’ and ‘unhesitating’ movement to ‘celle d’insectes allant accomplir leur tâche instinctive’ but how ‘[I]orsqu’on se mêle à se mouvement, ce caractère de régularité et d’automatisme se dissimule sous les nuances infinies de la physionomie individuelle...’. 86 Alexandre

82 Vernières (1908), p. 27.
83 L. Morin, Les Cousettes, 1895, pp. 4-5.
86 Alexandre (1902), p. 2.
allowed the reader’s curiosity to reach a step further though, by inviting him into the normally private area of the couture atelier or ‘beehive’, presenting a written and pictorial image of secluded and idealised working conditions which refuted the miserablist accounts of contemporary research [fig. 61]. Indeed, Alexandre openly criticised the findings and approach of contemporary sociological studies, stating, for example, that the veillées could be joyous and that the only figure who really knows how to see and to represent these ‘modern life beauties’ is the painter.87 Alexandre closed his text with the claim that while misery exists, ‘...rien n’est plus noble dans la douceur, que la simplicité avec lesquelles l’ouvrière parisienne la supporte.’88

As either unwilling victim of material circumstance or sexualised fantasy of working class availability the contemporary discursive construct of the seamstress is reliant upon the street as the site for her visual consumption. In relation to this, Vuillard’s domestication of Madame Vuillard’s atelier and work could be seen as a strategy for resisting the prevailing narrative construction of the contemporary seamstress; a means of arresting the dominant scopic regime of the seamstress and protecting her from those who only want to see and portray her as a victimised or sexualised body. In Vuillard’s perception of the seamstress the street has no place. Indeed, for an atelier located at the centre of the Parisian garment industry, Vuillard’s paintings indicate surprisingly little consciousness of the world outside. As in the 1893 painting, *Interior with Women Sewing (L’Aiguillée)* [fig. 62], a work which might be deployed as a means of visualising this protective strategy of resistance, the public sphere has been reduced solely to the function of a brilliant light source. Moreover, while the three seamstresses who work in close proximity to each other are ignorant of the viewer’s gaze our ability to consume them is resisted by the cursory delineation of their physical appearance and sombre outfits. Instead, the sensuality which Benoist, Morin and Alexandre described as a physiological characteristic of the seamstress when viewed at close range and on the Parisian streets is displaced onto the surrounding surfaces and objects of this crystalline interior. It is in the top righthand corner of the composition that the figure of a man appears, contained within the fragment of a painting. Wearing a black suit and holding a cane in his right hand, this faceless

87 Alexandre (1902), pp. 31 & 82.
88 Alexandre (1902), p. 185.
apparition wears the uniform now commonly associated with the figure of the \textit{flâneur}. But here the \textit{flâneur} is doubly framed and objectified within the confines of visual representation. He remains an impotent figure and momentary distraction for our gaze which eventually comes to rest upon the emphatic gesture of the silhouetted figure at the centre of the painting. Her hand, frozen in space and time, holds an invisible and yet powerfully symbolic tool which is the ultimate signifier of her profession, the needle.

Whilst it may be argued that Vuillard’s pictorial domestication of the sewing atelier functioned as a means of protecting the seamstress from the prevailing narratives of her sexual availability, removing her from the streets did not necessarily protect the seamstress from the prevailing construction of her physical appearance. A survey of Vuillard’s many paintings of the domestic atelier suggests that these representations tap into the dominant pictorial and literary construction of the seamstress as a recognisable physiological type. Many of Vuillard’s paintings of the atelier, including \textit{Interior with Women Sewing (L’Aiguillee)} \cite{fig. 62}, tend to displace all notions of physical sensuality onto the decorative surfaces of these diverse interiors. This lends a pared-down regularity and simultaneity of appearance and gesture to the seamstresses’ bodies within individual paintings and across the subject matter as a whole. This is particularly true of those paintings, \textit{Seamstress (Interior)} \cite{fig. 46}, \textit{A Seamstress} \cite{fig. 53} and \textit{Interior with Women Sewing (L’Aiguillee)} \cite{fig. 62}, for example, in which identifiable members of the Vuillard family are absent. When the familiar figure of Madame Vuillard is present, in \textit{Three Women in a Room with Rose-Coloured Wallpaper} \cite{fig. 63}, for example, her slow, corpulent and ageing body constitutes an effective pictorial and iconographic foil to the corseted, linear forms and efficient, balletic movements of the more youthful workers. In these paintings, the female figures assume a regularity and simultaneity of appearance and gesture which finds a remarkable pictorial equivalent in the previously cited illustration to Alexandre’s text \cite{fig. 61} and a further Henri Somm drypoint etching which accompanies Morin’s text \cite{fig. 64}. The strong, tightly contained silhouettes, with neatly pinned back hair and barely delineated facial features of the Somm drypoint also dominate Vuillard’s \textit{Interior with Women Sewing (L’Aiguillee)}, in which several women are similarly seated around a narrow table, with heads lowered and sewing arms raised in a painting which deploys a comparative use of the contrastive effects of light and dark. In both representations, the idiosyncratic
physical characteristics of the individual seamstresses have been obliterated in favour of physiological types and pictorial motifs which render the occupational identities of the figures instantly recognisable. The repetition of a single physiological type is, however, most forcefully enacted in the illustration accompanying Alexandre’s text. Each of the ten figures which are crammed into the narrow yet tall space of the atelier are depicted with almost identically corseted bodies and tightly fitting outfits, each crowned with a voluptuously constructed chignon. This repetitive pictorial motif lends to each figure a seductive appearance which is highly reminiscent, if less languorously predatory, of another popular, if no less fantastical, contemporary physiological type, the equally à la mode ‘Gibson girl’ [fig. 65]. As with many of Vuillard’s paintings of the atelier, especially those in which Madame Vuillard is absent, the controversial signifier of contemporary mechanisation, the sewing machine, is absent from the illustrations accompanying both Morin’s and Alexandre’s texts. Yet the pictorial language of mechanisation is subtly present. In each instance it is displaced onto the standardised physiological appearances and repetitive gestures of the anonymous female figures. The conflation of the working methods and tools of the seamstress’s trade with the latter’s physiological appearance constituted a dominant and resilient pictorial and literary motif during this period. It had occurred, for example, in Brisset’s mid century physiologie of the Parisian housewife, when the author referred to the mechanical agility of the domestic woman who sews.89 It re-occurred in Benoist’s 1895 description of the Parisian seamstress, in which the author identified his subject by the needle, with its serpentine length of thread, that was inevitably pinned to his subject’s breast.90 In doing so, Benoist provoked an immediate visual connection between the physical appearance of the seamstress and the limbless dressmaker’s models, who were similarly adorned with needles, pins and other accoutrements of the seamstress’s trade. This was a visual comparison between the regularised and mechanical gestures of the seamstress and the standardised dressmaker’s models which is more suggestively enacted in the illustration accompanying Alexandre’s text [fig. 61]. Though more resplendently clothed, the idealised and emphatically feminine form of the centrally located model, upon which two figures are working, is endlessly echoed in the idealised, though artificially constructed,

89 Brisset (n.d.), p. 93.
90 Benoist (1895), pp. 122-3.
forms of the corseted seamstresses. At the same time, the standard physiological appearance of the seamstress, to which numerous contemporary commentators referred, is metaphorically evoked by the repetitive forms of the three limbless models located on a high shelf at the rear of the composition and which, in turn, evoke the visual connotations of a production line. In referring, for example, to the seamstresses as ‘vêtuës de sombre’ and with ‘un pâle visage’, Alexandre made similar verbal references to the doll-like appearances of the seamstresses.91 Similarly, Alexandre consistently referred to the ‘monotonous life’ and ‘essentially mechanical work’ of the seamstress which imprinted upon ‘...leur allure et leur visage...un peu de l’implacable régularité de leur fonction.’92 According to Alexandre, this produced ‘...un caractère général...qui est commun à cette population et est une des causes principales de son attrait et de la sympathie qu’elle dégage.’93 When viewed within the spatial context of the atelier, it was this ‘caractère général’ which formed ‘...une harmonieuse mêlée de silhouettes, une opposition de tons, une symphonie de mouvements, que seuls les peintres pourraient rendre, si nos peintres, hélas! savaient voir et cherchaient à comprendre les beautes de la vie moderne.’94 The ideological incentives driving the pictorial and literary construction of the seamstress as a physiological type, identified by the repetitive, mechanical gestures and artificial, even doll-like appearances of the body, may be interpreted in a number of ways. It may be argued, for example, that by enacting the exclusion of the mechanised language of the sewing machine in favour of the mechanised discourse of the seamstress’s body, these texts were able to signify and at the same time, displace and dissipate contemporary anxieties with regard to modern methods of production. Similarly, the seamstress’s de-humanisation may have served to distance the notion of actual individuals from the material hardships of overwork and poverty which were increasingly associated with the garment trades. In relation to this, the characterisation of the seamstress as a mechanical automaton, also served to de-humanise these individuals to an extent which enabled them to operate as the anonymous yet alluring objects of a collective erotic fantasy. At the same time, the textual construction of the seamstress as a mechanical automaton eased the psychic processes which, as in

91 Alexandre (1902), pp. 1-2.
92 Alexandre (1902), pp. 2-3.
93 Alexandre (1902), p. 9.
94 Alexandre (1902), p. 82.
Alexandre’s case, allowed commentators to explain and fantasize the masochistic pleasure inscribed within the seamstress’s pain. The effect of the textual construction of the mechanical automaton, as Alexandre stated, and as the illustrations to both his and Morin’s text demonstrate, was undoubtedly and ultimately visual. Alexandre’s text, more than most, revelled in the standardised and repetitive decorative patterns effected by his fantasy of the seamstress’s body, which only the painter of modern life subjects was equipped to portray. It was this decorative visual effect, the pared-down, two-dimensional pictorial motif of the seamstress’s body which undoubtedly structured Vuillard’s representation of the subject.

Returning, once again, to the 1893 painting Interior with Women Sewing (L’Aiguillée) [fig. 62], it is possible to detect the visual appeal of the seamstress at work. It is a painting which might easily function as the pictorial equivalent to Alexandre’s description of the busy atelier as ‘...une harmonieuse mêlée de silhouettes, une opposition de tons, une symphonie de mouvements...’95 In this painting, as with many others, the body of the seamstress operates as little more than a pared-down, decorative pictorial motif. The figures’ individuality has been obliterated in favour of the silhouetted, doll-like forms and mechanical gestures which constitute a stark, monochrome contrast to the exuberant and formless colours and surfaces of the interior. It has been argued that Vuillard’s cursory attention to the idiosyncratic physical details of the individuals which populate his paintings derived from some chivalrous desire to protect their identity.96 At the same time and as it has been demonstrated, several accounts have described Vuillard’s professional and creative identification with the work of the sewing atelier. By deploying the means by which Alexandre and others viewed and represented the seamstress’s body from a distance and by tapping into the contemporary pictorial and textual construction of the seamstress as a distinct physiological type, Vuillard’s paintings of the sewing atelier tend to refute the possibility of the artist’s intimiste identification with and attention to his subject. It remains unlikely, moreover, that Vuillard would have equated his artistic creativity and productivity with the mechanical and repetitive labour of the professional seamstress. More than this though, it is precisely the corsetière’s specialised form of labour, a

95 Alexandre (1902), p. 82.
96 See, for example, Chave (Fall 1980), p. 13.
process during which the *corsetière*, for example, ‘...pique le corset...le monte, le bride, l’entoure, le rabat, bâtit et pique les galons ou les rubans...enfile les baleines...les arrête, pose le busc et les ressorts, éventaille le corset, le borde, met les coussins...et pose les garnitures...’, which is occluded in these paintings. The significance of Vuillard’s paintings of professional female labour has more to do with the artist’s commitment to the demands of the Nabi aesthetic than they do Vuillard’s creative identification with his subject. Portrayed as a pared-down and two-dimensional decorative motif, the physiological type of the seamstress is as much a product of Symbolism’s attention to the artificial and decorative possibilities of form and surface as it is a pervasive means of describing and defining the seamstress. In each instance, and as a comparison between *Les Couturières* [fig. 36] and *L’Atelier de la corsetière* [fig. 38] demonstrates, the inclusion of the functional tools of the *corsetière*’s trade, indeed the method of production itself, serves to destroy the decorative homogeneity between form and subject and thereby, the pictorial illusion of the seamstress’s visual appeal.

In conflating the categories of home and work, domestic and professional, Vuillard’s representations of work in the domestic sphere make visible the duality of women’s relationship to capital. More than this, they speak of women’s ability to cope with and need to negotiate, the contradictory parameters of their existence. By conflating the representational codes of professional domestic labour with those of natural maternal duty, the previously undervalued representations of Madame Vuillard’s domestic labour are of particular interest, as they tend to visualise the fluid boundaries between the domestic servant’s waged and the *petit-bourgeois* housewife’s unwaged domestic labour. Similarly, Vuillard’s domestication of his mother’s professional labour may be interpreted as a protective strategy of resistance against the contemporary sexualisation of the professional seamstress. But in refusing the penetrating gaze of the sociologist in favour of a Nabi aesthetic which demanded a pictorial attention to the decorative surface of the painting, which Vuillard evidently found in staging the seamstress’s labour within the context of domesticity, a number of factors are occluded. These include the material conditions and real exploitation of professional homeworkers and the notion that the family atelier might involve is own idiosyncratic forms of

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97 Lebrun (1907), p. 387.
exploitation. But more significantly, the productivity of the professional seamstress and in particular, the specialised labour of the corsetière is occluded. Ultimately therefore, the idealisation of a domestic context for women’s professional labour fosters collusion with the opinion of earlier commentators, such as Jules Simon, in which l’ouvrière continues to constitute ‘[un] mot impie, sordide...’ \(^9^8\)

\(^9^8\) Simon (1861), p. v.
Chapter Four

‘An Unconscious Love of Ornament’: Femininity and the Decorative

‘The interior was the place of refuge of Art.’¹

In an essay posthumously published in 1955 as part of his unfinished project ‘Paris - The Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, Walter Benjamin launched a stinging yet highly perceptive attack upon the bourgeoisie and its construction of the private interior as the refuge of its most dearly held illusions and fantasies. Benjamin supported his assault upon the bourgeois treatment of the interior with a ‘Statement on Art Nouveau’, the fin-de-siècle decorative arts movement which purported to ‘bring with it the perfecting of the interior’ but which, Benjamin claimed, actually brought about the ‘shattering of the interior’.² Benjamin proceeded to describe Art Nouveau as the ‘...last attempt at a sortie on the part of Art imprisoned by technical advance within her ivory tower.’³ According to Benjamin, Art Nouveau found its means of expression in:

‘...the mediumistic language of line, in the flower as symbol of the naked, vegetable Nature that confronted the technologically armed environment. The new elements of construction in iron - girder-forms - obsessed Art Nouveau. Through ornament, it strove to win back these forms for Art.’⁴

It is clear from Benjamin’s diagnosis of Art Nouveau that he regarded it as a final bid on the behalf of paranoid bourgeois taste to rescue Art and by association, the ideological values invested in Art, from what the bourgeoisie perceived to be its destruction in the face of the onslaught of modern technological and formal advances. Regarding it, therefore, as a nostalgic and outmoded form of cultural expression, Benjamin cited the deployment of a structurally redundant and parasitic use of ornament as the most visible

evidence of Art Nouveau's inferior status. Manifestly intending his description of Art Nouveau to operate as a critique of bourgeois taste, Benjamin deployed a value-laden discourse of binary oppositions in order to structure and lend meaning to his analysis. By negatively comparing, however, the stylistic properties of the domestically located Art Nouveau with those of public iron structures, Benjamin invoked an unspoken yet implicitly present and infinitely meaningful value system in which gender, not class, played the defining role. A well-established discourse of sexual difference structured Benjamin's derisory identification of Art Nouveau with 'naked, vegetable Nature' in contrast to monumental iron structures which the writer identified with the transformative, and thereby cultural, realm of technological progress. But Benjamin's implicitly gendered discourse went further, for by identifying the stylistic properties of Art Nouveau as simultaneously natural and artificially ornamental the writer invoked the familiar double-bind of femininity, in which the potentially threatening 'natural matter' of the female body must necessarily be disguised beneath a seductive, cosmetic veneer of make-up and fashionable clothing. According to the relativist terms of Benjamin's critique, the skeletal linearity of the 1889 Tour Eiffel [fig. 66] would, for example, be considered stylistically and functionally transparent and as a consequence, aesthetically pure. This is an effect which would be heightened were the aesthetic integrity of the Tour Eiffel compared, for example, to La Parisienne [fig. 67], the one-hundred foot stone statue surmounting the curvilinear and 'orientalist' forms of the gateway [fig. 68] to the following Exposition Universelle of 1900. In contrast to the technological essentialism of the Tour Eiffel and according to the terms of Benjamin's critique, La Parisienne appears aesthetically compromised; its internal structure encased within an elaborate concrete carapace and disguised beneath an alluring, cosmetic veneer of fashionable femininity.

Whilst the notion of stylistic and functional purity which resonates through Benjamin’s critique of Art Nouveau may be located within the context of twentieth-century German aesthetic theory, the method of his analysis also tapped into an enduring French tradition of gendering artistic style. The rhetorical tradition of describing literary hyperbole as feminine dates back to the Latin period. Jacqueline Lichtenstein has argued however, that the gendered battle-lines between the two properties of the painted image, line and colour, were most emphatically drawn in France during the seventeenth
Contemporary academic theory ascribed to the drawn line the ‘masculine’ attributes of structure, control and restraint, in contrast to the secondary and ‘ornamental’ properties of colour, which was ascribed to the ‘feminine’. Contemporary ‘colourists’ such as Roger de Piles, who argued for the essentially artificial nature of painting, praised colour for its seductive qualities which, he claimed, could illuminate the spectator’s desire for the painting and ravish them as a lover might. For its academic detractors however, the artificial and ornamental properties of colour which, Lichtenstein notes, used paste in order to ‘stain’ and to ‘feign’, linked it to the concealing properties of make-up and the seductive deception of the courtesan. Of most anxiety to its detractors was the fear that colour would disturb the heterosocial balance between it and the drawn line, that it would fail to respect the hierarchical distinctions between the orders of painting, spilling over into ornamental excess and concealing or polluting the aesthetic purity of the image. The academic tradition of gendering artistic tropes in order to produce a hierarchy of genre, style and medium continued in the work of nineteenth-century theoreticians such as Humbert de Superville and Charles Blanc. As with their seventeenth-century predecessors, colour was ascribed an inferior and feminine status to the superior masculine qualities of line, in a ‘naturalized metaphoric discourse’ which Tamar Garb has argued, operated ‘...on the level of common sense in late nineteenth-century parlance.’ It was a naturalised discourse of gendering ‘certain kinds of mark making’ which informed the critical reception of Impressionism during the 1890’s, which was frequently referred to as a ‘feminine art’, and which continued to determine avant-garde rejections of the ornamental and the corporeal during the early decades of the twentieth century. It is this same nexus of stylistic attributes which informed Benjamin’s text in which gender

7 Lichtenstein (Fall 1987), pp. 78-81.
8 Lichtenstein (Fall 1987), pp. 82-3.
9 See, for example, C. Blanc, Grammaire des arts du dessin, 1867. For Blanc’s aesthetic theories see M. Song, Art Theories of Charles Blanc, 1813-1882, 1984.
operates as the most emphatic, if implicit, signifier of difference and therefore, demarcator of aesthetic value.

Whilst Benjamin relied upon certain implicit and commonplace gendered associations in order to construct his critique of Art Nouveau, other twentieth-century critics of ornament extended their discourse of aesthetic purity to the issue of racial identity. The sweeping critique of ornament, aimed once again at Art Nouveau, made in 1902 by the Viennese architect and critic Adolf Loos is by now well rehearsed and yet it is worthwhile noting the particular associations which Loos drew between ornament and racial degeneracy. In addition to denouncing ornament as feminine excess Loos was the advocate, as Naomi Schor has argued, of 'a sort of aesthetic Darwinism'. This is evidenced by his theory that cosmetic practices such as tattooing, which were long associated with 'the savage body', must therefore, operate as the indexical sign of both criminality and degeneracy in civilised (i.e. western) society. Indeed, Loos expanded on his theory of racial superiority when he stated that the jettisoning of ornament constituted the mark of the progress of civilisation itself:

'Happily, the grandiose development in which our culture has taken part in this century has overcome ornament...The lower the culture, the more apparent the ornament. Ornament is something that must be overcome.'

The difficult relationship between notions of the ornamental and twentieth-century aesthetic theory becomes both more divisive and more complex with regard to the critical writing of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's work consistently returned to the problematics of 'the decorative' in relation to modernist painting. In 1957 for example, Greenberg claimed that 'decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting' and yet a year later, in reference to Cubist collage, Greenberg wrote that 'Cubism, in the hands of its inventors...achieved a new, exalted and transfigured kind of decoration by reconstructing the flat picture surface with the very means of its denial.' Greenberg was not being deliberately misleading when he made these seemingly contradictory claims for the status of 'decoration' in modernist painting. By using the
same term to connote both positive and negative attributes of modernist painting, Greenberg reinforced what was for him and for modernist aesthetics alike, a crucial distinction between decoration as a desirable and particular quality of the surface in painting, its flatness, and 'decoration pure and simple' which is associated with 'mere interior decoration' and ornament. In order to achieve aesthetic value, modernist painting may borrow from decoration its qualities of deformation and flatness but at the same time, it must shrug off any notions of interior decoration and ornament in order to achieve its abstract quality.\(^{15}\) For Greenberg then, 'decoration' is a relative term, it may be a precious thing and enjoy a position of fundamental importance in Modernism's heroic narrative of individual and artistic freedom, but only so long as it continues to maintain and represent painting's transcendence over interior decoration and the concomitant notions of the ornamental, the feminine and the domestic.

Despite their diverse political agendas, analysis of these arguments prompts the conclusion that modern(ist) aesthetics has endured a deeply problematic relationship with the concepts of 'the ornamental' and 'the decorative'. Whether an understanding of these often arbitrarily applied terms ranges from Loos' gendered and racial characterisation of ornament as excess and degeneracy, to Benjamin's description of *Art Nouveau* as outmoded and parasitic ornament or Greenberg's relativist division of 'decoration' into positive and negative categories, 'the ornamental' and 'the decorative' are terms which have been struggled over. Despite the universal vitriolic abuse heaped upon 'the ornamental', it is however, 'the decorative' and the more slippery possibilities of its meaning which have constituted the most enduring source of anxiety. Whilst 'the ornamental' has been regarded as consistently problematic, 'the decorative' has the potential to transcend its ornamental properties. Anxiety towards 'the decorative' has been compounded therefore, and as Greenberg's analysis suggests, by the fact that modern(ist) aesthetics has been consistently unable to rid itself of the decorative in its ornamental guise. It is always there, the alter-ego, the unconscious, the repressed and negative *other* to Modernism's 'fully conscious self', an excess always threatening to spill out.

The group of painters and sculptors most commonly associated with the Nabi group who were working and exhibiting in Paris during the final decade of the

\(^{15}\) According to Fer (1997), p. 43, Greenberg regarded it '...a heroic act for a work to come so near to decoration and yet to remain an easel painting.'
nineteenth century have tended to enjoy a particular status within orthodox histories of modernist painting. Often ignoring the disparate subject matter and, at times even, the clear stylistic differences between the work of the members of the Nabis, modernist orthodoxy has heralded the group, now infamous as ‘followers of Gauguin’, for the technical and theoretical advances they were seen to have made in the pursuit of abstraction. Modernist accounts have tended to focus, at the expense of the inclusion of most other textual and contextual information, on Maurice Denis’ now well-worn ‘manifesto’ statement of 1890:

‘Se rappeler qu’un tableau - avant d’être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote - est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées.’16

Paul Sérusier's *Le Talisman* [fig. 69], a small painting executed on a cigar box lid and produced under the supervision of Gauguin in Pont Aven during 1889, invariably performs the perfect visual accompaniment to Denis’ statement in orthodox histories of modernist painting. It is celebrated for demonstrating the formal and stylistic advances made by the Nabis: the application of brightly juxtaposed, flat patches of unmodulated and sharply delineated colour. Modernist art histories have frequently referred to the Nabi aesthetic, whether that expressed in words or in paint, as being closely associated with a certain ‘decorative quality’. But this is a decorative quality which appears to be very much in keeping with Greenberg’s positive definition of decoration as a specific property of the surface of the canvas, its flatness. Certainly Vuillard appears to hold a relatively significant place for Greenberg within the history of painting’s rejection of three-dimensional representation. In an essay of 1957, for example, in which Greenberg debated the value of ‘The Later Monet’, the critic referred to both Pierre Bonnard’s and Vuillard’s ‘early work’ as satiating the ‘...new appetite for close-valued, flat effects in pictorial art.’17 In a subsequent introduction to an exhibition of works by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, Greenberg praised Vuillard for the technical advances the latter had made in the move towards the absolute unification of canvas and paint with the employment of a distemper technique known as *peinture à la colle*:

‘Cézanne had been the first to take a conscious step in this direction when he transferred his watercolour touch to oil. At about the

same time the young Vuillard was beginning to use distemper (glue and water) instead of oil and turpentine.\textsuperscript{18}

An interesting example of Vuillard's distemper technique is to be found in a group of four decorative panels [figs. 70-73] painted in 1896 for installation in the library of the Parisian apartment of an early patron, Dr. Louis-Henri Vaquez.\textsuperscript{19} These panels were conceived around the shared iconographic theme of predominantly female figures engaged in leisurely pursuits located in comfortable, hermetic interiors. The iconographic homogeneity is further enhanced by the shared palette of muted purples, pinks and greens, the repetitive floral pattern of the wallpaper and the woven frieze running across the top of each panel. Vuillard has restricted the modelling properties of light and shade to the figures which occupy these interiors, reducing the compositional arrangement of inanimate objects in space to the juxtaposition of different areas of pattern and colour. This lends to each panel an evenly dispersed, decorative appearance which has been likened, to the two dimensional \textit{mille-fleur} effect of medieval tapestries.\textsuperscript{20} Many of these stylistic effects result from the distemper technique which the artist employed. In contrast to the fresco technique to which it is often compared, the \textit{peinture à la colle} method allows the artist to retouch at will. As with fresco, however, this distemper technique, in which powdered pigment is mixed with a warm glue size, lacks the vast range of modelling and textural properties normally associated with the sensual viscosity of oil paint. Once applied, the water content of this warm mixture rapidly evaporates to form a rigid surface of matte paint.\textsuperscript{21} Unlike the acrylic paintings of Morris Louis, in which the distinction between canvas and paint is rendered imperceptible as the latter seeps into the former, the warm size of these panels has dried into a thick encrusted layer of grey tinged powdery pigment. This impenetrable layer absorbs rather than reflects light, thereby restricting the viewer's gaze to the frustrating activity of scouring the paintings' less than sensual surface. With its stilted forms, austere tones and brittle surfaces, the \textit{peinture à la colle} technique mobilises a formal

\textsuperscript{19} See Groom (1993) pp. 90-6 for information concerning the Vaquez commission. 
\textsuperscript{21} For a description of Vuillard's \textit{peinture à la colle} technique see J. Salomon, 'Vuillard's Technique' repr. in Russell (1971), pp. 138-9.
language of restraint which is sympathetic to the ideal ‘feminine’ activities portrayed in these subdued interiors but is simultaneously at odds with the material plenitude of a comfortable domestic setting. The restraints placed upon the viewer’s pleasure may, however, issue from Vuillard’s desire to repress his own tendency towards creative ebullience. If Jacques Salomon’s interpretation is to be believed, then Vuillard used the peinture à la colle technique because it ‘...helped him to keep his excessive facility under control, and allowed him to deliberate more fully over his work...’.

A comparison between the Vaquez commission and another series of decorative panels, completed during the previous year of 1895, will further demonstrate the repressive tendencies of the distemper technique. Commissioned for installation in the Parisian apartment of the art critic Thadée Natanson and his wife Misia (née Godebska), this group of five panels, collectively entitled L’Album [figs. 74-78], were also the subject of public display. L’Album was one of a number of Nabi works exhibited at the first Maison de l’Art Nouveau exhibition which opened in Paris in December 1895. L’Album shares the remarkably similar iconographic theme of the slightly later Vaquez panels: groups of young women engaged in leisurely, feminine pursuits in comfortable, self-contained interiors. Unlike the Vaquez panels, however, these five works were executed in an oil on canvas medium. Whilst the Natanson panels demonstrate an equivalent attention to the decorative possibilities of compressed space in which figure and ground are rendered barely distinguishable, the female figures of the Natanson commission are pushed forward, pressed against the absolute limits of the picture plane.

The ideal feminine type and the visual and textural properties of feminine costume, in particular, also play a far greater role as sensuous, decorative surfaces in the L’Album series [see fig. 78, for example]. The oil medium, moreover, allows for a greater degree of pleasure in viewing these panels and arguably, a greater degree of artistic freedom in exploring the painterly possibilities of colour, pattern and texture. The paintings’ viscous surfaces are composed of explosions of either fluttering, broken or rubbed on strokes of rich, predominantly red, pigment. It is, indeed, as a result of the overwhelming attention paid to the textural possibilities of objects, played out in the capricious materiality of the painted surface, that the compositional delineation of

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individual objects in space threatens to collapse into formlessness. The pleasures of the
decorative surface appear excessive when compared to the dry austerity of the Vaquez
panels or, in an alternative paradigm, to the controlled facture of the ‘seminal’ Nabi
painting, Le Talisman [fig. 69]. Owing something to its status as an experimental
work, the compositional arrangement of Le Talisman is undeniably elemental.
According to the critical terms of the modern(ist) aesthetic there is an ‘aesthetic purity’
to the bold, unmodulated colours which are carefully applied in broad, vertical strokes.
Each element of the composition, whether the trees and shoreline which comprise the
upper part of the landscape or the echoing forms of their reflection, are treated with an
equal pictorial intensity. It is the balanced distribution of these mirrored forms which
accentuates the two dimensional properties of the image over and above its status as a
landscape painting, prompting the classification of Le Talisman as ‘decorative’ in
accordance with Greenberg’s positive use of the term. Despite the significant role given
to colour in the compositional delineation of individual forms, it is not allowed to exceed
the pictorial and, by association, ideological boundaries of its usefulness and is thereby
prohibited from ‘polluting’ the linear integrity of the image. Similarly, and in further
contrast to Vuillard’s two decorative series cited above, the body, and the female body
in particular, is denied any agency in the formal and iconographic construction of the
derorative.

Analysis of both the Vuillard commissions and Sérusier’s Le Talisman suggests
that each pertains to, whilst enacting different interpretations of, the decorative. With
their attention to the two dimensional properties of the painted image, the compression
of three dimensional space in favour of colour compositions and the patterned dispersal
of forms, both of Vuillard’s panel series and Sérusier’s cigar box painting may be
described as decorative in style. Both the Vaquez and Natanson panels contain a
number of additional elements however, which push Vuillard’s interpretation of the
derorative close to, or even over, the hierarchical division separating the decorative style
from its negative underside, the ornamental. Some of these elements are exclusive to
the Natanson panels. These include the potentially formless excesses of the painted
surface, the abundantly present and fashionably attired female body and the enveloping
warmth of the interiors in which these figures are situated. As panels produced for
installation in specific domestic locations, both Vuillard commissions were conceived
moreover, to be undeniably decorative, possibly even ornamental, in function as well as style.

Having pointed to what amounts to diverse and potentially opposing interpretations of the decorative as it was subsequently conceived by Greenberg, it is important to ask whether such distinctions held the same resonance for contemporary critics of Vuillard’s work. Moreover, were the same prejudices against ornament described by Loos and Benjamin in place and were equivalent critical categories, such as those pertaining to the issues of sexual and racial difference, employed as the means to conceptualise these hierarchical distinctions? Initial analysis of Vuillard’s work supports the assertion that the distinctions between these positive and negative attributes were certainly less rigid than they were to appear to twentieth-century commentators. As the writing of Robert Herbert and more recently that of Debora Silverman and Roger Benjamin has demonstrated, the complexity of the fin-de-siècle use and significance of the term ‘decorative’ has been lost to twentieth-century commentators. This study will demonstrate, for example, how twentieth-century distinctions between the terms ‘ornamental’ and ‘decorative’ were less clear cut, indeed their use was often interchangeable, in the cultural discourses of the 1890’s. L’Art décoratif moreover, was a term of ubiquitous and often competing artistic usage. At the same time as the Nabis were pursuing their self-proclaimed aim of an art décoratif that would stylistically and functionally problematise and extend the narrow parameters of easel painting, l’art décoratif was being pursued and produced within the state sponsored institutions of official culture. In the 1890’s, l’art décoratif was a term simultaneously employed to describe, for instance, both the Nabi aesthetic and the Style Moderne of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, as well as industrial art of either a municipal or domestic function. One of the primary objectives of this chapter therefore, is to analyse the

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25 For a succinct account of the Nabis’ ambitions for an art décoratif see Groom (1993), pp. 5-17. See Silverman (1989) for an invaluable account of the conservative Republican government’s politically and economically motivated decorative arts policy of the 1890’s and the various institutions, including the CUAD, through which it was implemented. See, for example, pp. 43-51 and pp. 109-228. As a result of her in-depth trans-cultural analysis, Silverman (p. 8) argues for a re-definition of Art Nouveau as ‘...one of the final stages of a craft initiative articulated within the institutions of official culture.’ See also M. Levin, Republican Art and Ideology in Late Nineteenth-Century France, 1986.
specific conditions of production and consumption relating to Vuillard’s decorative works which the modern(ist) discourse of aesthetic purity has consistently undermined. In order to gain some insight into the historical complexity of the decorative it is important to analyse some of the many and often competing instances of its contemporary use. As suggested, these were more far reaching than the rarefied confines of vanguard or official artistic practice and ranged from such diverse cultural discourses as department store strategies for the display of goods to aesthete’s guides to interior decoration. This study will go on to analyse the structural and curatorial installation of the decorative and its objects within a particular institutional and commercial context, the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau*. The exhibition space’s title alone forces a connection between the decorative and the domestic interior, a relationship which demands further analysis in response to Benjamin’s indictment of the interior as the final refuge of an artistic genre already manifesting the signs of bankruptcy. The aim, ultimately, is to demonstrate the extent to which vanguard decorative arts theory and practice of the 1890’s both appropriated and jettisoned the production and consumption practices traditionally identified with the ornamental and more ‘feminine’ realms of the decorative. This study will argue that many of the negative connotations contained within Greenberg’s paranoid rejection of ‘the spectre that haunts modernist painting’, the ornamental, the feminine and the domestic were integral to the development of the decorative as a stylistic property of modernist painting.

Despite the various uses to which it has been attributed, the decorative’s status as *surface*, as something which makes an explicit appeal to visual pleasure and to the satisfaction of *sensory* appreciation, remains constant. Whether the term ‘decorative’ is employed in the vocabulary of art history and criticism to describe either a genre of painting, for example a panel produced to fulfill a specific decorative function, or to describe a particular stylistic effect of the painted surface, there is a consistent sense that this is, in many ways, a non-literary or non-intellectual pursuit, that its ultimate goal is pure visual pleasure. It is this appeal to *sensory* pleasure and the viewer’s desire which makes it imperative that any reference to the status of the decorative in late nineteenth-century French culture recognises the relationship between the various discourses of the decorative and the display and consumption of mass consumer goods. In much the same way as modern(ist) aesthetics has tended to set itself up in opposition to the ornamental, the aesthetic discourses of the decorative in late nineteenth-century France were
constructed in opposition to the mass production and consumption of household objects associated with the rapid growth and expansion of the *grands magasins*. Nonetheless, an analysis of the marketing and display strategies adopted by the department stores in their bid to inflame the fantasies and appeal to the material desires of the strolling consumer, demonstrates a distinct parallel with the appeal to sensory, especially visual, pleasure associated with the term 'decorative'. As Rosalind Williams has shown in her fascinating exploration of nineteenth-century French mass consumption, the display and marketing of commodities in the new department stores was directed specifically at the arousal of 'free floating desire' through the 'numbed hypnosis' of shoppers. In order to do so, the marketing strategists appealed explicitly to the pure *surface* glamour, no matter how illusory or artificial, of the objects placed on display. Émile Zola's 1883 fictional study of the modern department store, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, has been celebrated for its description of, and influence upon, the seductive marketing of goods associated with *grands magasins* such as the *Bon Marché*. As Williams goes on to point out in her analysis of Zola's text, the seductive appeal of the particular, though often banal, goods placed on display was brought about, not through any quality inherent to the objects themselves, but through the *sensory* stimulation their display induced. Through the endless repetition, colour coding and textural juxtaposition of consumer objects, which Williams refers to as a sort of 'chaotic-exotic' style of display, the spectator's eye was seduced. In the wake of the object's extinguished use-value, the consumer's desire was ignited. As Zola's novel suggests, the visual effect of this 'chaotic-exotic' display was overwhelmingly and undeniably decorative:

"Oh! It's fantastic!" the ladies kept repeating. "Amazing!"
They did not tire of this hymn of praise to white, which all the materials in the shop were singing. It was the most immense exhibition that Mouret had mounted so far, the stroke of his genius for display. Through the flow of all this white, and the apparent disorder of the materials, there ran a harmonic phrase, white maintained and developed in all its tones, which were introduced and then grew and expanded with

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26 See Silverman (1989), pp. 52-62 for a case study account of the anxiety caused by the erosion of artisanal methods of furniture production that accompanied the rise of the department store.

27 See Troy (1996), pp. 116-17 for the parallels she draws between *Art Nouveau* and the 'feminized realm' of department store consumerism. Troy argues that it was the Cubist reaction against the commercialisation of the *fin-de-siècle* decorative arts which contributed to the former's rejection of the latter as 'impotent'.


the complicated orchestration of some masterly fugue, the continued
development of which carries the soul away in an ever-widening flight.\footnote{30}

Whilst Jenny Anger has demonstrated convincing analogies between the
aesthetic concerns of modernist pure form and the aesthetic effects of commercial
display, it is possible to approach the relationship between department store display
strategies and aesthetic theory from a different historical perspective.\footnote{31} There is, for
example, an obvious analogy between the methods of display described by Zola in the
passage quoted above and more traditional nineteenth-century artistic conventions, such
as those dictated by the academic theorist Charles Blanc. In his 1875 guide to ‘Art in
Ornament and Dress’ for example, Blanc suggested that it was the repetition of a single
motif which produced the most elemental decorative effect:

‘The simplest mode of decorating a surface is by the repetition of
any given figure. Any form, however insignificant in itself, becomes
interesting by repetition, at first because the artist by repeating it forces
us to take notice of it, and reveals an intention which would have escaped
our observation without this repetition, and next, because number often
suggests thoughts which unity would not have originated.’\footnote{32}

Approaching this issue from yet another trajectory, Rémy Saisselin has described
the concomitant effect of collapsing the art museum’s ethics of display into those of the
department store upon the decoration of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior and
the eventual ‘bibelotisation’ of the art object.\footnote{33} Saisselin suggests that this blurring of
the categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, in which the department store attempted to
usurp the art museum’s role as the educator in matters of taste, was the cause of
considerable concern. Recognising the significant economic and social role that women
played as consumers, department stores attempted to appeal directly to ‘feminine’ tastes
and desire. It was no coincidence that Octave Mouret, Zola’s reluctant hero and owner
of ‘Au Bonheur des Dames’ is persistently characterised as a seducer, playing on
women’s ‘weak’ sensibilities, ‘natural’ susceptibility to visual effects and ‘innate’ desire
to consume:

‘Mouret’s sole passion was the conquest of Woman. He wanted
her to be queen in his shop; he had built this temple to her in order to

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{32} C. Blanc, \textit{Art in Ornament and Dress}, (1875) trans. 1877, p. 4.
\end{footnotes}
Anxiety developed, Saisselin argues, through the fear that as the department stores took
over as the arbiters of taste and interior decoration, the gendered boundaries that had
traditionally separated the cultural practices of collecting from that of mere decoration
as accumulation, were becoming worryingly indistinct. Saisselin suggests that this
anxiety reached its apotheosis during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The fear that the ethics of mass production and consumption promoted by the
department stores, and therefore and by association, facile feminine taste, was
tyrranising French design and subjugating its artisanal tradition provoked a considerable
backlash during this period. The male renewal of interest in both the realms of interior
decoration and the production of *les arts décoratifs* should be understood within the
context of this anxiety and the ensuing attempts to regain control of the interior by
reinforcing male creativity, professionalism and authority within its boundaries. It is,
however, particularly significant that the various institutions and individuals that set out
to promote some notion of ‘the decorative’ which was not mass produced, almost
always did so in the shadow of the culture which they refuted.

The majority of guides to personal taste and interior decoration published in the
closing decades of the nineteenth century were written by men, with a male audience in
mind. Though women continued to be credited with ‘the fundamental responsibility of
furnishing the home’, any claims to creative expression were rapidly suppressed as
evidence of women’s instinctual desire to consume and to adorn in the interests of
producing a spatial setting that would most favourably display their bodies as the objects
of desire. Together with male guides to interior decoration, such texts, often found in
women’s journals, tended to reinforce the strictly coded, though arbitrarily applied,

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34 Zola (1883), p. 234. See R. Bowlby, *Just Looking*, 1985, p. 20 for her argument that ‘...the making
of willing consumers readily fitted into the available ideological paradigm of a seduction of women by
men, in which women would be addressed as yielding objects to the powerful male subject forming, and
informing them of, their desires.’
35 For a detailed description of the gendered practices of consumption see Auslander in de Grazia (ed.)
37 See Silverman (1989) for the many institutional contexts of the French state’s response to this crisis.
Interior and the Feminine Modern: Home Decorating as High Art in Turn-of-the-Century Paris’, Reed
(ed.) (1996), pp. 28-32 for the characterisation of women’s interior decoration as instinctual and
lacking originality.
paradigm that distinguished between male and female creative practices as respectively professional and amateur in status. By invoking the transformative, as opposed to instinctual, capacity of male creativity and the connoisseurial process of devising, attaining and assembling an individual collection of objets d'art, male guides to interior decoration were able to exploit their readers' potentially dubious status as consumers by offering them an acceptable context within which to decorate.39 These guides addressed their advice to 'men of taste', discussing interior decoration in terms of bourgeois identity, individuality and personal style, and thereby safely reclaiming the domestic interior and the practice of interior decoration for a male readership.

The question of bourgeois identity and the practice of defining and consolidating one's social status through the practice of interior decoration enjoyed an unequivocal significance in these texts. Two popular guides to interior decoration published in 1884, Henry Havard's L'Art dans la maison, grammaire de l'aménagement and Emile Cardon's L'Art au foyer domestique as well as Octave Uzanne's more culturally elitist essay of 1892, 'Notes sur le goût intime et la décoration personnelle de l'habitation moderne' made explicit references to the consolidation of bourgeois cultural authority through interior decoration.40 For all three commentators an integral part of reclaiming the house in order to 'remake' it according to bourgeois taste, was to stamp the occupier's personality onto it, to mark it as a possession, to raise its status as a symbol of one's authority, creativity and individuality. It is clear from analysing their descriptions of the male individual's physical and psychic relation to the various spaces of the home, that many of the innovative ways of conceptualising the public and private self as espoused by the psychologie nouvelle had impacted upon the fin-de-siècle discourse of interior decoration.41 Henry Havard, for example, stated that whilst the exterior of the house must bow to 'des lois d'ensemble', interior decoration '...doit, au contraire, refléter nos préoccupations personnelles, être en harmonie avec nos aptitudes, nos ressources, nos besoins et nos goûts.'42 Havard proceeded to illustrate this point with metaphorical references to the different types of clothing that an individual might

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39 Auslander argues that the gendered production/consumption dichotomy is inaccurate, that bourgeois men could be 'cast as consumers' as long as their consumption was considered to be both productive and not overly desirous. Auslander in de Grazia (1996), pp. 79-112.
40 Each text criticised the fake opulence of department store products and the banal uniformity of Haussmanisation. Havard (1884), p. 6; Cardon (1884), pp. 10 & 38; O. Uzanne, 'Notes sur le goût intime et la décoration personnelle de l'habitation moderne', L'Art et l'idée, (1892), p. 274.
41 Silverman (1989), pp. 75-106.
wear in public or private and a scientifically worded correlation between the external simplicity of the body or house in contrast to the complex though complimentary distribution of the body’s and the house’s internal organs and spaces.\textsuperscript{43}

For the interior’s decorative arrangement to truly reflect the inhabitant’s personality the latter must comprehend and submit to the coded language of decoration. This included, for example, realising the individual significance of a single line. Once again, the issue of gender and decoration returns, for Havard’s thinly disguised descriptions tend to imitate well-known tropes of masculinity and femininity. A straight line, for example, expresses ‘des idées viriles et de résistance’, whilst a curved line, ‘des idées d’union et de flexibilité’.\textsuperscript{44} The rules of decorative arrangement were of equal significance to Uzanne, for whom the guiding principal of interior decoration was to ‘...rencontrer ce je ne sais quoi d’intime, de personnel, de plaisant au regard ou à l’esprit, qui serait comme la marque, la représentation individuelle, le génie même du propriétaire.’\textsuperscript{45} According to Uzanne, this sense of intimacy, of physical and psychic proximity to the owner may only be achieved if each object is allowed to arouse the eye’s pleasure as part of a ‘harmonious fusion’ of the entire space:

‘Il sait, celui-là, non pas acheter la pièce rare, mais la chose d’art qui vaut par sa forme, son étrangeté, son imprévu, sa curiosité, sans autre valeur que sa coloration, son profil ou sa grâce, mais œuvre décorative, c’est-à-dire, delices du regard, note complémentaire dans la fusion harmonieuse de l’ensemble qu’il a crée.’\textsuperscript{46}

In their deployment of a reparative terminology of fusion, harmony and intimacy and by theorising even the most diminutive elements of interior decoration Havard, Cardon and Uzanne manifested the desire for a re-evaluation of man’s physical and psychic relation to the domestic interior. More than simply practical guides to matters of style, these texts operated as the vehicles for an illusory fantasy, as Benjamin’s critique implied, in which the bourgeois man occupies and appropriates the interior as the only site where he may regain the dignity and individuality otherwise lost to him. It was, however, only by ejecting its negative connotations, those pertaining to the feminised and material realm of the domestic, and by raising the cultural and professional status of interior decoration, in effect by turning male consumption into a form of

\textsuperscript{43} Havard (1884), p. 244.  
\textsuperscript{44} Havard (1884), p. 251.  
\textsuperscript{45} Uzanne (1892), p. 259.  
\textsuperscript{46} Uzanne (1892), p. 276.
Innovative artistic production, that 'the man of taste' could continue to feel (masculine) at home.

Incorporated into the competing discourses of late nineteenth-century department store display strategies and male guides to interior decoration, the decorative was simultaneously deployed as a complex critical term in 1890's aesthetic theory and practice. The many occurrences of its theoretical use suggest that the decorative's significatory status was by no means fixed and it was the issues of style and function which came to the fore in the competing instances of its use. The concept of a decorative style, as opposed to function, of painting found its keenest supporter in the resident art critic for *Le Mercure de France*, G. Albert Aurier. Subsequently regarded as the principle critical supporter and theoretician of 'La Symbolisme en peinture', Aurier took up the issue of the decorative as a style of painting in two important essays of 1891 and 1892 concerning the work of Gauguin and the Nabis.\(^{47}\) When studying Aurier's critical response to the work of these artists, it is easy to see why the critic's idiosyncratic concept of Symbolism and the employment of a decorative style in painting have been considered so influential for twentieth-century theoreticians of modernist painting. Aurier's advocacy of the painter's right to distort reality for subjective and artistic ends reads like a 'textbook' description of the process required to produce painterly abstraction:

"...it is easy to deduce that the artist will always have the right to exaggerate, attenuate, and distort these directly signifying elements (forms, lines, colours, and so forth), not only according to his individual vision, his subjectivity (as happens even in realist art), but also according to the requirements of the idea to be expressed.\(^{48}\)

For Aurier, the ultimate goal of contemporary Symbolist painting was the expression of ideas and the artistic temperament through a 'special language', the decorative, of which line, colour and tonal variations formed the vocabulary.\(^{49}\) In a summary of his often


\(^{49}\) Aurier (15 March 1891) in Dorra (ed.) (1994), p. 199. Also see Aurier (April 1892), p. 480:
'Dans l'art ainsi compris, la fin n'étant pas la reproduction directe et immédiate de l'objet, tous les éléments de la langue picturale, lignes, plans, ombres, lumières, couleurs, deviennent, on le comprendra, des éléments abstraits qui peuvent être combinés, atténués, exagérés, déformés selon leur mode expressif propre pour arriver au but général de l'œuvre: l'expression de telle idée, de tel rêve, de telle pensée.'
esoteric theory of Symbolist painting, Aurier gave particular significance to the deployment of a decorative style of painting:

‘...the work of art as I have evoked it logically, is:
1. Ideist, since its unique ideal is the expression of the idea;
2. Symbolist, since it expresses the idea by means of forms;
3. Synthetic, since it writes out those forms, these signs, according to a mode susceptible to general comprehension;
4. Subjective, since the object depicted is not considered as an object, but as a sign of an idea perceived by the subject;
5. And (as a consequence) decorative - inasmuch as decorative painting...is only a manifestation of an art that is at once subjective, synthetic, symbolist and ideist.’

Despite Aurier’s status as an important polemicist of Nabi painting, James Kearns has recently argued that the group’s own theoretician, Maurice Denis, disagreed quite significantly with Aurier’s theory of Symbolist painting. Kearns suggests that for Denis, Aurier’s approach tended to blur the issues and impeded a clear delineation of the Nabi project with an overemphasis of the significance of ‘the idea’ and the philosophy of Neo-Platonism. Fundamentally a traditionalist, as the title of the 1890 ‘Nabi manifesto’, ‘Définition du néo-traditionnisme’ suggests, Kearns argues that Denis (writing under the pseudonym of ‘Pierre Louis’) was more concerned with a restatement of the priorities of painting, in the face of Neo-Impressionism, than with the expression of ‘the idea’. According to Kearns, the aim of Denis’ essay was to (re-)state that painting need not slavishly seek to copy its chosen subject and to (re-)emphasise the distinction between subject matter and form whilst highlighting the powerful expressive potential of the latter:

‘Le néo-traditionnisme ne peut s’attarder aux psychologies savantes et fébriles! aux sentimentalités littéraires, appelant la légende, toutes choses qui ne sont point de domaine émotionnel...Il arrive aux synthèses définitives. En la beauté de l’oeuvre, tout est contenu.’

Whereas Aurier was careful to place the notion of the synthetic, the unification, simplification and reduction of forms to their most elemental state, at only third on his list of the components of Symbolist painting, Denis proclaimed synthesis to be painting’s

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52 Kearns (1989), p. 34
ultimate aim. Both theoreticians appear, however, to be in general agreement as to the meaning of the synthetic as an elemental formal language of the emotions, though Denis was more all-encompassing when he envisaged its potential for universal communication. As a traditionalist, it was to the decorative works of the geographically and temporally removed cultural past that Denis turned in inspiration for equivalent instances of visual motifs which he considered to be universally comprehensible, despite the distancing effects of both space and time:


Denis repeatedly returned to the decorative as the basis for a ‘neo-traditional’ yet modern style of painting in his critical writings of the 1890’s. Often, as in his preface to the catalogue of the ninth Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes, positing decorative truth against the ‘naturalist lie’. Art which is decorative was for Denis, above all, a form of expression that remained true to the artifices and conventions of picture making. In contrast to naturalist painters who, according to Denis, believe that ‘...un tableau est une fenêtre ouverte sur la nature...’, those who exhibited at the gallery of Le Barc de Boutteville ‘...ont préféré, dans leurs oeuvres, l’expression par le décor, par cet assemblage esthétique de formes et de couleurs, par la matière employée, à l’expression par le sujet.’ But the roots of Denis’ antipathy towards naturalist painting, and Impressionism in particular, reached further than Aurier’s. As well as believing, as Aurier did, that naturalism had sought to negate the inherently artificial properties of painting, Denis’ distaste for Impressionism manifested itself as a reaction against the latter’s stylistic excesses, the disorderly arrangement of its surfaces. In this context, the decorative was called upon to operate as a reparative call to pictorial order.

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57 Marlais applies the label of ‘Maurice Denis’s Conservative Modernism’ to the latter’s ambiguous critical theories. Marlais (1992), p. 185.
58 M. Denis, preface to Paris, Galerie Le Barc de Boutteville, Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et Symbolistes, exh. cat., (April 1895), p. 5.
Denis’ simultaneously conservative and modern taste for the artificial and orderly properties of the decorative has been well documented. Another element of Denis’ contemporary theory of the decorative has, however, been less widely acknowledged; that other category, the domestic interior. Whilst Denis and Aurier agreed that Symbolist art should be decorative in style, Denis was no less insistent that it should strive to be decorative, even ornamental, in function. According to Denis’ seemingly unambiguous use, the term ‘ornamental’ described a modern pictorial genre in which the properties of both style and function were unambiguously connected. Denis wrote of ‘the decorator’ Paul Gauguin, following the latter’s death in 1903, saying that he had equipped the Nabis with ‘...cette sage maxime que tout tableau a pour but de décorer, doit être ornemental.’\(^6\) In another instance, Denis deployed a critical language of pure form reminiscent of Charles Blanc’s, as a means to describe the stylistic properties a painting was required to possess before it could be awarded the prodigious status of an ornament:

‘I think that above everything else a painting should be an ornament. The choice of subjects for scenes means nothing. It is through coloured surfaces, through the value of tones, through the harmony of lines, that I attempt to reach the mind and arouse the emotions.’\(^6\)\(^1\)

It was, however, in a critique published in La Revue blanche of 1892 that Denis most succinctly outlined his vision for the ornamental potential of Nabi paintings in the aesthetic transformation of the modern interior:

‘J’imagine assez nettement, le rôle du tableau dans la décoration de la maison moderne. Soit un intérieur précieusement disposé par un peintre de goût comme Pierre Bonnard: avec des meubles de style neuf et des tentures de dessin imprévu; un intérieur clair, simple, et plaisant, ni un musée, ni un bazar. A certaines places, mais en petit nombre, des tableaux de dimensions convenables et d’effet approprié. Je les veux de noble apparence, de beauté rare et fabuleux: qu’ils ajoutent au luxe des colorations et des arabesques sans âme, la poésie de la vie intérieure: et qu’on y trouve tout un monde d’émotions esthétiques, pures sans doute d’alliages littéraires et d’autant plus hautes.’\(^6\)\(^2\)

\(^6\)\(^0\) M. Denis, ‘L’Influence de Paul Gauguin’, (October 1903) repr. in Théories, 1890-1910, (1913) 1920, p. 170.
\(^6\)\(^1\) Cited in E. Gombrich, The Sense of Order, 1979, p. 58.
With this description Denis made an explicit reference to the ‘role of painting in the
decoration of the modern house’ which alluded to and advanced the display strategies
associated with the domestic environment of the Impressionist exhibitions of the
previous two decades. But Denis’ appeal to the ornamental function of Nabi paintings
was more than just a commercial ploy (though it was undoubtedly that as well), for
Denis allowed himself to envisage the most appropriate style of domestic space in which
to view Nabi paintings. In his vision for the ornamental possibilities of a ‘small number’
of paintings of ‘suitable dimensions’ Denis’ description of a ‘light, simple and pleasant’
interior looked more towards twentieth-century conceptions of the clinical white cube
space than it did the nervously organic and enveloping forms of an Art Nouveau interior.
Within Denis’ ideal interior, painting would find a refuge from the ‘literary allusions’
associated with public exhibition spaces and, in an anachronistically modernist fantasy of
aesthetic autonomy, an illusory escape from the confines of meaning itself. Denis’ ideal
interior would allow Nabi painting the spatial, aesthetic and ideological freedom to
pursue its ornamental purpose, the viewer’s unhindered sensorial pleasure.

It is however, necessary to ask whose pleasure in (leisurely) looking was this?
Who was Denis’ ideal inhabitant? Despite the negative implications normally associated
with equating les beaux-arts with interior decoration, it was safe for Denis to suggest
that these paintings may contribute to ‘la poésie de la vie intérieure’ if the imagined
occupant and creator of this ideal interior was indeed, a man. Denis’ claims for the
decorative function of Nabis paintings must be understood within the discursive context
of ‘the retreat to the interior’. This was the male cultural retreat constructed upon an
externally developed fantasy of the domestic interior from which the latter’s negative
connotations, namely the material relations of domesticity and sexual difference, had
been ejected. It was only within this non-material space, the product of aesthetic,
literary and psychological discourse that the practice of interior decoration might be
raised in status, theorised and marked with the masculine stamp of cultural authenticity
and superiority. Denis’ description contained the implicit assumption that it was only
the ‘man of taste’ or ‘man of the world’ who may stand back in the domestic interior
and admire these paintings for their decorative effect without completely subsuming
them (they should be ‘sparingly’ distributed) into ‘mere’ interior decoration. Being
‘neither a museum, nor a bazaar’, Denis was quick to note that his ideal interior refuted
the bibelotisation and ‘chaotic-exotic’ arrangement of domestic art objects normally
associated with department store display and 'feminine' modes of consumption and interior decoration. Rather, Denis' ideal interior sounded and 'looked' remarkably similar to the fantastical space of masculine retreat and serious aesthetic appreciation, the 'maison sans femme' described at length by Maurice de Fleury in his article of the late 1880's, 'La Maison d'un moderniste'.

Whilst 'la maison de demain', as de Fleury also described it, would appear to take its inspiration from the dilettante houses of the past, most notably the Goncourts' *Maison d'un artiste*, the article suggested that the role of art objects within the modern interior was intended to serve a quite different purpose. Regarded less as objects of historical interest or individual museum pieces which could, in effect, stand on their own, the art objects of this future interior, combined with an imaginative deployment of modern building materials, such as iron and glass, were aimed at the creation of a decorative ensemble, with de Fleury stating that the house is '...mieux qu'une curiosité, [c'est] une oeuvre d'art.'

Works by contemporary vanguard artists, including Chéret, whose works were described as 'parfaitement décoratives', Degas, Forain, Renoir, Besnard, Whistler, Caillebotte, Signac and Seurat were distributed about this glass house according to the function of the rooms they adorned, with the more intimate subjects 'peuplent les murs' of the more private rooms. A bedroom, for example, was decorated with 'intérieurs' by Caillebotte and Forain, some 'cauchemars de Redon' and 'une grand vision de rêve' by Whistler, with the 'femmes au tub' of Degas being reserved for the darker recesses of the *salle de bain*. What is most significant about this fascinating description of the Due de X...’s inevitably imaginary *maison sans femme* is that, even when subsumed into a decorative ensemble, which included the installation of paintings according to medium and subject matter, the individual identities of each artist, and by extension of the artworks, were carefully maintained:

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63 de Fleury (n.d.), p. 4: 'Dans cette maison sans femme, le salon est surtout le lieu de causerie, de fumerie, où le duc reçoit ses amis d’art.'
64 de Fleury (n.d.), p. 1.
65 de Fleury (n.d.), p. 1 and of the *salle* (p. 3) de Fleury wrote: 'Aux plafonds, du fer encore, en poutrelles, en rosaces, en caissons, en lambris. Aux murs - où il n’est pas aisé de planter des clous - de vastes sous-verre, plaqués à plat, abritent dessins, aquarelles, eaux-fortes, pastels; tandis que les toiles, encadrées de cristal aux teintes logiquement juxtaposées aux couleurs mêmes du tableau, reposent toutes sur chevalets.'
66 de Fleury (n.d.), pp. 3-4.
67 de Fleury (n.d.), p. 4.
Dans cette maison-là, il n’y a pas jusqu’aux les plus strictement utilitaires qui ne revêtent un cachet d’originalité, de goût artiste.”

Denis’ description of the role of Nabi paintings within the decoration of the modern house finds other parallels, not least the bourgeois discourses of personal interior decoration as outlined by Havard, Cardon and Uzanne. When Denis suggested that these paintings should contribute to ‘la poésie de la vie intérieure’ he was manifesting an equivalent desire to the claims of these commentators that the decoration of the home should reflect and compliment the personality of its inhabitant. More than this though, it is reasonable to suggest that the desire to re-make the interior, in effect, to re-create it in one’s own image, through ‘la fusion harmonieuse de l’ensemble’ found a direct parallel in the reparative motives of synthetism itself. Following H. R. Rookmaker, Michael Marlais has argued that the term synthèse signified two distinct yet related concepts for the theorists and artists associated with Gauguin. As suggested above, it may have referred to the ‘simplification of things in order to get at their essence’ from which the concept of the ‘universal language’ of synthetism derived, but at the same time, synthèse was understood to signify the opposite of ‘analysis’, the dissection or taking apart of elements. This second meaning implies a reparative process of fusing forms and objects in order ‘to make them whole’ again. As Marlais notes, Denis wrote of the ‘triumph of synthesis over the spirit of analysis’ and in doing so, expressed a desire to put the world back together again, to master and control it, in much the same way as the advocates of personal interior decoration strove to repair the cultural status of the domestic interior.

The correlation between the Nabi aesthetic of the decorative and the practice of interior decoration did not go unnoticed or unappreciated as a sign of aesthetic value in favourable critiques of their work. Both Denis and Paul Ranson were individually referred to in a review by the critic of La Dépêche de Toulouse, as ‘un décorateur’, whilst Octave Uzanne, critiquing the first Le Barc de Boutteville show of January 1892, praised the group as a whole for ‘sentent enfin que l’art doit être exclusivement

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68 de Fleury (n.d.), p. 3.
69 Uzanne (1892), p. 276.
personnel et décoratif. With reference to the exhibited works of Vuillard in particular, the critic François Monod stated in 1905 that ‘[l]e monde extérieur...lui apparaît comme un plan décoratif où toutes choses fourmillent et fleurissent à la façon d’un riche tapis d’Orient qu’on regarderait sans penser à rien.’ Reviewing the Maison de l’Art Nouveau, Vuillard’s patron Thadée Natanson referred to his own L’Album commission [figs. 74-78] as ‘les panneaux comme de somptueuse tapisserie’, whilst Jacques-Emile Blanche, writing in Le Mercure de France in 1904 suggested that Vuillard ‘...conduit du tableau à l’art appliqué avec cet idéal moderne: la peinture collaborant simplement, comme l’ébénisterie ou les étoffes, à embellir l’habitation des plus modestes citoyens.’

In an article entitled ‘La Réforme de l’Art décoratif’ of 1896, Camille Mauclair analysed the nature of the relationship between the issues of style and function in response to the increasing complexity of the meaning and practice of the decorative. It was to the recent development of a decorative style in modern life painting that Mauclair turned for a contemporary definition of l’art décoratif emphasizing, as others did, its primary solicitation of the viewer’s visual pleasure:

‘...c’est un art où le conceptions intellectuelle de l’artiste, au lieu d’exprimer ou de susciter une émotion intérieure, doit tendre avant tout vers une expression visible, c’est-à-dire beaucoup plus semblable à celle des spectacles naturels qu’à celle naît de la pensée de l’homme...c’est un art descriptif et déformateur, c’est un groupement de spectacles dont le propre est d’être vu.’

Citing the formal properties of decorative art, Mauclair looked to stylistic developments enacted by Impressionist painting in particular, as the source for a modern interpretation of the decorative. Mauclair claimed that the Impressionist artists had been the first to abandon ‘...le désir ancien de signification intellectuelle des tableaux’. Having articulated his stylistic definition of l’art décoratif as the external as opposed to internal manifestation of an artistic temperament, Mauclair proceeded to argue that beaux-arts artists must put aside their elevated undemocratic status in order to apply innovative

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77 Mauclair (15 February 1896), p. 733.
techniques to the artisanal design and production of domestic objects. Less radical than Roger Marx’s ‘social art’ philosophy in which the working class operated as both producer and consumer, Mauclair described the design criteria for such objects in the significant terms of the consumer’s desire for products that were modern in style, designed in a manner appropriate to their use and intended for ‘democratic’ consumption. In seeking contemporary manifestations of decorative art objects that complied with these criteria, Mauclair turned to the recently opened Maison de l’Art Nouveau, the freshly renovated gallery owned by the dealer in Japanese objets d’art and cultural advisor to the government, Siegfried Bing. Many of the Nabi artists, including Vuillard who submitted the L’Album panels [figs. 74-78], a stained glass window design executed by Tiffany [fig. 79] and samples from a commissioned ninety-six piece dinner service [fig. 80], had been invited to exhibit at and in certain cases, to design rooms for, the gallery’s first exhibition which opened at 22, rue de Provence in December 1895. Mauclair was generally favourable towards, if not completely persuaded by, Bing’s project. Praising it as a place of ‘curiosité’ and ‘libre exhibition’, the critic noted that the majority of exhibitors had taken up the Impressionist deployment of a ‘non-intellectual’ decorative style. According to Mauclair this constituted, as yet, a failure to implement real innovations, which warranted giving the Maison de l’Art Nouveau and its exhibits the more accurate label of ‘récent’ as opposed to ‘nouveau’. Nonetheless, Mauclair regarded Bing’s ‘maison impressioniste’ as heralding a promising future for the artisanal production of appropriately designed domestic objects. Within ten years, however, Mauclair’s sense of cautious optimism had descended into one of bitter disillusionment.

In 1906 Mauclair published an article entitled ‘La Crise des Arts décoratifs’ in which the critic demonstrated both a greater degree of clarity and caution in his

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78 The art critic, arts administrator and private collector Roger Marx was unique amongst decorative arts reformers (he was a member of the CUAD) in his advocacy of mechanical methods for producing affordable, well designed household goods that would extend domestic comfort to a wider range of consumers. In R. Marx, ‘Les Arts décoratifs et industriels aux Salons du Palais de l’Industrie et du Champ-de-Mars’, La Revue encyclopédique, vol. 1, no. 19 (15 September 1891), p. 588 Marx described his ambition as to [m]élir intimement l’art à la vie quotidienne’. Also see Williams (1991), pp. 162-7 and Mauclair (15 February 1896), p. 740:

‘C’est dans l’ornementation d’objets usuels... et non dans la réussite de choses très chères et d’un modèle unique, qu’on peut chercher utilement la diffusion du goût, qu’on peut rêver la disparition de la monotonie et de la laideur, l’éducation d’art du public par d’humbles et quotidiens exemples, serrures, ustensiles d’usage constant qu’il n’en coûte pas plus de faire jolis.’

79 Mauclair (15 February 1896), p. 742.
understanding and application of the term *l'art décoratif*. Describing it as 'ni le luxe ni même l'adjonction de peintures et de sculptures à des objets usuels', Mauclair aimed to divorce the 'democratic' design of household utensils and objects according to their use from the production of one-off pieces for a wealthy clientele.80 Mauclair accused the many institutions and artistic groups that had laid claim to the title of *l'art décoratif*, including the *Salon du Champ-de-Mars*, the CUAD's government sponsored *Style Moderne* and Bing's *Art Nouveau*, of having pulled off a brilliant deception. Suggesting that their forays into the production of decorative art objects had been nothing more than a patronage driven sham, a brief fashion for '...s'amusèrent à faire de l'art appliqué ou décoratif en même temps que des tableaux et des statues', Mauclair claimed that decoration had merely been imposed onto expensive objects as a 'crafty' veneer.81 Having promised a productive 'entente cordiale' between the artist and the artisan, these groups had admittedly created a new style, disparagingly described in the terms of 'un brilliant décor'.82 According to Mauclair, however, 'il n'y a rien derrière ce décor'.83 Mauclair was not alone in his revisionist condemnation of 1890's decorative arts practice. In April 1892 Maurice Denis had argued for the ornamental function of Nabi paintings in the modern interior, a desirous fantasy that had anticipated the installation, if not the appearance of, the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* in 1895. By 1903 however, when the Nabi group could no longer be regarded with any sense of unity and Denis was actively involved in (re-)writing the history of the personalities, theories and events of the 1890's, the links between Nabi art and interior decoration had become distinctly problematic. Having been commissioned to design a bedroom for the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* Denis claimed in 1903, without any apparent sense of contradiction, that 'Art Nouveau and its snobbishness no longer exists'.84 Denis expanded upon this critique in an article of 1908 concerning Sérusier, in which the former claimed that the latter had always seen through and fought against '...la prétentieuse facilité des improvisateurs d'Art Nouveau, de ceux qui, en l'absence de toute esthétique et de toute tradition, n'ont de règle que le caprice individuel.'85

81 Mauclair (June 1906), p. 755.
82 Mauclair (June 1906), p. 755.
83 Mauclair (June 1906), p. 755.
84 Denis (October 1903), p. 170.
85 M. Denis, 'Paul Sérusier', (December 1908), repr. in *Du Symbolisme au classicisme: Théories*, 1964, p. 57. It is possible that Denis' revisionist critiques derived, in part at least, from a long-standing resentment towards Bing following the latter's decision to dismantle Denis' poorly received bedroom
Both Denis’ and Mauclair’s revisionist critiques of the 1900’s manifested a concern with the Maison de l’Art Nouveau that focused upon the issue of deception. Their disillusionment was articulated as a bitter reaction against the feeling of having been duped by an institution that had failed to fulfill the desires invested in it. As such, their critiques consistently centred upon the now derisory formal equation between the decorative arts and the shallow sensuality of the decorative surface as the material evidence for Art Nouveau’s deceit. As a purely cosmetic veneer that disguised the void beneath, l’art décoratif of the 1890’s confirmed both Denis’ and Mauclair’s recently developed fear that the decorative had descended into the now negative category of the ‘merely’ ornamental. These anxieties concerning the decorative’s and specifically, Art Nouveau’s status as surface, were remarkably similar to those Loos had, and Benjamin was, to articulate. Denis’ implicit and Mauclair’s stated assumptions of the 1890’s that the Maison de l’Art Nouveau signalled a promising future for the blossoming relationship between artistic creativity and interior decoration may be considered naive and their revisionist critiques of the 1900’s, as strategic acts of betrayal. In attempting, however, to distance themselves from the perceived failures of the previous decade, their revisionist critiques inadvertently pointed to the commercialism that underpinned fin-de-siècle artistic culture and Bing’s Maison de l’Art Nouveau in particular. As an astute tactician, highly experienced in the display and commerce of Japanese objets d’art, a business which expanded significantly with the opening of the Maison de l’Art Nouveau, Bing responded energetically to the expansion of the domestic consumer market that occurred in the 1890’s. Analysis of the Maison de l’Art Nouveau suggests that, like Zola’s fictional owner-seducer Octave Mouret, Bing both traded on and in his customer’s inflamed desires. In this instance, these were the desires of an élite clientele demonstrably repulsed by the chaotic glamour, discounted goods and mass consumption ethics of the department store. With the desires of his potential customers in mind, Bing designed and implemented the installation of the Maison de l’Art Nouveau at 22, rue de Provence [fig. 81], using a tripartite strategy towards display and commerce. Contrary, however, to Bing’s own claims and seemingly, the aesthetic desires of an élite clientele, the 1895 Maison de l’Art Nouveau collapsed the increasingly fragile boundaries separating the institutional and discursive space of the independent gallery from that of

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just two weeks after the opening of the Maison de l’Art Nouveau. See G. P. Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing, 1986, pp. 66-7

86 For Bing’s business interests see Silverman (1989), pp. 270-3.
the domestic interior and the department store. In doing so, Bing manifested a tendency towards the (covert) appropriation of traditionally feminine modes of production and consumption whilst simultaneously excluding women from his *maison* as both producers and consumers.

The *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*’s status as an independent exhibition space is irrefutable. As Debora Silverman has demonstrated, Bing’s intention was to expand upon his pre-existing *rue Chauchat* business with the development of the adjacent space. The renovated *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* would be dedicated to the non-hierarchical display of experimental decorative art objects of diverse media produced by young, international (American and European) talent, sympathetically installed in commissioned rooms designed by the artists themselves.\(^{87}\) Whilst the catalogue to the first exhibition held at the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* neglected to include an introductory essay, it did detail the vast range of objects on display, listed according to the mediums employed. These included a large number of two dimensional works such as paintings, pastels, watercolours, drawings (the first category to be listed) and prints as well as three dimensional objects such as sculpture, furniture, ceramics and glasswork, and more diverse items including illustrated books, wallpaper designs, fabrics, stained glass windows and jewellery. Amongst those who submitted and were invited to exhibit their works were Vuillard, Denis, Bonnard, Paul Ranson and Henri-Gabriel Ibels from the Nabi group as well as, amongst others, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Théo van Rysselberghe, Henry Van de Velde and Albert Besnard. From the total number of six-hundred-and-sixty-two works on display, only fifteen were produced by the eight women who exhibited. The majority of these were seasoned painters and sculptors, the more well-known including Mary Cassatt, Camille Claudel and Charlotte Besnard. Only two women, Mme. E. Duez and Mme A. Vallgren were included amongst those invited to exhibit works more traditionally categorised as decorative arts objects.\(^{88}\) The extensive critical response, which repeatedly exploited the unrivalled opportunity provided by the exhibition’s title in order to deride the presumptuousness of its claim to display ‘new art’, further alluded to the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*’s given status as an exhibition space.\(^{89}\) Bing’s stated curatorial aim had been to produce an ‘harmonious

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\(^{89}\) See, for example, Anon., ‘L’Art Nouveau’, *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, (11 January 1896), p. 11: 178
whole' in which both the permanently installed spaces and the objects displayed within them would articulate a symbiotic relationship of experimental creativity. A photograph of the large central atrium [fig. 82], picturing a figurative sculpture located on a plinth at the centre of a number of symmetrically sited glass display cabinets suggests that Bing's stated curatorial aims were sometimes more ambitious than the conventions of installation would allow. Certainly, the critical response was unable to refer to and describe the objects in terms other than those conventional to the analysis and diagnosis of individual beaux-arts works, in which the authorial classificatory function of the artist was carefully maintained and reproduced. Needless to say, the albeit barely visible instances of work produced by women exhibitors, failed to elicit any form of critical response.

That the Maison de l'Art Nouveau was intended to re-create and possibly induce psycho-somatic memories and fantasies of, the spatial environment, internal arrangement and leisurely comfort of the haut-bourgeois domestic interior is evident from more than the gallery’s title alone. The building had formerly functioned as a two storey house until Bing commissioned the architect Louis Bonnier to transform it into a site for the display and consumption of decorative art objects. It would appear from photographs and descriptions, that despite the modern architectural materials such as glass, iron and coloured tile that Bonnier employed, a strong sense of the original domestic function of the building was intentionally maintained. In a letter written to Denis in April 1895, Bing clearly stated his intention to convert the space into a single domestic interior containing rooms of a specific and identifiable purpose. These rooms, Bing stated, were to be designed and decorated with 'a certain character of elegance' that would, it is reasonable to presume, appeal to and in the terms of fin-de-siècle guides to interior decoration, reflect the refined tastes and singular personality of an élite clientele.

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90 Letter from S. Bing to Maurice Denis (30 April 1895), Archives de Maurice Denis, St. Germain-en-Laye [translated and quoted in Weisberg (1986), p. 56].
91 Silverman has noted the similarities between the modes of display enacted in this central atrium and those of the Salon du Champ-de-Mars. Silverman (1989), p. 369, footnote 30.
92 One critic, Jules Chancel, noted how the furniture, like the paintings, had been marked with the producer's signature. J. Chancel, 'L'Art Nouveau', L'Événement, (28 December 1895), p. 1.
94 Letter from S. Bing to Maurice Denis (30 April 1895) [quoted in Weisberg (1986), pp. 55-6]:
gallery was arranged to house seven rooms around the central atrium, containing works that stylistically and functionally signified the types of rooms found in bourgeois households with aristocratic pretensions. These were a dining room [fig. 80], a fumoir [fig. 83] and a cabinet de l’amateur, all designed by Henry Van de Velde, a circular salon with panels painted by Albert Besnard [fig. 84], a bedroom designed by Denis that was dismantled within two weeks of the opening, and a boudoir decorated with painted silk panels by Charles Condor. A waiting-room located on the ground floor was decorated with the five L’Album panels [figs. 74-78] that Thadée and Misia Natanson had commissioned Vuillard to produce for their Parisian apartment. The maison and its design ethic of organic forms that negated the corrupting influence of historical pastiche was installed as a ‘model private environment’, that offered the most desirable qualities of a modern urban home: refuge for the individual. As such, the Maison de l’Art Nouveau was explicit in its appeal to both the most elemental physical and the most fantastical psychic desires of its temporary inhabitants. The domestic interior motif was not wasted on the critics who responded to the Maison de l’Art Nouveau, many of whom referred to it with an interchangeable use of the terms maison, hôtel, appartement, and habitation. Several critics reacted positively towards the idealising tendencies of the Maison de l’Art Nouveau’s domestic aspirations. One critic, for example, described it in the terms of ‘ses petits appartements aux fantaisies et aux nouveautés de l’art décoratif’, proceeding to acknowledge the maison’s consumer-led display strategy with the claim that ‘[e]lle répond à des besoins qui étaient devenus urgents, celui d’avoir une maison bon accueil... ’ Another, Jules Chancel, structured his critique as a personal journey into the depths of the interior that re-enacted the sequential arrangement of the maison, room by room. Chancel and his reader eventually arrived at the most secluded and fantastical of destinations for the individual, the fumoir

[fig. 83], '...dont les meubles faisant corps avec l’appartement sont l’idéal du confort.'

The majority of critics, however, reacted negatively towards the \textit{Maison de l'Art Nouveau}, with some, such as André Hallays, referring to its domestic motif as the residence ‘...d’un opulent détraqué désireux de cultiver ses maladies.’ Like Hallays, many of the critics who invoked nightmarish metaphors of neurasthenic interiors in order to articulate their perception of the \textit{maison}'s claustrophobic lack of formal restraint, did so whilst making derogatory references to the \textit{Maison de l'Art Nouveau}'s commercial purpose.

The similarities between the \textit{Maison de l'Art Nouveau} as it was arranged for the 1895 opening and the department store or \textit{grand magasin} are initially, at least, a little more oblique than Bing’s deployment of the spatial and discursive conventions of the independent exhibition space and the domestic interior. Nonetheless, clear parallels may be drawn. Firstly, the majority of objects displayed in the 1895-6 exhibition were on sale to the visiting public. Bing’s \textit{magasin}, as it was also labelled, was more than simply a place for the harmonious display of experimental decorative art objects. Bing fully intended the \textit{Maison de l'Art Nouveau} to operate as a commercial venture in which the visitor of means might be encouraged to purchase objects for display and use within their own home. In order to attract and seduce his customers, Bing employed many of the architectural features and display strategies of the department store which, it will be demonstrated, complimented rather than negated the \textit{maison}'s domestic interior motif and the desires of an élite clientele. Like the fictional ‘Au Bonheur des Dames’, the building of the \textit{Maison de l'Art Nouveau} with its circular turret, dramatic use of ceramic tile and boldly coloured friezes, dominated the corner on which it was located [fig. 81]. As the potential customer drew closer, evidence suggests that they would have been absorbed by both these external features and an innovative use of stained glass in the building’s external window displays. The main entrance, which formed a cavernous recess in the building’s \textit{rue de Provence} façade, was flanked by suspended streetlights and posters advertising the building’s exhibitions [fig. 85]. A cast sunflower motif climbed the archway’s vertical posts, directing the visitor’s gaze upwards, towards the

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100 Chancel (28 December 1895), p. 1.
102 See, for example, G. Soulier, ‘Le Mobilier’, \textit{Art et décoration}, vol. 2, no. 3 (March 1898), p. 70.
building’s proudly displayed name and product.\textsuperscript{104} At the rear of this dark and slightly elevated space the visitor would have entered the building through double glass doors decorated with metal filigree which, according to one observer, were mounted in a wall of broken coloured glass [fig. 86].\textsuperscript{105} Having entered the building via this dark recess and iridescent glass wall, it is likely that the visitor would have been struck by the exuberant colour and size of the atrium, stretching away both below and above them [fig. 87]. It is only possible to imagine the startling intensity of the atrium’s pale blue walls as they were illuminated both laterally, by the external use of stained glass windows and from above, by the atrium’s glazed ceiling. [fig. 88].\textsuperscript{106} Photographs show the walls of the atrium adorned with a large number and variety of two dimensional works. The shifting intensity and prismatic play of daylight as it passed through the individual panes of transparent or coloured glass and was projected onto the atrium walls in kaleidoscopic patterns would have further harmonised and enhanced the rich decorative properties that had determined the selection and location of the works displayed within this space. An internal architectural feature of the building since the 1880’s, the atrium rose its full two storey height (excluding the taller circular turret with its own glazed ceiling) and was encircled by an elaborate staircase and landings, from which the individual exhibition rooms radiated. The observations of a contemporary critic suggests that the experience of entering the Maison de l’Art Nouveau to be greeted by the vision of an atrium ‘où Tout-Paris se marche sur les pieds’, echoed that of entering the bustling central gallery of a department store.\textsuperscript{107} Intended to display each floor and its swarming occupants to any viewpoint, these spectacularly vast galleries constructed in iron and glass became an integral feature of department store design and the modern urban location in which to observe and be observed.\textsuperscript{108} As with the

\textsuperscript{104} Though considerably smaller in scale, this imposing yet engaging facade and entrance, prompts comparison with that of the ‘Au Bonheur des Dames’ (referred to in translation as The Ladies’ Paradise). Zola (1883), pp. 3-4:
‘...this shop which had suddenly appeared before her, this building which seemed so enormous, brought a lump to her throat and held her rooted to the spot, excited, fascinated, oblivious to everything else. The high plate-glass door...reached the mezzanine floor and was surrounded by elaborate decorations covered with gilding. Two allegorical figures, two laughing women with bare breasts thrust forward, were unrolling a scroll bearing the inscription: The Ladies’ Paradise.’


\textsuperscript{106} Weisberg (1986), p. 60.

\textsuperscript{107} Lefevre (5 January 1896), p. 3:
‘...guidés par les tessons de bouteilles de la porte, lentilles de phare, pénétrons sous l’arcade des deux massives bottées de tournesols, jusqu’au hall à double balcon intérieur où Tout-Paris se marche sur les pieds.’

\textsuperscript{108} See Zola (1883), pp. 233-4:
department store, Bing employed modern engineering features, including electric lighting, that would function as awe-inspiring spectacles in their own right. The new technological darling and a domestic privilege for the very few, electric lighting was introduced into the grands magasins during the 1880's and had been responsible for the 'fairyland environment' that bedazzled and transfixed the crowds at the 1889 Exposition Universelle. The internal arrangement of the rue de Provence building itself, with rooms other than the atrium arranged according to a specific domestic function, similarly echoed the internal arrangement of the department store. In both spaces the commodified objects were initially categorised and installed according to function or type in individual departments or rooms that surrounded the central hall. Within these individual spaces, objects of type were displayed in carefully constructed tableaux according to predominantly formal criteria. Implemented as the means to facilitate the shopper's visit to the (grand) magasin, the sequential arrangement of departments, or rooms, would nonetheless encourage the customer to browse as their 'free-floating desire' became aroused by, the carefully constructed displays that lined the route to their intended destination.

Several critics pointed to the Maison de l'Art Nouveau's 'préoccupation mercantile.' As with André Hallays and Gabriel Lefeuve, quoted above, the links between the Maison de l'Art Nouveau and the department store were invariably articulated in derogatory terms. These critics tended to employ a negative terminology associated with the department store in order to criticise the Maison de l'Art Nouveau. This terminology derived from the 'chaotic-exotic' arrangement of alluring yet cosmetic surfaces associated with department store display strategies, which allowed the critics to dismiss the objects displayed in the Maison de l'Art Nouveau as little more than bibelots and bric-à-brac. Hallays' critique was most explicit in this respect, referring to the

'The courtyards had been glazed in and transformed into halls; and iron staircases rose from the ground floor, while iron bridges had been thrown across from one end to the other on both floors...Space had been gained everywhere, light and air entered freely, and the public circulated with ease beneath the bold curves of the wide-spaced trusses. It was the cathedral of modern business, strong and yet light, built for vast crowds of customers.'

Zola (1883), p. 426: 'Then, when all the lamps were lit, there was a rapturous murmur from the crowd; the great display of white took on fairy-like splendour beneath this new lighting. It seemed as if the colossal orgy of white was burning too, was itself being changed into light...all this opened up a dream firmament, a glimpse into the dazzling whiteness of a paradise...'.

Maison de l'Art Nouveau in the derogatory terms of 'un bazar somptueusement décoré', in which:

'[c]es tableaux, ces poteries, ces mobiliers hurlent d'être ainsi réunis. Chaque objet nuit à son voisin. Il n'y a point trace d'harmonie; il n'y a pas d'ombre d'un “style”. Et pourtant, que de jolies pièces éparses parmi ce bric-à-brac tumultueux! Mais ce sont de simples bibelots de vitrine. Ils seraient charmants dans une exposition banale, soigneusement isolés les uns des autres. Mais ici leur assemblage est monstrueux. Ce pèle-mêle de choses composites et cosmopolites donne le vertige.'

This was an undoubtedly gendered discourse, intended to negatively equate the commercialism of the Maison de l'Art Nouveau with the feminised culture of the department store. It was a discourse that was also racially motivated. The racialised language of this and several other critiques drew upon a number of pertinent factors. These included the internationally diverse range of artists who had been invited to exhibit at the Maison de l'Art Nouveau, knowledge of Bing's German Jewish identity and a deeply ingrained nexus of widely held anti-Semitic beliefs that associated arriviste Jewish figures with false, ostentatious glamour and unbridled capitalist greed.

According to the most outspoken critic of the exhibition's foreign contributors and incidentally, Bing's friend, Arsène Alexandre, the Maison de l'Art Nouveau was migraine inducing in its 'unhealthy incoherence'. The latter was a term that Hallays also employed when referring to the Maison de l'Art Nouveau as 'le triomphe d'incohérence'. It is a term moreover, that conjures up the notion of a willful curatorial desire for stylistic disorder. It was intended to denote an aesthetic of such cultural diversity as to be incomprehensible to the 'native' French observer. In the space of Hallays' oriental 'bazar', Alexandre located the 'jewess addicted to morphine' in a notoriously xenophobic statement of stylistic indictment:

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113 There is an extensive range of texts detailing this nexus of anti-Semitic beliefs. For the manifestation of anti-Semitism in the critical response to the Maison de l'Art Nouveau in particular, see K. Silver, 'The Other Fin-de-Siècle', Art in America, vol. 75, no. 12 (December 1987), p. 110. For texts analysing contemporary associations between gendered Jewish identity and artificial, excessive glamour and modern finance see essays in both N. L. Kleeblatt (ed.), The Dreyfus Affair, exh. cat., 1987 and Nochlin & Garb (eds.), (1995).
114 A. Alexandre, 'L'Art Nouveau', Le Figaro, (28 December 1895), p. 1: 'La migraine commence à gagner, l'énerverment me court au bout des doigts, je suis à point pour goûter l'art nouveau...Et tout cela est confus, incohérent, presque malsain.'
'Tout cela sent l'Anglais vicieux, la Juive morphinomane ou le Belge roublard, ou une agréable salade de ces trois poisons.'

Whether real or imaginary, there is a striking similarity between the psychosomatic symptoms described by these critics and the trance-like stupors and nervous disorders apparently suffered by the department store's overly desirous, even kleptomaniacal female customers. At the same time, it is important to remember that Bing intended for his customers to feel at home in his maison-magasin. The public conflation of domestic and commercial space was not, however, a strategy developed by Bing, but a well-known feature and highly successful marketing ploy employed by the department store. Like the Maison de l'Art Nouveau, the department store reading-room, a space intended to recreate the comfortable appearance and peaceful atmosphere of a bourgeois salon, presented its male clientele with a privileged site from which to participate vicariously in the consumption process whilst maintaining the illusion, at least, of their distance from it. In Au Bonheur des Dames, Zola characterised the entire department store as a huge machine at the heart of Paris, the nineteenth-century city of capital, which sucked in, marketed, sold and spat out commodities at huge profit. Within this space Zola described the reading-room as a refuge from the implied hysteria, described as a 'distant murmur', of the rest of the store and as a symbol of the Parisian's and Parisienne's different yet complimentary ideological comfort and complacency within the store as a whole. With its artificial yet seemingly convincing veneer of bourgeois respectability, the reading-room further articulated Mouret's tactical brilliance as the inducer and seducer of the consumerist desires of both his male and female customers:

'The dome of the long room was laden with gilding; at either end monumental fireplaces faced each other; mediocre pictures, very ornately framed, covered the walls; and, between the pillars, in front of each of the arched bays opening onto the shop, were tall green plants in majolica pots. A crowd of silent people surrounded the table, which was littered with magazines and newspapers, and furnished with stationery and ink-pots..."Oh!" said Mouret smiling, "these ladies aren't in my shop, they're at home here!"...he led his old schoolfellow along and made him stand on the threshold of the room, facing the great central gallery, its successive halls stretching out below them. Behind them, the reading-room retained

118 Zola (1883), p. 16.
its atmosphere of meditation, disturbed only by the scratching of pens and the rustling of newspapers. An old gentleman had fallen asleep over the Moniteur. Monsieur de Boves was studying the pictures, with the obvious intention of losing his future son-in-law in the crowd. And, alone in the midst of the calm, Madame Bourdelais was amusing her children in a loud voice, as if in conquered territory.

“You see, they're at home here,” repeated Mouret with a grand gesture towards the crowds of women with which the departments were almost bursting.”

According to Zola’s description, the department store reading-room disrupted the social and spatial conventions that normally determined male and female behaviour. Whilst the Parisienne was ‘at home’ within the public and commercial spaces of the store, it was her husband or male counterpart who sought refuge in the imitation, though by contrast, ‘real’ and ‘private’ space of the reading-room, where he felt at leisure to consume the comparatively ‘high’ culture on offer, the newspapers and paintings that filled the ‘salon’. As with Bing’s Maison de l’Art Nouveau, the male customer’s comfortable acquisition of commercial space was dependent upon the department store being able to maintain the illusion of their distance from its commercial function by catering to, whilst disguising, their role as consumers. In order to do this, both institutions created an artificial ‘home from home’ within public space. The creation of such a space was not, however, the preserve of the department store reading-room or the Maison de l’Art Nouveau. The origins of both may be located in the nineteenth-century bourgeois equivalent of the eighteenth-century aristocratic salon, the cercle, or private gentlemen’s club. As Maurice Agulhon and Tamar Garb have demonstrated, the occurrence, use and social significance of the cercle expanded and shifted during the period of the July Monarchy with the consolidation of the bourgeois ideology of separate spheres. The concomitant division of public and private space served to structure bourgeois modes of sociability along gender, as well as class, divides. It was, for example, no coincidence that the rise of the cercle accompanied an equivalent rise in the popularity of the male pastime of smoking, a habit deemed inadmissible in the presence of bourgeois women. As the luxurious furniture and burning hearth of Jean

\[119\] Zola (1883), pp. 246-8.

\[120\] Agulhon (1977), pp. 47-57; Garb (1994), p. 33. Where Agulhon tends to emphasise the class divisions that structured this mode of bourgeois sociability, Garb argues that the exclusion of women from the cercles was not coincidental but ‘integral’ to their social value and significance.

\[121\] Agulhon (1977), p. 53.
Beraud’s painting *Le Cercle* [fig. 89] demonstrates, these spaces were arranged in order to provide their occupants with the material comforts of home whilst operating as a more favourable site for male psychic refuge.\textsuperscript{122} The supremely relaxed countenance of the two figures in Beraud’s painting alludes to the cercle’s essential purpose as an idealised, womanless space, a sanctuary where bourgeois men might go in order to truly ‘be themselves’. As an artificial yet real home from home in public space, the cercle provided all the pleasure of the domestic interior with none of the negative aspects associated with this ‘feminine’ space, including the material relations of domesticity and sexual difference. As a safety-valve for bourgeois men, the cercle was equally regarded as the nemesis of bourgeois womanhood. Indeed the idealised spectre of the cercle was frequently raised as a suitable weapon with which to threaten those women who failed to provide their husbands with a suitably welcoming domestic interior.\textsuperscript{123} During the 1860’s and 1870’s the cercles increasingly operated as independent exhibition spaces that, as Garb has suggested, provided an invaluable forum for the blossoming relationship between the producers and consumers of fine art objects.\textsuperscript{124} As such, the cercle provided the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* and its more populist counterpart, the department store reading-room, with an important institutional and spatial model of a womanless yet comfortable home from home space for the male consumption of ‘high’ culture.

To equate the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* with the department store reading-room and the cercles of a previous generation, both womanless spaces, is to imagine for Bing’s *maison-magasin* an ideal visitor who was male. The evidence for such a claim is nonetheless, located in the spatial arrangement of the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* itself. The significance of including both a *fumoir* and a *cabinet de l'amateur* at 22, rue de Provence should not be undermined. The *fumoir* and the *cabinet de l'amateur* were regarded as ‘pièces accessoires’ to the average bourgeois home and when included, rooms in which the man of taste might find the refuge and seclusion required in order to pursue cultural interests and intellectual conversation.\textsuperscript{125} At the same time Bing

\textsuperscript{122} Garb (1994), pp. 34-5.
\textsuperscript{123} See, for example, Cardon (1884), p. 37 and note the link he drew between the cercle, comfort and art:
‘Inconsciemment, la plupart de temps, l’homme se trouve mal chez lui et il va au cercle où il trouve le confort et l’art qui le réjouissent...’.
\textsuperscript{125} Havard (1884), p. 446.
neglected to include any rooms, such as a kitchen, pantry or scullery, normally dedicated to the hidden yet essential practice of domestic work. Of those rooms normally identified as ‘feminine’, only the bedroom and the boudoir remained. Both of these were, however, associated with the feminine pursuit of ideal beauty and the concomitant promise of male sexual pleasure. It may be argued that with its innovative use of the modern building materials of iron and glass, its subsumption of art and decoration into a decorative ensemble and its stylistic arrangement of decorative art objects according to the domestic function of individual rooms, that the Maison de l'Art Nouveau was the material enactment of Maurice de Fleury’s wishful maison de demain, the maison d’un moderniste that was also a maison sans femme. Both were fantastical spaces, ideal interiors in which neither women nor domesticity were allowed to taint the aesthetic value or leisurely consumption of art. In many ways the Maison de l'Art Nouveau’s ability to occupy traditionally ‘feminine’ space and to appropriate traditionally ‘feminine’ modes of consumption was constructed upon the mutual exclusivity of the terms ‘moderniste’ and ‘femme’. For the Maison de l'Art Nouveau to have been a maison d’un moderniste it must also, in effect, have been a maison sans femme.

The extent to which the spatial arrangement of the Maison de l'Art Nouveau sought to appropriate traditionally feminine modes of consumption whilst excluding women as consumers echoed the extent to which its curatorial purpose sought to appropriate traditionally feminine modes of production whilst excluding women as producers. This may be demonstrated by comparing the Maison de l'Art Nouveau with the Exposition des Arts de la Femme of 1892. Installed at the Palais de l’Industrie this exhibition, and its 1895 sequel, were organised by the CUAD as part of their mission to encourage women to become more involved in the public regeneration of the French decorative arts tradition. Despite this stated intention and the state’s seemingly progressive inclination to sponsor the public display of ‘women’s art’, the traditional parameters of female amateurism and domestically located modes of production and consumption were carefully maintained. Such restraints were clearly evident in the CUAD’s published objectives for the 1892 exhibition, which proposed to ‘[m]ontrer la femme moderne, avec ses élégances, les arts qu’elle pratique, se mouvant dans le cadre

126 For detailed information concerning the institutional objectives and curatorial arrangement of these exhibitions see Silverman (1989), pp. 186-206.
Neatly framed and contained within their rightful domestic environment, the classificatory arrangement of the exhibition sought to further undermine women’s involvement in decorative arts production in favour of their more economically significant role as consumers. The exhibition was divided into two distinct sections. The first, a retrospective celebration of feminine taste that nostalgically invoked the great women patrons of the eighteenth century and included such feminine accoutrements as costumes, hairstyles and historical objects used for the everyday purposes of the toilette. The second or ‘modern’ section was divided into three further categories. Whilst the first of these was devoted to the beaux-arts practices of women since 1871, the second was dedicated to displays from pedagogic institutions responsible for educating women in ‘les Arts de la femme’. The final category was designated for the display of functional domestic and decorative arts objects produced by both male and female practitioners.

Octave Uzanne’s critical reception of the exhibition was typical in its formulaic response to the few objects that were produced by women. Throughout the short critique, which was published in a journal devoted to the analysis and promotion of the decorative arts, Uzanne distinguished only a handful of women exhibitors. The remainder of the works displayed and, by extension, the women who produced them, were grouped together under the dismissive rubric of ‘une halle aux médiocrités’. These objects, Uzanne claimed, served only to demonstrate ‘l’habileté et la délicatesse qu’ont les femmes pour la peinture des fleurs’ and the extent to which the miniature is an ‘...art féminin...qui vit toujours...sous les doigts experts des femmes modernes.’ The deeply held belief that women possessed an innate and physiologically determined talent for specific types of cultural production clearly informed Uzanne’s response. These were the creative practices that tended to demonstrate bourgeois women’s amateurish interests, their femininity and their rightful place within society and the domestic interior.

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130 Uzanne (January-June 1892), pp. 226-7.
131 See Garb (1994), pp. 162-5 for the ways in which professional women artists and members of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs responded to dismissive criticism by deploying the gendered terminology of their critics in order to develop a utopian artistic category, l’art féminin.
As numerous commentators who claimed to be authorities on femininity testified, women's innate propensity for the decorative arts originated from a voracious compulsion to consume that in itself, derived from a narcissistic desire to adorn and to harmonise their own bodies with their domestic setting. In an article published in the *haut-bourgeois* woman's magazine *La Grande Dame*, Edme Couty appealed to women's instinctual desire to adorn themselves. Couty's argument was, nonetheless, structured by the belief that whilst the fashionable *bourgeoise* may possess innate taste, this needed to be harnessed to, and controlled by, the professional direction of an interior designer. The conflation between a woman's narcissistic desire for self-adornment and the decoration of her domestic interior found its greatest exponent in Octave Uzanne, the avid proponent of personal (psychological) interior decoration for men. According to Uzanne, the *Parisiennes* decorated her interior with the sole intention of creating a decorative motif of aesthetic and textural harmony between figure and ground that would, nonetheless, ensure that the visitor's gaze unfailingly returned to its finest, most decorative of objects, the hostess's body. Like Couty, Uzanne implied that women's narcissistic desire to adorn took on the pitiful proportions of a sexually driven pathology, that needed to be both regulated and controlled. According to Uzanne, the endless tedium of the modern woman's (rightfully) domestic life induced such an overwhelming desire for sensorial stimulation that she was driven to search for 'distraction and forgetfulness' in the 'prismatic horizons' created by the 'chaotic-exotic' displays of the department store that consume her weakened sensibility and which she, in turn, consumes without reason:

'We see them by day...promenading in grand bazaars of novelties, searching, ferreting, cataloguing silks, woollens, linens...spending without care, without need, through whim or ill-defined caprice...they prowl incessantly, chatter without reason, finding in the midst of that feminine

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132 Couty (January 1896), p. 23: 'Malgré les dons naturels qu'elle montre pour sa toilette - peut-être même à cause de ces dons - elle est d'une infériorité déplorable dans 'l'arrangement' de sa maison...Sous la tutelle du tapissier comme pour sa robe et son chapeau, elle est à la mode et toujours à la mode...cette éducation serait cependant bien nécessaire, et, en s'imposant pour provoquer le libre essor de nos facultés délicates...'.

133 O. Uzanne, *Fashion in Paris, 1797-1897*, (1897) trans. 1898, p. 168. Note the similarity between the following description and the decorative aesthetic of department store displays: 'The *Parisiennes* of the present day endeavours, as a rule, to have her dress and furniture all in keeping. Her hangings and her gowns must harmonise, as much as may be. Her feeling for colour, and for the innumerable shades of general effect, is delicate and unerring. Nothing about the person is allowed to clash with the carefully arranged symmetry, or enchanting disorder, of her apartments.'

134 Uzanne (1898) p. 167: 'The home of a Parisian lady is a delicious nest, arranged with consummate skill and taste, a worthy setting for the pleasure-loving hostess who adorns it.'
crowd, in those crushings, and crumplings, and continual wanderings to and fro, a sensation...of moral intoxication, profound and unhealthy..."  

In fin-de-siècle cultural discourses, the practices of decorative arts consumption and interior decoration were thought to be particularly suited to women. This was in direct contrast to men, for whom interior decoration was constructed as a transformative mode of innovative artistic production. Within the context of the Exposition des Arts de la Femme, decorative arts production was conceived as a particularly amateurish practice in which the identity and subjectivity of the artist was subsumed under an aegis of femininity-anonymity and where creativity was more the result of biology and narcissistic consumption than individual talent. If women artists did not require the conscious use of their mental faculties in order to produce decorative arts objects and if these objects were rarely placed in front of the public gaze, then any claims to high culture were certainly problematic. Moreover, if women’s decorative arts production was unable to transgress the boundaries of nature in order to become culture then it was inevitably doomed to failure as work that aspired to be either experimental or original. Siegfried Bing was adamant that the objects he displayed and sold in the Maison de l’Art Nouveau would be interpreted as new, as original forms of experimental artistic expression. Indeed, the Maison de l’Art Nouveau was able to be new, even when delving into the murky depths of the domestic interior and decorative arts production and consumption, by becoming without doubt, a maison sans femme.

To suggest that the Maison de l’Art Nouveau of 1895-6 was, in effect, a maison sans femme is not strictly true. Women did occupy the spaces of Bing’s maison-magasin. Not as actual people granted a significant role to play in the production and consumption of the objects displayed but as the two-dimensional phantasmatic figures that peopled the walls, the three-dimensional organic forms carved in wood or cast in iron that sculpted and created fantastical space, and as the repetitive patterns and arabesque lines of pigment that formed the seductive, shallow veneers of the objects displayed. In compliance with the feminised imagery deployed to signify the aesthetic policies of the official decorative arts movement [see fig. 90], the ‘universal language’ of synthetism found its most communicative means of visual expression in a reductive, syntactical arrangement of the female body. The pared-down feminine type as

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135 O. Uzanne, The Frenchwoman of the Century, (1886) trans. 1886, pp. 269-70:
decorative subject dominated the murals, panels and smaller two dimensional works. Amongst the Nabi artists, the female subject ranged (not very widely) from Denis’ bedroom mural depicting ‘woman’s life in a passage from youth to maturity as an uninterrupted cycle of familial devotion and protection’, the Love and the Life of Woman [fig. 91], to Paul Ranson’s dining-room panels featuring female figures harvesting and washing laundry in dreamy, rhythmic landscapes [see fig. 80], to Vuillard’s L’Album panels [figs. 74-78]. In each instance, and so with Vuillard’s dinner service [see, for example, fig. 92], the works manifested a clear link between the representation of the female figure as decorative subject and the re-occurrence of certain two dimensional formal elements, such as arabesque lines, repetitive patterning and fluttering strokes of tentatively applied pigment.

A passage from his journal, written in 1894, articulates the extent to which Vuillard sought to invest in the decorative potential of the female, as opposed to male, body. In his statement, Vuillard sought to highlight a common distinction between the aesthetic conceptualisation and representation of the male and female figures. In a statement of confession, the artist admitted that he found it difficult to portray the male subject because, in effect, he found masculine subjectivity too powerful. Vuillard noted that he was unable to perceive the male figure in any terms other than that of an individual identity, or in the artist’s typically self-deprecating prose, as a caricature. For the generalising purposes of genre painting or the reductive needs of decorative synthetism, the male figure seemed ‘ridiculous’. Conversely, Vuillard claimed an unconscious artistic attraction towards the female figure. He praised the feminine subject for its implicit lack of subjectivity, its more satisfactory and ‘satisfying’ transformation into the role and form of an artistic object, from which a few essential physiological elements might be abstracted and transformed into formal elements:

‘Je devrais avoir une multitude variée d’objets représentés dans mes peintures, or je n’introduis jamais de personnages hommes, je constate. D’autre part quand mon attention se porte sur les hommes, je vois toujours d’infâmes charges, je n’ai qu’un sentiment d’objets ridicules. Jamais devant les femmes où je trouve toujours moyen d’isoler quelques éléments qui satisfont en moi le peintre. Or les uns ne sont pas plus laïds que les autres, ils ne le sont que dans mon imagination.’

137 Institut de France, MS5396, carnet 2, (27 July 1894), p. 46r.
A sheet of nine ink and brush studies of a single female figure in a variety of poses [fig. 93], executed in c. 1891, demonstrates both Vuillard’s strength as a purveyor of moods through the reduction and manipulation of bodily gestures and a related technical indebtedness to the Japanese print tradition. Despite the strong caricatural bias of each study, this sheet further demonstrates the artist’s early attention to the female figure as an object from which to abstract a few essential elements that may be transformed into a formal rhetoric of arabesque lines and repetitive patterns. Each individual study constitutes a pared-down, reductive rendition of the female figure, simply composed of fluid, shifting lines that have been applied in seemingly quick, light and tentative yet telling strokes of ink. It is these fluid, linear touches that have been abstracted from the female figure, forming and at the same time issuing from, the shape and inclination of the head, the features of the face and the curves of feminine clothing as it responds to and reveals the body’s movements. This last element should not be overlooked, for it is significant that it was from the clothed, not naked female body that this elemental formal rhetoric derived. It is the repetitive rendition of feminine dress that produces the patterned, even wallpaper-like effect of the sheet when viewed as a whole, reducing the female figure and its familiar accessories to no more than a flat, decorative surface.

The equation between feminine display and the decorative surface is significant. It structured contemporary descriptions of women’s narcissistic desire to adorn their own bodies with make-up and fashionable clothing, extending this compulsion to include the surfaces of the domestic interior. The process of applying an alluring, if shallow, cosmetic veneer was pivotal. Although without it, the ‘natural woman’ continued to be both ideologically reassuring and sexually inviting, woman’s perceived closeness to nature and natural matter in this unadorned state was, nevertheless, regarded with a certain degree of ambivalence. Revealed as pure fleshy physicality the ‘natural woman’ constituted a threat, a potentially destructive force which might operate beyond the controlling realms of culture. The process of transforming the female body through make-up, clothing and the multitudinous accessories of femininity assured that, whilst the promise of a woman’s sexuality may still be retained, indeed alluded to in a less overt and potentially more titillating way, its threatening and castrating connotations

were masked.\textsuperscript{139} The cosmeticised female body appears as a fetishised surface and like the commodity registers in the mind of the viewer/customer as a desirable and ultimately possessable object.\textsuperscript{140} Evidently it was the charade, the veneer, the artifice itself, even the consciousness of it and the reassurance of the power it encapsulated for its viewer, that was easier to stomach than the perceived reality that lay beneath the cosmetic carapace. Once again, it was Octave Uzanne, with reference to the ultimate symbol of fetishistic, cosmetic artifice, the \textit{Parisienne} (to whom the 1900 \textit{Exposition Universelle} statue [fig. 67] was dedicated), who most evocatively articulated this need and the observer's ensuing desire to possess by smelling, touching and possibly even, tasting the object of desire:

'Without any desire to undervalue the natural beauty of women in certain countries one must admit that a very attractive characteristic of the \textit{Parisienne} is her grasp of the artifices of the toilet - the powder, the venetian dyes, the pencils for eyes and lips, the enamellings, and all the other recipes for beauty. A man who has cultivated his senses of sight, smell and touch must be attracted by these feminine “aids to beauty”.'\textsuperscript{141}

It is within this arena of commodity fetishism, commodified femininity and the consumer's desire that the iconographic and formal properties of Vuillard’s ceramic plates [fig. 92], displayed at the \textit{Maison de l'Art Nouveau} [fig. 80], should be considered. Whilst the phrase 'fashionable young women surrounded by floral motifs' has been employed to describe the overriding theme of the dinner service, the formal and iconographic invocation of a commodified, desirable femininity is far from innocuous.\textsuperscript{142}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{139} For this and other issues pertaining to the artistic framing and containment of the naked female body see L. Nead, \textit{The Female Nude}, 1992.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Abigail Solomon-Godeau has described the process by which the female body came to monopolise the role of image of desire during the nineteenth century by tracing its links to the advent of a mass produced and mass consumed print culture in the 1830's. Solomon-Godeau links the exaggerated specularisation of femininity to the fetishisation of the commodity to such an extent that desirable femininity comes to function as 'the supplementary emblem of the commodity itself'. A. Solomon-Godeau, 'The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display' in de Grazia (ed.) (1996), pp. 113-50
\item \textsuperscript{141} O. Uzanne, \textit{The Modern Parisienne}, (1910) trans. 1912, p. 27. See Garb (1998), pp. 84 & 111 for succinct descriptions of the \textit{Parisienne}:

‘Emerging as a type in the burgeoning print culture of the Restoration, the ‘Parisienne’ represented a commodified femininity, one that was packaged to create an alluring, eroticized spectacle centring on the fetishized, fashionable body and flirtatious address of the female figure...The idea of disguise and display was at the heart of the modern construction of the ‘Parisienne’...Part of her allure was the mystery in which she was veiled. What lay beneath the veil was an object of unending curiosity, but the risks of looking at her too closely were always present. The venal power of Woman was only constrained by her costume, it was not vanquished by it.’

\item \textsuperscript{142} Groom (1993), pp. 71-4. Vuillard produced eight watercolour designs for the ninety-six piece dinner service that were transferred onto ceramic by Georges Rasetti.
\end{itemize}
This chapter has argued that the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* manipulated and appealed to the latent consumerist desires of an élite, male clientele. The objects placed on display were integral to this, not through any inherent use value which would fail to distinguish them from commodities of a similar function, but in the way, as with department store goods, their surface appearance and method of display inflamed the consumer’s desire to possess. The history of commodity fetishism suggests that there was no more effective way of doing this than with the application of a decorative layer of the most desirous and possessable object known to man, the commodified female body. Exhibited at the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* as twenty-seven samples from a much larger dinner service, commissioned and owned by another of Vuillard’s early patrons, Jean Schopfer, the display as opposed to use or exchange value of the ceramic plates was of paramount significance.

An essay written by Schopfer in 1897 provides some insight into the basis of their allure. Entitled ‘Modern Decoration’ and published in the American journal, *The Architectural Record*, the article reproduced a number of photographs of the dinner service [see, for example, fig 94]. Schopfer introduced his analysis of the dinner service with an expression of almost violent physical revulsion at the process of eating from conventional plates decorated with ‘...Tritons and dolphins ejecting water from their mouths...’, because ‘...the appetite once satisfied, it was impossible to resist a feeling of disgust to see these creatures mingling so much water with the food.’143 Whilst it is true that floral motifs and fluid touches abound at the edges of the Vuillard plates, the flowers are more artificial than natural, another accessory of femininity’s sensual appeal to desire. As with the sheet of *Nine Figure Studies* [fig. 93], referred to above, in which the fluid touches of ink respond to and evoke the clothing of the female subject, the arabesque lines and fluttering touches that radiate towards the edges of the plates clearly replicate and issue from the patterns of the central female figures’ attire [figs. 92 and 94]. These figures are not the naive child-women enthroned within the branches of a blossoming tree that comprised the cover image of the *Revue des Arts décoratifs* [fig. 90]. They are resplendently *à la mode*, their coquettish or voluptuous bodies adorned by the fashionable clothing and flamboyant millinery of the day. As Schopfer noted and celebrated, the decorative veneers of these plates are composed of a three coloured,
pared-down formal vocabulary that derived from and extended the commodified and ‘frivolous’ attributes of contemporary desirous and desirable femininity:

‘He has only taken so much of them as can be taken for decorative purposes. He has sought inspirations in the fashions of the day, and has made use of whatever was suitable to the work he desired to produce, and thus, reduced by him to their essential decorative signification, we have large spotted sleeves, silk blouses of assorted patterns, the low bodices, the large bows and the ribbons with which our women folk bedeck their persons, the immense hats with feathers, the waving plumes with which they crown themselves - in fact, all the frivolous and charming side of feminine life of the present day.’

The sensual, even erotic, charge of the dinner service as surfaces for eating off is further heightened by the inclusion of several plates decorated with figures of semi-nude women [fig. 94 right]. Presented in a state of semi-undress, their breasts are suggestively displayed for the titillation of the consumer, the man of taste. In a reversal of Schopfer’s original feeling of physical revulsion, it is possible to imagine the tangible physical excitement that his dinner guests might have felt at the prospect of eating from one of these plates in particular. As a high culture equivalent of the late twentieth-century ‘peanut pin-up’, the erotics of the striptease would have been played out as the ‘consumer’ smells, touches, tastes and swallows the edible contents of the plate in a bid to reveal the hoped for surface beneath.

The decorative potential of the commodified, fashionable female figure was fully explored in Vuillard’s other major contribution to the Maison de l’Art Nouveau, L’Album [figs. 74-78], the group of five oil on canvas panels originally commissioned to hang in the Parisian apartment of Thadée and Misia Natanson. Gloria Groom, who has analysed the commission, production and display of the L’Album panels at some length, suggests that, as with the varied format, the subject matter of the individual panels is loosely related. Groom argues that the most unifying iconographic theme of the group as a whole is, as with the dinner service, the familiar Art Nouveau theme of ‘young women and flowers’. Moreover, Groom gingerly attributes the collective title to an album of prints featuring graphic works by Nabi artists, including Vuillard, that La Revue blanche (owned and managed by the Natanson family) published in 1895. It is neither possible to undermine the formal significance of the explosions of paint that

\[144\] Schopfer (January-March 1897), p. 254.
\[146\] Groom (1993), p. 69.
constitute the numerous floral bouquets that frequently occlude the panels’ many female figures, nor is it reasonable to deny the personal references that may determine the application of a painting’s title. Nonetheless, the collective title L’Album refers to the title of the largest panel [fig. 74] which clearly refers, in turn, to the object being studied by its three central figures [see detail, fig. 95]. In many ways, L’Album refers verbally, visually and structurally to the type of albums which, as Anne Higonnet suggests, bourgeois women traditionally produced as a significant means of amateur and personal artistic expression.¹⁴⁷ Higonnet’s study of the subject matter, format and perception of women’s albums of the nineteenth century demonstrates how, within the domestic context of other amateur female pursuits, the creation of an album was considered to be one of the ‘defining feature[s] of femininity’.¹⁴⁸ Despite the variety of images produced in or attached to such albums, Higonnet argues that the single image was attributed little individual significance, lending itself more successfully towards the meaning of an album as a single entity. Through the imagery of these albums, which might focus upon the everyday scenes and rituals of the domestic life of a family or upon a special trip or ‘rite of passage’, bourgeois women tended to represent an ideal vision of bourgeois femininity. As such, an album constituted a unique means of understanding and reproducing one’s place and identity within the narrow parameters of bourgeois ideology and gendered sociability. Such albums, moreover, were never intended for the type of professional public display normally associated with works of art, but were reserved for the private scrutiny of the bourgeois households in which they were produced.

The references to this particular mode of women’s amateur artistic production and consumption in the L’Album panels appear unequivocal, whether a matter of artistic intention or not. Vuillard’s ‘album’ is composed of a group of images which are disconnected in terms of both size and format. It is, moreover, and as the individual titles of L’Album [fig. 74], Le Pot de grès [fig. 75], La Table de toilette [fig. 76], La Tapisserie [fig. 77], Le Corsage rayé [fig. 78] suggest, composed of individually negligible yet collectively significant variations on a single theme, ideal bourgeois femininity. In many ways, Vuillard’s ‘album’ is concerned with the types of domestically

located, ideologically reproductive roles and rituals associated with amateur album imagery, the duties associated with learning to acquire and fulfill one’s role as a woman. The subject matter concerns itself with the familiar feminine tasks of embroidery [fig. 77], the private study of amateur artistic objects [fig. 74] and adorning both one’s own body [fig. 76] and the spaces and surfaces of the interior [figs. 75 and 78]. These are some of the same concerns that dominated domestically located album imagery throughout the century, though updated to reflect the interests and experience of a late nineteenth-century audience. Despite the depiction, for example, of the productive activity of embroidery, *L’Album* presents the acquisition and enactment of femininity as a necessary process and product of women’s consumption. The compressed yet visually and texturally resplendent domestic space issues from the female figures who, in accordance with contemporary guides to women’s interior decoration, harmoniously adorn their interior with both their own adorned bodies and the products of their consumption. In several panels [figs. 74 and 75], the table tops support both vases of flowers and gift boxes from which the covers have been removed in order to reveal their contents: dainty pieces of crumpled material that have only yet to be assigned a place within the wider decorative ensemble. The site of *L’Album’s* public display in the waiting-room of the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* was more than appropriate. With their fantastical, texturally and visually resplendent spaces and surfaces, adorned by desirable young women who are themselves desirous and as a result consume in order to adorn, *L’Album* would have introduced Bing’s visitors to the undeniable pleasures of domestic consumption.

Analysis of the critical reception to Vuillard’s work of the 1890’s and the *L’Album* commission in particular, suggests that Vuillard’s appropriation of traditionally feminine modes of production reached further than the realms of subject matter or structural format. Written within the context of a critical discourse in which certain artistic tropes, such as colour, or certain types of mark-making, such as the arabesque line, were gendered in the feminine, the critical reception suggested that Vuillard’s exploration of the feminine seeped into the artist’s personal style. Though not referring to the *L’Album* panels or the Schopfer dinner service in particular, critics frequently sought to revel in the pleasurable sensuality of Vuillard’s style. During the

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1890’s Vuillard’s work was variously described as being ‘plus profondément séduisantes que jamais’, as paintings in which the figures were absorbed by the ‘sumptuousness, the loving caress’ of the paint, and his ‘lignes tremblées’ as ‘caressantes’. Though rarely stated directly, the attention given to the issues of colour and the fluttering line suggests that critics were aware of the apparent ‘femininity’ of Vuillard’s style. It was, once again, early patrons such as Thadée Natanson who responded most favourably to Vuillard’s use of these tropes. He repeatedly returned to the issue of colour in his criticism for La Revue Blanche. The critic could not, of course, claim to be completely unbiased in his appraisal of the L’Album panels when he proclaimed that ‘[c]’est une profusion magistrale des splendeurs colorées harmonieuses où se drape une âme tendre.’

Whilst Thadée Natanson responded positively to the ‘profusion’ of colour in Vuillard’s work, others criticised the artist for taking his use of colour to extremes. This was a criticism which, Anne Higonnet suggests, with reference to James Tissot, Charles Chaplin and Alfred Stevens, was often levelled against artists primarily concerned with the female subject. Though left unstated, J.-R. Brousse was nevertheless explicit about the implications of his reference to the corrupting and polluting tendencies of colour when he criticised two Vuillard paintings in 1894 as ‘...où les plaques de couleur étouffent le dessin et cachent le sens de la toile.’ Brousse’s almost paranoid response to Vuillard’s use of colour carried with it the derogatory inference that the artist, in effect, lacked both the control and the proficiency to master the more ‘feminine’, more excessive, aspects of this work. Camille Mauclair writing in 1904 would, therefore,
appear to have been quite explicit when he claimed that by denigrating a ‘firmness of indication’ in favour of ‘fluttering, broken tones’ Vuillard was overstating his femininity:

‘Un peu plus de fermeté peut-être dans l’indication, un peu moins de papillotement dans les tons brisés que l’artiste affectionne, un peu moins de subtilité, de féminité...’

The ‘off the cuff’ comment of one critic, Jacques-Emile Blanche, when reviewing the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* in its entirety, infers once again, though in a completely positive way, how the deployment of a decorative style might be perceived as a flirtation with ‘femininity’. In claiming that the exhibitors shared this ‘amour inconscient de l’ornementation’ Blanche equated their practice with the ‘instinctual’ desires of women to adorn. Though brief, Blanche’s critique is invaluable, not least because it encapsulates the extent to which the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* sought to tap into and appropriate traditionally feminine modes of production and consumption. It confirms, moreover, the return of the repressed in the significance awarded to the decorative’s *other*: ornament. At the same time, it allows us to imagine the extent to which the exhibitors found in the *Maison de l’Art Nouveau* an ideal space in which to enact their previously repressed desires. Conversely, Blanche’s use of the increasingly valid term of the ‘unconscious’ provided the exhibitors and critics alike with a convenient means of explaining an otherwise problematic flirtation with the feminine.

By seeking to exploit contemporary associations between the sensual appeal of both the female figure and the painted surface which resulted in an almost formless decorative style, Vuillard was perceived by some as lacking the control required to restrain his ‘excessive facility’. Within the confines of this gendered critical discourse, the repetitive deployment of deep reddish tones and the formless surfaces of the *L’Album* panels might suggest a correlation with the ‘chaotic-exotic’, yet seductive appearance of the department store. The compressed and texturally resplendent spaces of the *L’Album*, with their display of gift boxes brimming with material and fashionably

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155 J.-E. Blanche, ‘Les Objets d’Art’, *La Revue blanche*, vol. 8 (1895), pp. 266-7: ‘...parmi tant de tempéraments que groupe ensemble un amour inconscient de l’ornementation, on trouvera, peut-être la formule d’art la plus fraîche et la plus élevée de la vie contemporaine.’
156 See, for example, J. Héricourt, ‘L’Activité inconsciente de l’esprit’, *La Revue scientifique*, vol. 26, no. 9 (31 August 1889), p. 257 where the author writes of a ‘...dualité de la personnalité, dont une partie, consciente, constituierait le moi proprement dit, et dont l’autre, inconsciente, aurait avec la première des rapports définis et constants, et en formerait le complément normal.’

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dressed female figures pressed against each other and the limits of the picture plane, may even raise the spectre of excitable, chattering women scouring the department store in search of some distraction with which to decorate their homes and their bodies. The most extreme instances of the lengths and the mental states to which women were driven by the need to consume, to adorn and to revel in the sensuality of their environment are to be found in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*. For the department store customer who desired too much, kleptomania offered a means with which to satiate their own ‘unconscious love of ornament’:

‘It was very warm. The customers, who were suffocating, were pale-faced and shiny-eyed. It seemed as if all the seductions of the shop had been leading up to this supreme temptation, that this was the hidden alcove where the customers were doomed to fall, the place of perdition where even the strongest succumbed. Hands were being plunged into the overflowing piles of lace, quivering with excitement from touching them...The Countess, having tramped through all the departments with her daughter without buying anything, had just ended up in the lace department in a rage of unsatisfied desire...She was rummaging in the heap of lace; her hands were growing limp, and her shoulders appeared hot with fever. Then suddenly, as her daughter turned her head away and the salesman was walking off, she tried to slip a piece of Alençon under her coat.’

It was, however, Maurice Denis who proved most willing to provocatively and divisively voice a concern regarding the lack of formal restraint in Vuillard’s work. Assessing the Durand-Ruel *L’École moderne* exhibition of 1899 at which many of the Nabis, including Vuillard and Denis himself exhibited, the latter wrote in his journal of the stylistic schism that now informed the work of the increasingly uncohesive Nabi group. Denis identified two stylistic strands. One, which the artist and polemicist identified in his own work as well as that of Sérusier and Ranson, was described by Denis as favouring the human figure, geometric measurements, pure colours and very simple, cohesive surfaces. This, Denis described as the ‘gout latine’.

The second stylistic strand, located in the work of Vuillard, Bonnard and Vallotton, Denis identified in the derogatory terms of the ‘gout sémite’, citing a characteristic lack of attention to the human figure, the drawn line and above all, a taste for complicated surfaces.

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157 Zola (1883), pp. 263-4.
158 Marlais suggests that ‘latinity’ was a concept developed by Catholics and nationalists, such as Charles Maurras, in order to describe ‘an orientation away from northern Europe’ that simultaneously ‘...served the needs of anti-Semitism.’ Marlais (1992), p. 215.
159 M. Denis, *Journal*, vol. 1, 1957, p. 150:
Denis’ critique revolved around the issues of stylistic order, control and restraint, that invoked the traditional opposition between the pictorial tropes of line and colour. Earlier citations demonstrate how such concerns had consistently formed an undercurrent of Denis’ néo-traditionniste aesthetic, his antipathy towards the disorderly arrangement of Impressionist surfaces and invocation of decorative synthesis as a reparative call to pictorial order. By the late 1890’s, however, Denis’ former predilection for order had developed into a bitter, pathological fear of mess, which he initially expressed within the seemingly private confines of his journal. It was within this textual space that Denis’ inability to stomach the apparently incoherent formlessness of Vuillard’s (and other’s) surfaces, was framed within a hygienist discourse of racial difference. Without doubt, it was the increasingly vociferous anti-Semitism of the 1890’s, inflamed by the racial discourse surrounding the Dreyfus Affair, that spurred Denis on, providing him with a vehicle to rationalise his fear of mess in racially motivated terms. Anti-semitically associated with avaricious modernity and ostentatious glamour, the arriviste Jew, regardless of gender, was also identified in neuropsychological discourses of the fin-de-siècle with a susceptibility towards the modern, urban disorder of neurasthenia and the most ‘feminine’ of all nervous disorders, hysteria. As Sander Gilman, who has analysed this relationship between Charcot’s diagnosis of hysteria and the Jew, writes, ‘the Jew is the hysteric; the Jew is the feminized Other; the Jew is seen as different, diseased.’ It was this disease, the same that possessed the kleptomaniacal woman, which according to Denis, polluted Vuillard’s style, leading to the formal excesses of his complicated surfaces.

At the same time, Denis’ racially motivated analysis of ‘latin’ or ‘semitic’ taste was informed by his knowledge of Vuillard’s, Bonnard’s and Vallotton’s patrons, many of whom, including the Natanson brothers, were publicly categorised under the derogatory rubric of arriviste Jews. Denis’ critique of Vuillard, Bonnard and

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161 Groom (1993), pp. 48-9. See, for example, a passage from Edmond de Goncourt’s diary of 1896 in which he referred to the young generation of critics and writers associated with La Revue Blanche as ‘un vraid nid de jeunes youtres’ that presumed to conquer literary France. E. & J. de Goncourt, Journal (1851-1896), vol. 4, 1956, p. 911.
Vallotton was, therefore, also a coded accusation that they produced works with complicated, even incoherent, surfaces in order to cater to their patrons' 'racially inherent' aesthetic tastes, their 'unconscious love of ornament'. However distasteful and misguided Denis' comments may be, they do nonetheless, provoke the, possibly unanswerable, question of whether Vuillard thought and felt the same way. Did Vuillard, who became a close friend of the Natansons yet who refused to voice an opinion about the Dreyfus Affair, when *La Revue blanche* came out in defiant support of Zola's 'J'Accuse', and maintained a correspondence with Denis in which the latter continued to express anti-Semitic views, consciously or unconsciously stereotype his patrons' aesthetic taste in equivalent terms? Did Vuillard, as Octave Mouret and Siegfried Bing did, aim to inflame, seduce and trade in the stereotypical desires of his customers, his Jewish patrons' own 'unconscious love of ornament'? This is an issue that will inform the argument of the final chapter, in which Vuillard's representation of the Natansons, and Misia Natanson in particular, will be considered. Certainly, for Denis, the difference between the stylistic exuberance of the Natanson panels [figs. 74-78] and the repressive tendencies of the later, yet related, Vaquez panels [figs. 70-73] would have been more than a simple matter of technical choice. Vuillard's need to repress his creative ebullience or, as Jacques Salomon stated, to control his 'excessive facility' with the dry austerity of the *peinture à la colle* technique would, for Denis at least, have been rooted in the different, Jewish and Catholic, racial and cultural identities of the artist's patrons.

In line with contemporary male guides to personal taste and interior decoration, vanguard artistic practice of the 1890's re-claimed the domestic interior as the site of innovative artistic production. Transformed by an externally produced fantasy, as Walter Benjamin claimed, the interior came to operate as 'the place of refuge of Art'. With certain safeguards in place and as this fantasy's material manifestation, the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* demonstrates, vanguard artists of the 1890's, including Vuillard, were involved in occupying ideal domestic space and appropriating traditionally feminine modes of production and consumption, in their pursuit of new forms of decorative art. In Siegfried Bing's *maison-magasin*, as with the ideal interiors of Maurice de Fleury and

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Maurice Denis, ornament was applied to paintings and domestic objects and these, in turn, to the interior itself as a seductive, cosmetic veneer that would inflame and seduce, the consumerist desires of an élite clientele. In the majority of instances this ornamental veneer took the form of an essentialised feminine iconography which in certain cases, as with Vuillard’s work, cloaked the natural woman and organic forms traditionally identified with *Art Nouveau*, in an alluring costume of desirable, fashionable femininity. For many critics, Vuillard’s investment in the decorative potential of the commodified female figure reached further than a feminine iconography, it underpinned and in some cases, polluted his artistic style. It would appear, that during the 1890’s at least, vanguard artistic practice was deeply implicated in the realm of Modernism’s *other*: interior decoration and the concomitant notions of the ornamental, the feminine and the domestic. It was only during the final years of this decade that such a flirtation with femininity was diagnosed as problematic. Denis’ rationalisation of identifiably ‘latin’ or ‘semitic’ taste and style in 1899, which turned his previous citations of non-western art on their heads, signalled the embittered critiques that characterised his theoretical writing of the following decade. The latter was a period during which both Denis and the previously supportive and ardently internationalist critic Camille Mauclair, became vociferous advocates of the anti-Semitic politics of far-right nationalism.\[^{163}\] It was also the decade in which Adolf Loos produced his more politically well-intended, if no less problematic, indictment of ornament as both gendered and racial excess. During this period Denis also set about constructing a sanitised account of the Nabi aesthetic, its theories, events and influences. It was as a result of Denis’ hygienist discourse that certain artists, namely Sérusier, certain stylistic attributes, ‘le goût latin’ and its pictorial enactment in *Le Talisman* [fig. 69], became enshrined within and as the Nabi aesthetic. It is this sanitised and evidently more palatable account which has formed the basis of orthodox modernist history. With the execution in 1900 of a group portrait entitled *Hommage à Cézanne* [fig. 96] Denis was pictorially able to re-configure the history of the Nabis and their relationship to the decorative. Clearly intended to evoke the pre-eminent example of the Henri Fantin-Latour group portrait *Hommage à Delacroix* [fig. 97], Denis’ painting locates many of the members of the Nabi group (Sérusier at the

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centre), Odilon Redon, the critic André Mellerio, Marthe Denis and the dealer Ambroise Vollard in the space of the latter’s gallery. Behind the stiff physiognomies and dry pallid tones that comprise these figures, the respectively ‘feminine’ and ‘decorative’ forms of both a Renoir and a Gauguin painting are visible. Though credited with some significance, their place at the compositional centre of the painting and by implication, the artistic and theoretical significance of the group has been usurped by a signature work of that most pictorially balanced and culturally ‘latin’ of French artists, Paul Cézanne.\textsuperscript{164} Ultimately, it was with this symbolic act of obliteration that the complexity of the sometimes competing, sometimes interchangeable meaning and use of the term ‘the decorative’ was lost. At the same time, ‘the ornamental’ was registered and jettisoned as unstable excess, the repressed and negative \textit{other} to Modernism’s fully-conscious self.

\textsuperscript{164} Marlais (1992), p. 200.
Vuillard's Pleasure: Misia Natanson, Sexuality and Subjectivity

'...elle est sans mystère moral, elle attend, comme une page blanche, que la sensibilité de l'homme y inscrive son rêve. Elle est un spectacle permanent, ouvert, comme un paysage, à l'admiration.'

To the art critic Camille Mauclair, writing in 1899, portraiture was structured along explicitly gendered lines. Though the physical features of a male subject may be traced like the co-ordinates of a map, producing a portrait image that is 'un document psychologique', the female subject is 'un cadre où nous plaçons nos rêves' and a portrait image that is 'purement physique'. Whilst the male sitter imposes his identity upon the artist, the portrait and its viewer, the female sitter waits 'comme une page blanche' for the artist and subsequently, the viewer, to impose their own image of desire. The complicit passivity of feminine subjectivity returns in a further metaphor for the female portrait subject who, as 'un spectacle permanent, ouvert...à l'admiration', is likened to a landscape. As well as drawing upon familiar links between the physical properties of the female body and those of the natural world, each displayed for man's aesthetic appreciation, it is a metaphor that forces a connection between two distinct genres of pictorial representation, landscape painting and female portraiture. Mauclair explored this connection in some detail, summarising his argument with the claim that a female portrait '...ne peut donc jamais être naturel comme un portrait d'homme...c'est toujours un paysage décoratif de plis, de lignes, de couleurs...' In applying these terms to female portraiture, Mauclair was not referring to the nineteenth-century genre of naturalist landscape painting that aimed to record topographical details or reproduce the optical effects of light. Rather, Mauclair was comparing female portraiture to the

2 Mauclair (15 November 1899), pp. 190-1.
decorative landscape tradition. This was the historical genre of painting decorative murals intended for architectural locations that, during the final decades of the nineteenth century, was being revived and adapted in the work of Puvis de Chavannes and the Nabis. These and other artists looked to the genre of the *paysage décoratif* and its deployment of symbolic referents from the natural world, abstracted and transformed for purely decorative ends, as a significant stylistic precedent and referent for their work.

In his text, Mauclair claimed that the female portrait subject was susceptible to a level of artistic manipulation and formal experimentation equivalent to that identified with the *paysage décoratif*. Being more sympathetic than her male counterpart to the artificial conventions of picture making, it is tempting to consider the female portrait subject’s potential, as an alternative vehicle to decorative landscape painting, for the implementation of the Nabis’ concern to erase the distinctions between the mural and the easel painting.

Despite his claims for the female portrait subject, Mauclair identified a recent development in the status of contemporary female portraiture. In pursuing the subject of ‘La Femme devant les peintres modernes’, Mauclair proceeded to examine the pictorial inscription of women’s changing social, political and intellectual status amongst recent and contemporary painters of modern life subjects. Thus, whilst Mauclair’s text opened with his metaphorical categorisation of the female portrait subject as ‘une page blanche’ and ‘un paysage décoratif’, by its closing paragraphs and in response to the work of several artists (Degas, Manet, Renoir, Carrière, Besnard and Chéret), the female sitter had been given the opportunity to gain some individuality as a representation, to the extent that now ‘...elle pense presque’.

Mauclair argued that modern life painting was causing a fundamental schism in the means of women’s representation, which would henceforth register a distinction between the female figure as either a decorative object or a documentary portrait subject. Whilst in future, ‘[l]a conception décorative se continuera distincte et parallèle...le portrait de femme cessera d’être un tableau pour

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4 Benjamin (June 1993), pp. 298-301.
5 Roger Benjamin notes that while some artists, including Puvis de Chavannes and Vuillard enacted a ‘semantic transference’ that incorporated ‘devices derived from their decorations in easel paintings’, other Nabis, such as Jan Verkade ‘called for the abolition of any distinction between the two’ with claims such as: ‘There are no paintings, but only decorations.’ Jan Verkade quoted in Benjamin (June 1993), pp. 300-1. Also see Groom (1993), pp. 11-16.
6 Mauclair (15 November 1899), p. 211.
devenir à son tour un document intime, analytique et idéologique...et l’on peut dire que
la femme, après avoir été peinte par des amants, va être maintenant étudiée par des
égaux..."7

In an essay of 1901 which focused both more specifically and more progressively
upon the recent phenomenon of the femme nouvelle, the critic Marius-Ary Leblond
drew equivalent attention to the pressures placed upon the mediums of portraiture and
genre painting by new definitions of bourgeois femininity. Leblond wrote, for example,
of a woman who:

‘Dans la rue et chez soi...vit une abondante, entière, puissante,
égale en intensité, en contention ou en dépense, à celle de l’homme. Elle
n’est plus la gracieuse parasite de l’homme que nous ont montrée
jusqu’ici la littérature et surtout l’art...elle a une petite individualité
indépendante, que la peinture contemporaine...commence à traduire en
franchise et décision de gestes, en souplesse rapide, en expressions
fermes, profondes ou électriques.’8

Whether issuing from the belief that women either instigated or were the subject of
artistic development and stylistic innovation, both writers concurred that the instability
of women’s contemporary status effectively problematised the pre-existing tropes of her
representation. Though the inscribed boundaries of sexual difference remained intact in
these texts, by admitting feminine subjectivity into the exchange between artist, sitter
and viewer, and the realm of representation itself, these critics helped to rupture the
belief that female portraiture was and should continue to be, a more faithful image of
masculine than feminine desire.

Neither Mauclair nor Leblond chose to cite Vuillard as one of the artists whom
they claimed to be developing a modern means of representing women. When
considering Vuillard’s status as both an artist associated with the Nabis and a painter of
predominantly female subjects, it may however, be valid to keep both texts in mind, not
least Mauclair’s separation of women’s representation into the categories of either
decorative object or documentary portrait subject. A statement reportedly made by
Vuillard, concerning his use of portraiture, suggests that he too was concerned to
consider its status as a modern representational medium. It was reported by the Vuillard
biographer André Chastel that the artist often made the following proclamation

7 Mauclair (15 November 1899), p. 213.
concerning his work: "Je ne fais pas de portraits, je peins des gens chez eux".\footnote{Chastel (1946), p. 94.} This is a statement which, despite its brevity, raises a number of important issues within the context of Vuillard's œuvre. First and foremost it sets up an interesting dynamic between the mediums of portraiture and genre painting as the most credible and authentic means of representing people within a certain historical and social context. That such a dynamic was integral to Vuillard's representation of domesticity is almost self-evident and perhaps most clearly expressed in the consistent categorisation of his work under the rubric of Intimisme. Falling short of portraiture's remit to identify and characterise a specific individual, Vuillard's representations of domesticity and of his own family in particular, simultaneously exceed the prescribed parameters of genre painting. But in this dynamic, was Vuillard hoping to bring the tropes of portraiture and genre painting closer together or to set them further apart? Certainly Vuillard's statement suggests that he considered the pre-existing conventions of portraiture to be, in some way problematic or even inadequate to his task and yet, at the same time, it suggests that he aspired for his works to be, in some way, like portraiture or perhaps even, to exceed portraiture. What are the tropes of portraiture which Vuillard might want to resist as implied by his claim to paint '...des gens chez eux'? Most obviously, it suggests a desire to escape the formal and certainly more artificial context of the studio location but, perhaps more significantly, Vuillard's statement suggests a desire to dismantle the formality, or at least the illusion of the formality, of the relationship between painter and subject. It suggests that Vuillard considered his paintings to be more psychologically truthful, in some way more faithful to the identity of the subject, by reducing the latter's consciousness of being both observed and painted. In an interesting development the domestic interior comes to function as the modern life painter's ideal place of work. It is known that until 1909 at least, Vuillard used a room, sometimes his bedroom, in the various family apartments as a studio.\footnote{See Chave (Fall 1980), p. 14; Groom (1993), p. 43; Kozloff (1971), p. 65; Russell (1971), p. 20.} Increasingly from the mid 1890's, however, Vuillard painted subjects from outside his immediate family and therefore, from outside his immediate domestic environment. These were subjects who, it has been well documented, formed a close-knit group of friends and patrons that would commission Vuillard to make decorative works for their apartments.

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9 Chastel (1946), p. 94.
at the same time as making regular purchases of his smaller easel paintings. The most
well-known and most consistently represented figures of this early group of patrons were Thadée Natanson, the director and art editor of La Revue blanche and his wife
Misia Natanson (née Godebska) [fig. 98]. Vuillard developed a close friendship with the
Natansons during this period, even at times, visiting their Parisian apartment on a daily
basis or enjoying lengthy stays at their country homes. It remains difficult to assess
exactly how Vuillard went about painting the Natansons within their various interiors. It
seems unlikely, however, that he would have been able to set up an easel in the
Natanson’s Parisian apartment. It is more likely that Vuillard observed and sketched his
subjects in their home and produced paintings from memory in his bedroom-studio,
using both his stock of small sketches and the photographs taken with his Kodak camera
as visual and technical aids. A letter written by Thadée Natanson to the painter Félix
Vallotton during the summer of 1897 appears to suggest something of Vuillard’s
method of observing, sketching and possibly, painting ‘...des gens chez eux’. Though,
perhaps more significantly, Natanson’s ‘off the cuff’ description of Vuillard at work
offers us an invaluable insight into the subject’s consciousness of being observed,
studied and represented in this way. Natanson wrote to Vallotton from Villeneuve-sur-
Yonne, the location of the former’s country home where Vuillard had been staying for
some time during the summer months of 1897, saying:

‘Vuillard portraitise à plaisir, et sans doute vous ravirait par cette
passion nouvelle à laquelle il s’abandonne en toute naïveté. C’est un
domaine où sans doute il fera de belles choses, en fait déjà. Je vais tout à
l’heure lui servir.’

The significance of Natanson’s use of the term ‘portraitise à plaisir’ should not
be undermined. The verb portraitir does not exist in French. The conventional means
of describing the act of portraiture would have been faire le portrait de, a phrase which
places a distinct emphasis upon a formal relationship and understanding between artist
and sitter. That Thadée Natanson employed an intentionally incorrect or even slang

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11 See Groom (1993) for the relationship between Vuillard and his patrons.
13 Letter from Thadée Natanson to Félix Vallotton dated 28th July 1897, repr. in G. Guison & D.
Jakubec, Félix Vallotton, Édouard Vuillard et leurs amis de la Revue blanche, 1975, p. 11.
14 Although there is a verb portraiturer, meaning ‘to portray’, ‘portraitise’ should be the conjugation of
an ‘-ir’ verb which does not exist.
reference to the act of painting a portrait would suggest that Vuillard was certainly considered to be acting outside of, or at least relaxing, the normal conventions of this genre. More than this though, Natanson’s deployment of the phrase ‘à plaisir’ implies, not only that he perceived Vuillard to be ‘taking pleasure’ in his work but also that this was a continuous project, one which, it could be suggested, the artist was allowed to undertake ‘at his leisure’. But what does Vuillard’s leisurely depiction of the Natansons mean for his subjects and whose pleasure is being invoked in these images? Natanson’s lighthearted, though telling, comment that he was about ‘to serve’ Vuillard constitutes an interesting contrast to the former’s perception of Vuillard’s ‘pleasure’. Natanson certainly places more emphasis upon the labour involved in being observed and represented than the informality of Vuillard’s ‘pleasure’ and the latter’s claim to paint ‘...des gens chez eux’ would suggest.

At the same time, Thadée Natanson’s deployment of the term portraitise to describe Vuillard’s ‘passion nouvelle’, may well have been a reference to the act of making a photographic portrait. It is known that Vuillard acquired a Kodak camera in 1896 and as photographs of the period demonstrate, the artist used it to make photographic images of the Natansons ‘...chez eux’ [fig. 99]. Elizabeth Wynne-Easton has suggested that Vuillard’s use of the camera reached further than the limited confines of a preparatory aide-mémoire for his painterly project.15 The striking visual and technical analogies between the photograph of c. 1897-8 [fig. 99] and a portrait of c. 1897, Misia and Thadée Natanson [fig. 98], proposes a significant relationship between the interchangeably authoritative and accidental formal properties of the photograph and the formal construction of Vuillard’s paintings of this period. As the user of a Kodak Model 96 camera, Vuillard would have been able to define a desired period of exposure for each image, though for optimum results, ‘...the exposure time for an interior shot could and probably did last for several minutes.’16 By juxtaposing his service to Vuillard’s pleasure, Natanson may well, therefore, have been referring to the length of time he was required to hold a pose for Vuillard’s camera. If this is the case then it is a statement which negates the sense of temporal instantaneity normally

16 Easton (June 1994), pp. 11-12.
associated with photographic procedures and reinforces in a similar, though obviously less time consuming way to the traditional procedure of modelling for a painted portrait, the sitter's consciousness of being observed and represented. Whether Natanson was, therefore, referring to either Vuillard's informal manner of observing, sketching and painting '...des gens chez eux' or his recent acquisition and use of a camera within the same spatial location, his statement provokes us to question the relationship between Vuillard's use of these two mediums of image making. An analysis might involve the more obvious, though no less significant, formal questions of lighting, foreshortening and framing the subject or the pressures placed upon portrait painting by the increasing relevance of photography as a portrait medium. Of particular interest in this instance and in the context of both Natanson's remarks and Vuillard's claim to '...peins des gens chez eux' is, however, the nature of the relationship between artist and subject. That is, the subject's consciousness of being observed and represented and the varying potential for their physical presence during, and participation in, the process of the artistic production of their own image.

A further aspect of Vuillard's statement, "Je ne fais pas de portraits, je peins des gens chez eux" must find its significance in the increasingly prevalent belief that the domestic interior functioned as the refuge and manifestation of its inhabitants' individuality and authentic identity in a world where, as Edmond de Goncourt noted with anxiety in 1860, 'life threatens to become public'. By the time Octave Uzanne published his 'Notes sur le goût intime et la décoration personelle de l'habitation moderne' in 1892 the decoration of the ideal interior had come to be thought of as '...comme la marque, la représentation individuelle, le génie même du propriétaire'. Implicit within this belief were the notions that the home operated as a refuge from the social constraints of public life and that the style of its decoration and arrangement might indicate something of its inhabitant's personality. Vuillard's claim to paint '...des gens chez eux' complies with Uzanne's belief; that by framing the portrait subject within the context of the domestic environment, the latter would expand and possibly even salvage, the portrait genre's remit to convey the sitter's identity.

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18 Uzanne (1892), p. 259.
For both de Goncourt and Uzanne, the individual within their ideal interiors was exclusively and implicitly male. On several occasions, however, and as even a cursory examination of his œuvre will show, Vuillard acknowledged that he tended to almost exclusively favour the female figure.\(^{19}\) In relation to the Natansons specifically, Vuillard claimed an almost unconscious tendency towards representing the feminine, even adding a certain erotic overtone to his apparently inadvertent desire:

‘Quand je veux imaginer par exemple une composition pour les Natansons, je ne puis penser à d’autres objets qu’à des féminins[…] Cela est gênant et prouve que je ne suis pas indifférent au sujet.’ \(^{20}\)

In claiming not to make portraits but to paint people at home it might, therefore, have been more accurate for Vuillard to acknowledge that he tended to paint women at home. But can the domestic interior function in Vuillard’s ‘portraits’ of women at home as ‘the mark, the individual representation’ of their female occupant in the way that Uzanne suggested it might with a man? It could be argued that the domestic interior would have provided the painter challenged by new definitions of bourgeois femininity with an invaluable means of conveying a female subject’s individuality in a period when the female body was regarded more as a sign of feminine desirability than subjectivity. When not representative of their husband’s social status, however, women’s interior decoration was commonly regarded as an extended signifier of the hostess’ physical desirability. Within late nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology the domestic interior was the only legitimate site of bourgeois femininity. It was the sole location of a woman’s existence, both public and private, and of her productivity, creativity and sexuality. When Vuillard turned to the domestic interior as a more authentic location for portraiture, in representing the female figure, was he able to portray female subjectivity and individuality, or merely its discursive position within the dominant ideology? Does domesticity as a site of subjectivity in Vuillard’s work occlude or substantiate the female subject?

A comparison between two paintings of Misia Natanson which Vuillard produced at around the same time should help to highlight some of these issues. The first, entitled *Portrait of Misia Natanson* [fig. 100] is dated c. 1897 and, as its title

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\(^{19}\) Institut de France, Journal MS 5396, *carnet* 2 (27 July 1894), p. 46 r.

suggests, presents its subject within a conventional portrait format. It is a half-length portrait of a seated female figure viewed from a slightly left of centre position. The figure’s proximity to the picture plane affords the viewer a relatively detailed view of the subject’s torso, face and trademark hairstyle. Though perhaps domestic, the abstract and non-specific space in which the figure is located, in conjunction with the large percentage of the canvas surface given over to this single figure demonstrates the extent to which Vuillard has played down the role of domesticity in this portrait. It is, indeed, the absence of an explicitly domestic setting and Misia Natanson’s solitary presence and physical likeness which renders this an unusual work within the context of Vuillard’s œuvre as a whole and his paintings of Misia Natanson in particular.

The extent to which a domestic context has been played down in this portrait may be demonstrated with reference to another painting of c. 1897, that referred to above, *Misia and Thadée Natanson* [fig. 98]. It is a painting which, as a contemporaneous photograph [fig. 99] demonstrates, intentionally locates its two subjects in the actual and lived space of their Parisian apartment. A striking compositional analogy between the photograph and the painting, most notably between the juxtaposition of the figures in sharply receding space, has already been identified.21 Of further interest is the extent to which, in both photograph and painting, the figures have been pushed into a triangular area at the lower right of the composition, allowing approximately half the space to be taken up with the furniture, decoration and objects of the interior. These analogies suggest that, at the very least, the framing capabilities of the camera’s lens provided Vuillard with a means of reconfiguring the compositional parameters of pictorial interest in further favour of the domestic environment in which the figures are located. In the painting *Misia and Thadée Natanson*, a sparkling light, presumed to be daylight, enters the compositional space from the upper left, highlighting a number of the surfaces and objects of this interior. These include the solid form of the grand piano, with its highly decorative cover drawn back in order to reveal the dark surface beneath, the books of sheet music resting upon a stool at its side, a landscape painting on the wall behind and, barely visible, the small dog at the righthand foot of Misia Natanson’s chair. Receiving the most detailed attention, however, is the yellow

21 Easton (June 1994), pp. 14-15, notes that whilst the location of the figures is reversed in the painting, Misia Natanson remains the focal point of both images.
and green floral pattern that forms the horizontal strip of wallpaper behind the hunched figure of Thadée Natanson and its echoing pattern in the upholstery of Misia Natanson’s chair. It is, moreover, the same daylight which fails to reach the site of Thadée Natanson, constituting him as a shadowy and unflattering figure, somewhat ludicrous against the vibrant rendering of the wallpaper. It is the same source of light which strikes the figure of Misia Natanson with such intensity that it bleaches the pigment of her hair and skin almost to the point of obliteration, causing the figure’s appearance to age quite considerably. Vuillard has rendered the viewer’s project of visual recognition almost impossible, even aiding the marginalisation of Thadée Natanson by scratching away the features of his face with the paintbrush’s wooden handle.  

The domestic interior and its objects appear to have usurped the physical appearance of the sitter as the conventional means of psychological access to the portrait subject. By focusing, instead, upon the dynamics of his sitters’ relationship within its everyday, domestic context, Vuillard appears to offer the viewer a privileged psychological access to his subjects. By exchanging Thadée Natanson’s looming photographic presence for a marginalised position at the rear of the space, a ridiculous figure in comparison to both the rendering of the interior and the dominance of Misia Natanson’s axial position, Vuillard’s painting recalls the disproportionate scale and concomitantly inverted power relations of Caillebotte’s 1880 painting, Interieur, femme lisant [fig. 101].  

Though appearing to offer the viewer privileged access to his subject’s relationship, as with many of Vuillard’s paintings of her, Misia Natanson only achieves psychological credibility as a portrait subject in relation to either her husband or other figures that share the pictorial space of the domestic interior. Nor does the body of Misia Natanson take up its dominant status in this painting with ease. Despite its seated position and the apparent reverie of its barely visible facial expression, Misia Natanson’s body appears stiff, even uncomfortable. An awkwardness made more emphatic by the appearance of this figure’s lower right arm and hand, the surface most brilliantly highlighted by the fall of light. Easily overlooked against her dress, this hand, painted in such a way as to almost appear deformed in the position it assumes, is emphatically yet awkwardly placed against the figure’s pubic area.

22 Easton (June 1994), p. 15.
23 For the critical response to the Caillebotte painting’s ‘freakish’ play on scale see Garb (1998), pp. 38-9.
Useful as a means of exploring the relationship between the portrait subject and its domestic location, this painting is also significant in, once again, raising the issue of the painter’s method of approach in relation to his preferred subject, the female figure. It has been suggested that, despite facing out of the picture plane and towards the viewer, Misia Natanson’s eyes appear closed in this painting. Whether closed or simply illegible, the sitter’s gaze does not recognise or return that of the artist, who simultaneously lays claim to his ability to ‘portraitise à plaisir’. Might it even be the figure of Vuillard himself that is suggested by, what appears to be, the sketchily delineated crown of a head in the lower part of the composition? Might this painting more successfully operate as a self-portrait of the artist at work, that is, comfortably ensconced within an armchair, observing his favoured subject. Again, we must return to the issue of Vuillard’s pleasure, and particularly his pleasure in looking, in conjunction with his ‘leisurely’ method of painting women in domestic interiors. As stated earlier, domesticity was the sole legitimate site of women’s productivity, creativity and sexuality. It was also the site of their display and self-representation. Whilst men were afforded the luxury of being able to move freely between the arenas of the public and private, regarding the latter as a refuge from the former, women lived out both their private and more public existence within the same spatial and metaphorical domain of domesticity. Vuillard claims both the domestic interior and femininity as his preferred subject matter. In doing so, Vuillard’s access to his subjects appears assured. But was the artist able to recognise and respect the boundaries between a public and private domestically located femininity? Or were Vuillard’s female subjects, such as Misia Natanson, destined always to be available to the artist’s gaze, to be, as Mauclair claimed, ‘...un spectacle, permanent, ouvert, comme un paysage, à l’admiration’?

A good deal of speculative comment has been written about the type of relationship which Vuillard and Misia Natanson were thought to have shared. In 1971, for example, John Russell suggested that ‘among all the men whom she knew, Vuillard had a special place in her affections’ whilst, Belinda Thomson in 1991 claimed that

24 Easton (June 1994), p. 15.
25 Much of this speculation derives from comments Vuillard made in his journals and to his friends, as well as Misia Natanson’s biography in which she states that on one occasion, at dusk in a beetroot field, Vuillard declared his love for her by bursting into tears. M. Sert, Two or Three Muses, (1952) trans. 1953, p. 52.
Vuillard, "despite suffering agonizing scruples on admitting his own amorous feelings for his friend's young wife" was unable to resist Misia Natanson's invitations.\(^{26}\) Other biographers and art historians have been less restrained in their free deployment of the notion of sublimation, laced with a hefty dose of innuendo. Misia Natanson's biographers, the pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale have claimed that Vuillard 'gets his love out in painting', whilst Wynne-Easton devoted an entire chapter to Vuillard's 'Homages to Misia' in which she suggests that '...it seems clear from the paintings that Vuillard was entranced by, if not infatuated with, Misia.'\(^{27}\)

It is not the purpose of this study to discover or prove the efficacy of Vuillard's desire for Misia Natanson. Representation, in any case, inevitably functions within the problematic realms of fantasy and desire (though equally, loss and alienation). What is of interest, however, is the consistency with which art historical texts and biographical studies have characterised the relationship between Vuillard and Misia Natanson as one in which she figures as a dangerous sexual predator in pursuit of Vuillard, the *ingénu*. The repression of Vuillard's sexuality, his works are consistently referred to as 'sensual', in a reversal of the normal perception of the bachelor and sexually virile modern male artist, constitutes a consistent and significant narrative in the critical construction of the artist and his work. Crucial to the construction of the artist is the notion that Vuillard was a good friend to women, that he was their confidant, that the women he painted could trust him with their secrets and therefore with their images. Indeed, as the narratives go, it was the impassivity and aloofness of Vuillard's sexuality which made the artist even more attractive to his 'delusional' female subjects. Belinda Thomson, for example, takes up Thadée Natanson's characterisation of Vuillard, '...le célibataire [qui] a toujours été plus entouré de présences féminines', with the statement that '...he gave himself up to women and their demands more completely than he would have done had he married.'\(^{28}\) Certainly, underlying the repression of Vuillard's sexuality in ratio to the promotion of Vuillard as women's confidant is, once again, the guarantee of artistic and representational authenticity. Any characterisation of Vuillard as virile lothario and active seducer of women would have problematised perceptions of his work. It would

certainly have undermined his status as a privileged yet unbiased observer of the feminine arena of domesticity and of women.

The critical construction of Misia Natanson is less sympathetic, more often than not it is vindictive. A number of recent historians of Vuillard and Misia Natanson’s friendship and working relationship have articulated a detectable sense of antagonism towards the latter. Most accounts brand her as a seductress and a liar. Gloria Groom, for example, tells of Misia Natanson ‘flirting shamelessly with her friend’ whilst Wynne-Easton suggests that her autobiography ‘is not wholly reliable’. Belinda Thomson becomes a little more extreme in her characterisation of Misia Natanson, employing the phrases ‘spoilt and childish’, ‘flattering and flirtatious’ and describing her as an artistic muse who ‘...calculatingly played on her many admirers’ emotions.’ The most damning and certainly patronising description of Misia Natanson belongs to John Russell in his 1971 study, *Vuillard*. Russell talks of ‘this podgy little Slav’ with ‘...her startling chatter and her craving for the company of clever and distinguished men.’ A woman who, ‘in whatever she did, from infancy onward...attracted the attention of whomever was top man in the field in question’, but who was ‘old, blind and poor’ when she came to write the autobiography which Russell refers to as ‘her fascinating little book’.

The consistency of the antagonistic critical reaction to Misia Natanson is somewhat disconcerting. Its vindictiveness certainly articulates a degree of anxiety towards women’s sexual power, but more than this, it suggests the continuation of certain gendered and even, racial stereotypes which were of particular currency during the fin-de-siècle. Russell’s description of Misia Natanson as ‘this podgy little Slav’ makes a negative reference to the latter’s Russian nationality. More than this, it raises the spectre of her ‘exotic’ racial identity, as a woman of mixed Catholic and Jewish origins and as the wife of a rich Polish Jew. It is the knowledge of Misia Natanson’s racial and henceforth implied sexual identity which feeds into and supports the contradictory and yet simultaneous investment in her as both *femme-fatale* and ‘child-woman’ in the majority of these narratives. At the same time, it is Misia Natanson’s ability to fit both categories of the ‘Symbolist muse’ whilst simultaneously exceeding

31 Russell (1971), pp. 54-5.
their boundaries in biographical narratives, which points to the inadequacy of the femme-fatale/child-woman binary.  

It seems reasonable to assume that, as recent biographical and historical texts, the descriptions of Misia Natanson by Russell, Thomson and others derive their opinion from contemporary and subsequent textual representations of this woman. Misia Natanson constitutes an interesting subject for study, for as an actual woman living within a particular social context, her textual representation can be located across a range of discursive sites and mediums, themselves subject to current notions of femininity and ethnicity. These discursive sites include the central focus of this study, Vuillard’s paintings of Misia Natanson, as well as his photographs of her within the same material and metaphorical space. Representations of Misia Natanson extended, however, to paintings by artists who also formed part of this social and artistic élite, including Vuillard’s friend and fellow Nabi, Pierre Bonnard, as well as the older artists Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Additionally, Misia Natanson can be located across a range of literary sites, including Marcel Proust’s fictional interpretation of her in the form of Madame Verdurin in À la recherche du temps perdu, as well as Gold and Fizdale’s more recent biography. More than this however, Misia Natanson represented herself: visually, in the decoration of her home, in the paintings which were commissioned to hang there and in written form, in her autobiography, Two or Three Muses. As demonstrated above, it has been suggested that Misia Natanson’s autobiography constitutes a problematic document in its selective and imaginative description of events which had occurred a number of years earlier. The main evidence for this appears to be that Misia Natanson tended to telescope the occurrence of certain events, having initially lied about the year in which she was born. It might be suggested, however, that whether an accurate description of events or not, Misia Natanson’s autobiography provides a rare and ‘different’ description of the culture of a particular social and artistic élite, that is a woman’s account. Moreover, it is a text which is likely

to be neither more nor less successful in its attempt to produce a coherent subject than the other diverse forms of Misia Natanson’s representation.33

Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s polemical text of 1986, ‘The Legs of the Countess’ constitutes an important theoretical and methodological model for thinking through the significance of the representation and self-representation of Misia Natanson. In summary, Solomon-Godeau’s article sets out to explore the extent to which a woman who commissions her own representation either colludes in or is able to resist her discursive position under patriarchy and capitalism, and to what extent the technical practices of representation (in this instance, photography) are implicit within women’s specularisation.34 Solomon-Godeau suggests that the analysis of these images, the photographs of herself which the Countess de Castiglione commissioned, needs to be both symptomatic and dialectical. As the author states: ‘symptomatic in that they are the personal expression of an individual woman’s investment in her image - in herself as image; dialectical in that this individual act of expression is underwritten by conventions that make her less an author than a scribe.’35 In drawing upon Freudian theories of the gaze (woman’s internalization of the male gaze) and the notion of ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’, as first expounded by the French psychoanalyst, Joan Riviere, Solomon-Godeau’s reading of these images is inevitably pessimistic. Even in the moment of fundamental individuality, ‘the act of authoring her image’, Solomon-Godeau suggests that the Countess de Castiglione ‘...can only reproduce herself as a work of elaborately coded femininity, a femininity which, as always, derives from elsewhere.’36

In response to the numerous representations of Misia Natanson across a variety of different mediums and in the light of our knowledge of the shifting historical notion of how adequately to represent modern women, it would be interesting to consider to what extent Misia Natanson might be the author of her own image. More than this though, to what extent did she collude with or was she able to resist the representation of herself by

34 Fundamental to Solomon-Godeau’s approach is an analysis of the relationship between three forms of fetishism within a particular historical moment: psychic fetishism, commodity fetishism and ‘the fetishizing properties of the photograph’. Solomon-Godeau (Winter 1986), pp. 67-8.
herself and by others as 'an already written text'?\(^\text{37}\) Whose desire is represented in Misia Natanson's image? In order to explore these issues with some historical accuracy it will be necessary to explore the dynamics of the artistic and social élite which surrounded the Natansons and Misia Natanson's role within it. It is indicative of many nineteenth and twentieth-century vanguard artistic groups that whilst the idea of Woman is at the centre of their practice and formation, that is as muse and physical object, women are actually invisible. Returning to the words of Camille Mauclair, the female subject '...attend, comme une page blanche, que la sensibilité de l'homme y inscrive son rêve.'

Mauclair's metaphor of woman as 'une page blanche' appears particularly pertinent in the case of Misia Natanson. Not least because of the diverse representations of this woman by the artists associated with the journal, *La Revue blanche*, but also because Misia Natanson functioned as the 'cover girl' and public image of the periodical. As such, her body formed the 'page blanche', the material and metaphorical signifier of the *La Revue blanche*, a title which was intended to signify the journal's a-political and non-partisan editorial policy.\(^\text{38}\) The journal's art editor, Thadée Natanson, commissioned both Pierre Bonnard [fig. 102] and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec [fig. 103] in 1894 and 1895 respectively to produce lithographic advertising posters for the review.\(^\text{39}\) Both artists reproduced the image of Natanson's wife, Misia Natanson, as the vehicle through which to advertise and attract potential readers to purchase the journal. Both posters situate Misia Natanson in a public location, a declaration in itself, of the journal's desire to appear both current and modern. In the Bonnard poster, the dark, possibly semitic, features of Misia Natanson form a unity with the svelte, chic and modern outline of this figure's fashionable outfit. Framed against a wall of small posters advertising the review's title, Misia Natanson enjoys a fleeting exchange with a young

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\(^{38}\) The employment, however of controversial figures such as the anarchist Félix Fénéon as editorial chief in 1894 and the journal's well-publicised pro-Dreyfus allegiance, proclaimed in their support for Émile Zola's 'J'Accuse', did much to undermine the review's non-partisan status. Whilst denying any stated aesthetic allegiance, *La Revue blanche* and its owners were firm in their support of a number of contemporary artists, including those associated with the Nabis. As well as staging small exhibitions in the journal's offices, between July 1893 and December 1895 *La Revue blanche* published commissioned frontispiece prints by Vuillard, Bonnard, Vallotton, Roussel, Denis, Ranson and Toulouse-Lautrec. See O. Barrot & P. Ory, *La Revue blanche*, 1989; G. Bernier, *La Revue blanche*, 1983; A. B. Jackson, *La Revue blanche, 1889-1903*, 1960; B. Waller & G. Seiberling, *Artists of 'La Revue blanche'*, exh. cat., 1984.

\(^{39}\) The poster designed by Toulouse-Lautrec was later used as the cover for *La Revue blanche*. Gold & Fizdale (1980), p. 50.
street urchin. The Toulouse-Lautrec lithograph deploys a similarly stylish image of Misia Natanson, though this time, represented with sharper facial features and red hair, the latter being a widely recognised visual stereotype and signifier of Jewish femininity.\(^4\)

It has been suggested that the sense of physical liberation and speed implied by Misia Natanson’s activity of ice-skating in this poster, evokes the currency of the image and freedom of movement of the politicised *femme nouvelle*.\(^4\) Ice-skating, however, though a modern, urban activity associated with both speed and physical freedom, was not a pursuit exclusive to or solely identified with the *femme nouvelle*.\(^4\) The emphasis given to the fashionable and commodified female body in both of these lithographs appeals far more overtly to the equally current image of the seductive and mysterious young woman consumer of contemporary Paris, the *Parisienne*, than it does the politicised *femme nouvelle*.\(^4\)

Whilst possibly tapping into a notion of the physical freedom of the *femme nouvelle*, any anxiety produced by the perception of her power, is assuaged in these posters by this figure’s fashionable cosmeticisation. The representation of Misia Natanson’s elaborate stylishness and visibility on the Parisian streets in these two posters, might find an even more convincing semiotic analogy in another recognisable Parisian figure and racial stereotype, *la belle juive*, as illustrated in Herman-Paul’s *La Belle Juive va aux provisions* [fig. 105] of 1896.\(^4\)

As was common with stereotypical representations of *la belle juive*, this is an image which locates the Jewish woman’s identity in her cosmetic appeal, her sublime, though potentially excessive and destructive, femininity.

Misia Natanson’s public role as ‘cover girl’ and two-dimensional image was, as these posters demonstrate, assured. Moreover, Misia Natanson’s investment in herself and her possessions as desirous objects was assured. One of the more expressive

\(^4\) Groom (1993), pp. 70-1.
\(^4\) As Annemarie Springer has noted in relation to Jules Chéret’s 1895 poster for the *Palais de Glace* [fig. 104], whilst the skating rink could serve as a possible means of escape for the young *bourgeoise*, it also offered the opportunity for display and flirtation. As with Chéret’s poster, an admiring young man, the cause of ‘so much coquettish gaiety’ is never far away in the visual portrayal of the young female skater. Springer (Winter 1973/4), pp. 121-2.
\(^4\) Garb (1998), pp. 84 & 111.
\(^4\) P. D. Cate has noted the similarity between the representation of this ‘type Parisien’, *la belle juive*, in Toulouse-Lautrec and Hermann-Paul’s illustrations. Kleeblatt (ed.) (1987), p. 72.
passages of Misia Natanson’s autobiography is to be found in a description of the pleasure she derived from shopping for objects with which to decorate her home and the stimulating visual effect both she and these objects were able to arouse:

‘Oh, the wonderful thrill that goes through me when, under a mass of things without age or history, my eye seizes upon one of those eloquent objects that have no equal...an object that immediately cries out to me: “...I was made for you, you will know how to love me. Take me, take me quickly; rub me, polish me, and you will see how beautifully I will shine for you!”

And what lovable friends the owners of antique shops can be! Almost all call me Misia and their eyes, as soon as I walk into their shops become veiled with sentimental memories in which I am mixed with lacquered screens, negroes carrying trays, or crystal candlesticks.”

In speaking of her investment in herself and her possessions as objects of desire, Misia Natanson simultaneously described, if inadvertently, her interests as a collector. It remains difficult, however, to uncover useful information about Misia Natanson’s role as a patron of the arts. The majority of texts that discuss the Natansons within this context, talk of the collection that belonged to Thadée Natanson, although this was accumulated over the period of their marriage. As the pictorial subject of a number of the works acquired for the Thadée Natanson collection it might be possible to suggest that Misia Natanson had some role to play in their production, even if it was one of ‘scribe’ as opposed to author. More significant perhaps, though no less ephemeral, is the suggestion by Gloria Groom that Misia Natanson played an intellectual and practical role in the production of La Revue Blanche. Groom states that Misia Natanson involved ‘...herself in the editorial process and [the] selection of artists and writers.”

The source of this assertion remains unclear, though Groom derives a significant degree of information from the recollections of individuals who were in some way connected to this artistic élite. Certainly, the various textual representations of this woman, including

46 Thadée Natanson’s collection of sixty-one modern paintings was auctioned in 1908, suggesting his exclusive ownership of these works. Whether other paintings from the collection formed part of the divorce settlement between Misia and Thadée Natanson, granted in 1904, remains difficult to assess. Amongst the twenty-seven works by Vuillard included in the sale were the commissioned five panel series, L’Album [figs. 74-78], as well as several paintings of Misia Natanson. From their description by Octave Mirbeau in the sale catalogue, these included Autour du piano, La Dame bleue à l’enfant and Les Bras nus. Hôtel Drouot, Collection Thadée Natanson: Tableaux modernes, (13 June 1908), preface by Octave Mirbeau.
those produced by Vuillard, offer little or no suggestion of Misia Natanson's editorial input into the production of *La Revue blanche*. Nor, indeed, does Misia Natanson herself. In her autobiography, she represents the process of exchange between herself and the artists who painted her, as one in which she nurtured their talent through love, as opposed to respect, and thereby acquired the production of her own image. 48 Where Misia Natanson's intellectual and editorial capacity appears unstable and ephemeral, even to herself, her domestic role appears assured. What is clear, is that Misia Natanson cultivated her status as a salon hostess, extending her official day of reception in the apartment which became known as ‘the annexe’ of *La Revue blanche*, and offering an open house to those artists and writers affiliated with the journal. 49

The role of a hostess of a literary and artistic salon in late nineteenth-century France was not, however, one which was easily or unproblematically assumed. It would have demanded a negotiation of the parameters and conventions of two gendered and mutually exclusive cultural practices: the symbolic ritual of bourgeois respectability and sociability, the domestic salon or evening *soirée*, and the equally symbolic arena of the vanguard and exclusively male, discussion group or intellectual salon. The experience of the artist Berthe Morisot constitutes an interesting example in this respect. Morisot’s correspondence with the writer Stéphane Mallarmé suggests that the artist felt more ‘at home’ within the arena of the *haut bourgeois* domestic salon than she did with the artistic and intellectual discussion group. In response to her friend Mallarmé’s repeated requests that Morisot attend one of his celebrated Tuesday literary evenings, a sought-after mark in itself of one’s position within the contemporary intellectual élite, Morisot consistently declined. Not, as her letters demonstrate, because she felt no desire to attend, but because she felt unable to, even precluded from these events by the threat of public ridicule. In a letter dated February 1894, Morisot’s reticence manifested itself as a fear of being intimidated by ‘the schoolbench’, Morisot’s description for the salon’s

48 Sert (1953), p. 44:
'I always believed that artists were more in need of love than of respect. I loved them, their pleasures, their work, their troubles and their joy in life, which I shared with them. Today the museums of the world are filled with the works of my friends...I prefer to have the privilege of having loved them in my own way and as persons. It is with a slightly amused smile that I evoke the image of the carefree and tremulous young woman that I was at that time, hung as I am now on the walls of the Hermitage at St. Petersburg, or appearing in the catalogue of the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia.'

regular male guests.\textsuperscript{50} More telling perhaps, is that Morisot often joked to Mallarmé that she and her daughter Julie would ‘dress as men and attend one of your Tuesdays’.\textsuperscript{51} This was a teasing, though pointed, threat with which Morisot expressed both doubt at being able to fit in as a woman and a desire to avert the inevitable attention to herself as a spectacle and subject of the male gaze. More than this, Morisot’s joke articulated a plea for the kind of anonymity that adopting masculine clothing would afford. Morisot never enacted her transgressive fantasy.\textsuperscript{52} Instead, in the final decade of her life, Morisot cultivated her own Thursday evening salons for the contemporary intellectual élite, frequently inviting Mallarmé to dine ‘en famille’, as the writer chose to describe these events.\textsuperscript{53} Even then, within the parameters of her own domestic environment, though in the presence of such leading cultural figures as Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Téodor de Wyzewa, Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, it has been noted that Morisot was ‘conspicuous for her silence’.\textsuperscript{54}

During the 1890’s and before Mallarmé’s death in 1898, Vuillard was a regular guest at the writer’s Tuesday literary evenings.\textsuperscript{55} During the early years of the 1890’s Vuillard was also a member of the exclusively male group of Nabi painters, a circle who went to great lengths to protect their exclusivity and masculinity. These self-named ‘Prophets’ would hold regular meetings on Saturdays at Paul Ranson’s house, with France Ranson, the artist’s wife, being the only woman who would, by default, attend.\textsuperscript{56} In addition, the Nabis developed the use of nicknames and a series of codes derived from Hebrew by which to refer to and communicate with each other to the exclusion of all others. It may be over-determined to claim that the Nabis were intentionally gendered in their exclusion of women artists, but even as members of a vanguard élite, they worked within an institutionalised system which normalised their attitudes and behaviour. More than this, the Nabis were working during an era in which vanguard

\textsuperscript{51} Adler & Garb (1987), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{54} Adler & Garb (1987), p. 40.
\textsuperscript{55} Russell (1971), p. 56.
artistic groups were stepping back from the (limited) forms of inclusion of women artists that had characterised the milieu of the Impressionist exhibitions. In a text analysing the position of women in relation to the Symbolist movement, Gudrun Schubert has described the extreme lengths to which the ‘Order of the Rose + Croix’ would go in their exclusion of women. ‘Rule 17’, entitled ‘Women’, of Sâr Pêladan’s 1893 manifesto for the group dictated that ‘...in accordance with magic law no work of any woman could ever be exhibited.’ If women were interested in being associated with the group they would have to demonstrate ‘absolute obedience’ by submitting to childbirth and childcare duties, but be banished should they ‘cause’ a male member to fall in love with them.57

In opening her home to the artists and writers affiliated with *La Revue blanche*, Misia Natanson would have been forced to negotiate not only women’s uneasy involvement in the practice and discussion of vanguard art during this period, but also the attitude of *La Revue blanche* itself and of its art critic, her husband, Thadée Natanson. Though largely uninterested in critiquing contemporary women’s exhibitions, Thadée Natanson’s art criticism for *La Revue blanche* articulated an anxiety-ridden though symptomatic opinion of women’s involvement in the arts as a form of gender transgression. In his review of the *Dix-cinquième Salon des femme peintres et sculpteurs* of 1896, Natanson compared his perception of the ‘unoriginal’ works on show to the unconvincing act of a drag artist:

‘On ne peut se défendre de songer à un bal où ces dames et ces demoiselles se seraient efforcées de restituer aussi fidèlement que possible les têtes et les attitudes des maîtres les plus médaillés. Mais, en dépit des fausses barbes, des moustaches postiches, des pantalons et de l’effort de la démarche, on aperçoit la supercherie, ici sans grâce. Des seins qui ne se dissipulent pas assez, une vilaine qualité de charmes et de coquetteries insexuées, certaines rondeurs et une malhabile affection de virilité, avec leurs pauvretés et leurs gaucheries pénibles font durer le troublant aspect, comme toujours équivoque, du travesti.’58

With Thadée Natanson, Berthe Morisot’s malevolent joke about cross-dressing becomes an all too real anxiety about the collapse of sexual and social difference. But it was his wife Misia Natanson who, as an undated photograph [fig. 106] of her wearing a man’s

suit and fake moustache helps to illustrate, dared to don the costume and assume the
guise of masculinity. At the same time, the theatricality of Misia Natanson’s ‘masculine’
pose in this photograph, the gestural conventions of femininity and feminine display that
are retained and exaggerated, suggests that this was a parodic rather than serious act of
gender transgression.\textsuperscript{59} In some respects, Misia Natanson made an equivalent gesture
with the cultivation of her salon, for she dared to assume a traditionally masculine social
and intellectual position that Berthe Morisot could only joke about. At the same time, it
will be demonstrated, Misia Natanson was careful to assuage any anxieties about gender
or social transgression that the acquisition of such a role would have provoked.

Vuillard tended to visit Misia Natanson’s salon on a daily basis and in his
paintings of the period, aimed to represent both something of its atmosphere and the
role of its hostess. One oil painting in particular, \textit{Salon, rue Saint-Florentin} of 1897
[fig. 107], evokes an aura of informality and conviviality around the salon, its characters
and the discussions held there. Despite the sketchy application of paint, it is an image
which locates the figure of Misia Natanson at the physical and metaphorical nucleus of
the salon. Once again, Vuillard has allocated a large percentage of the painting’s
compositional space to the objects of the interior (an area of the salon photographed by
Vuillard in fig. 99), and yet the only area of the canvas which is actually presented in
focus, is the surface of the large mirror hanging above the fireplace. Whilst the eye
wanders across the dispersed objects and surfaces of the space it necessarily returns to
where it is allowed to rest: the brilliantly stark lamp and rectangular panel seen in the
two-dimensional reflection of the mirror; the objects that are actually the furthest away
in space, located as they are behind the implied site of the viewer. The rectangular
shape which is reversed by the reflective process of the mirror is recognisable as
\textit{L’Album} [fig. 74], one of five decorative panels that Vuillard had been commissioned to
produce for the Natanson apartment and after which, the series is named. \textit{Salon, rue
Saint-Florentin} functions as a useful means of displaying Vuillard’s artistic talent but,
more than this, it celebrates the patronage of the figure who is seated beneath the
reflection, Misia Natanson. The most interesting aspect of this painting is to be found in

\textsuperscript{59} See Matlock (1993), pp. 40-9 for contemporary forms of female transvestitism including that
classified under the rubric of ‘Masquerades of Convenience’. In their attempt to escape the confines of
genine dress, display and coquetry for the sake of everyday convenience, women of this category
were, nonetheless, despised and pathologised as perversions of the sexual and social order.

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the poses and location of the figures. The figure of Misia Natanson is perched at the end of a *chaise-longue*, rejecting the languorous and seductive pose which she might have assumed. Vuillard depicts this figure leaning forward with keen interest towards two male figures, her arms raised to support her head, in a communicative gesture of conversation. The two male figures located by the half open door on the right appear to have arrived in the salon only recently and assume the relaxed countenances of informal exchange. The relatively removed vantage point from which this scene is observed and painted implies Vuillard’s prior and implicitly privileged presence in the salon. Furthermore, it indicates Vuillard’s construction of himself as a detached, even unseen observer, an identity reinforced by the mirror’s failure to reflect his image in the position it might be understood to assume. Vuillard’s *Salon, rue Saint-Florentin* articulates the artist’s perception of Misia Natanson’s ability to provide an atmosphere and location conducive to the discussion of ideas. As such, Vuillard’s perception of Misia Natanson in *Salon, rue Saint-Florentin* finds a significant analogy with Marius-Ary Leblond’s characterisation of modern femininity in his previously cited text, ‘Les Peintres de la Femme Nouvelle’. According to Leblond, the *femme nouvelle* inaugurates ‘une familiarité amicale’ in the salons where ‘...on les voit aussi aïses, aussi affairées, aussi libres que les hommes groupés à quelques pas d’elles.’

Vuillard’s painting also marks a shift in the dynamics of the relationship between the various members of the Nabis. The cultivation of the *rue Saint-Florentin* salon accelerated or, at least, coincided with the group’s increasing lack of cohesion. Realising that she was unable to go to them, Misia Natanson drew the artists and writers now affiliated with *La Revue blanche* towards herself. This was a process undoubtedly facilitated by the financial and professional rewards promised by her patronage. In her autobiography Misia Natanson wrote of her specific ambition to attract Stéphane Mallarmé to her salon, of even competing with his Tuesday evenings. Misia Natanson’s desire was articulated, however, as a competition based upon her capacity to seduce Mallarmé away from the few women who did attend the writer’s literary evenings. In this way Misia Natanson undermined and refuted her authorial and intellectual status as a salon hostess, as implied by Vuillard’s painting, *Salon, rue Saint-Florentin*. Instead,

Misia Natanson sought to draw the male gaze back towards herself as the object of desire. Remembering Mallarmé, she wrote:

‘Never could I get him to come and dine with me on a Tuesday. It was a sacrosanct evening, which he invariably spent with Marie Magnier and Mary Lawrence, a former model of Manet’s...Now they were both there, my Tuesday enemies. Heaven alone knows how many charming smiles and affectations I had used, trying for the fun of it, to keep him away from them on a Tuesday - and always in vain.’

Misia Natanson’s description of a meeting with Rémy de Gourmont is even more indicative of a woman who appears to have been caught between on the one hand, a narcissistic self-obsession and on the other, the ‘self’ trying to get out. Misia Natanson’s physical [fig. 106] and literary self-representation finds an interesting analogy with the woman whose case study formed the basis of Joan Riviere’s 1929 text, ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’. A woman of some intellectual and public status who, therefore, dared to assume a normatively masculine position of power and yet who ultimately undermined this status through a coquettish and self-deprecating display (the ‘mask of womanliness’) in order ‘to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men’.

Misia Natanson insisted upon drawing attention to herself and her salon as a seamless surface and image of desire. To use Solomon-Godeau’s description for the Countess de Castiglione, Misia Natanson ‘...can only reproduce herself as a work of elaborately coded femininity, a femininity which, as always, derives from elsewhere.’ In doing so, Misia Natanson’s silence appears as conspicuous as Berthe Morisot’s had been. It was a silence which Rémy de Gourmont, unsurprisingly, failed to notice:

‘When the day arrived, I tried on all my dresses in succession, dressed my hair ten times over, feverishly arranged the flowers in their vases and at last settled down in an inspired attitude in a large armchair, waiting for the bell to ring...I was so deeply moved when I at last had my celebrity facing me that I could find nothing to say to him. This did not seem to embarrass him in the least, and he talked for an hour and a half. His conversation was so exquisite that I understood only half of what he said, and was quite content to listen in ecstasy. (I must admit, besides,

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61 It appears, from her description of Mallarmé’s response, that the poet was complicit with Misia Natanson’s perception of herself. Sert (1953), pp. 50 & 41:
‘He never talked about literature at meals, but invented wonderful stories for the pleasure of making me laugh. Then he would exclaim: “Ha! Isn’t she sweet!” and would himself shake with laughter.’


63 Solomon-Godeau (Winter 1986), p. 76.
that I love listening to the very learned things which I cannot quite grasp: it is one of my weaknesses." 64

Misia Natanson’s desire to be the exclusive focus of the male gaze is further confirmed by Marcel Proust’s fictionalised characterisation of her as Madame Verdurin in À la recherche du temps perdu. Though the character of Madame Verdurin was not exclusively based on Misia Natanson, the former is described as a music loving salon hostess. More than this, Madame Verdurin is characterised as a woman who insists that her guests declare and maintain an exclusive fidelity to her salon. Madame Verdurin’s preferred means of ensuring the fidelity of the ‘little nucleus’ is to exclude all other women. 65 Vuillard’s paintings of the salon grant Misia Natanson an equivalent fidelity of representation. It is only rarely, in the context of a more obviously domestic à table scene such as Le Déjeuner [fig. 108], for example, that Misia Natanson is presented in the company of other female figures. Moreover, the figure of Misia Natanson invariably constitutes the controlling presence in the salon images, where, more often than not, she is accompanied by at least one male figure. More than simply granting Misia Natanson the pictorial space of représentation, Vuillard allows her salon to function as a stage, the site in which to enact her own performance. In the c. 1897 painting Misia au piano et Cipa l’écoutant [fig. 109], for example, the viewer is allocated a relatively low position, as though seated within the shadowy refuge of an auditorium. The darkness of the immediate and surrounding foreground gives way, however, to the fantastically theatrical space of the performance, where the molten form of Misia Natanson’s upper body glows the brightest. Fixed between the solid and dark forms of the standing male listener to the left and the elegant sweep of the unfolded grand piano lid, this figure radiates an autonomous heat which places the stark, even cold, light of the adjacent oil lamp in the shade. As a silent yet unhearing member of the audience, the viewer is invited to contemplate the seductive shapes and surfaces of the salon. The rhythmic poise of Misia Natanson’s lowered head and shoulders are echoed in the sweep of the

64 Sert (1953), p. 77.
65 Proust (1996), p. 225:
‘Women in this respect being more rebellious than men, more reluctant to lay aside all worldly curiosity and the desire to find out for themselves whether other salons might not sometimes be as entertaining, and the Verdurins feeling, moreover, that this critical spirit and this demon frivolity might, by their contagion, prove fatal to the orthodoxy of the little church, they had been obliged to expel, one after another, all those of the “faithful” who were of the female sex.’
piano lid, the voluptuous silhouette of a coffeepot and the curves of the sewing table upon which it rests. Despite the sensuality of the image, it is a painting which rejects the connotations of amateur pursuits around which, for example, Renoir’s paintings of young women at pianos operate [fig. 110]. Not least because Misia Natanson is allowed to demonstrate her ability at a grand piano but more subtly because, though absorbed by her activity, there is no loss of self. Whereas Renoir’s painting offers the viewer a stolen opportunity to voyeuristically witness the absent-minded physicality of two young women, Misia Natanson is allowed to command her own space and performance.66 Moreover, her physical and professional integrity is both protected and maintained by the stoic figure of Cipa Godebski, Misia Natanson’s brother, who listens and watches with enraptured interest. The hands which might have been tempted in a painting by Renoir to reach out and touch the figure at the piano, are firmly buried in the pockets of this figure’s jacket.

Misia Natanson gained her position as the central and controlling figure of ‘the annexe’ salon at a price. In 1895 Toulouse-Lautrec produced a caricature of and for Misia Natanson which, though apparently intended as a pictorial joke, manifested a certain symptomatically uneasy analysis of this woman’s professional and social status. Produced in response to Misia Natanson’s criticism of the artist’s unflattering depictions of her elsewhere, Toulouse-Lautrec gave his friend and patron the caricature, which she is reported to have destroyed. But the artist persisted by producing a second, surviving caricature, *A Table chez M. et Mme. Thadée Natanson* [fig. 111]. In both works, as she undoubtedly realised and to which she objected, Lautrec portrayed Misia Natanson as the *madame* of a brothel. In the image that survives Lautrec has transformed a conventional domestic à table scene into one of duplicitous, venal sexuality.67

Positioned around the implied surface of a table are the identifiable caricatures of four people. Closest to the viewer and viewed from the rear is the scantily delineated figure of Thadée Natanson, who looks across the space of the table towards the figure

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66 Misia Natanson’s talent as a pianist was widely recognised. She studied with Gabriel Fauré as a child and, it has been suggested, that before her marriage and when living alone, Misia Natanson earned money by giving piano lessons. Any aspirations towards a professional career as a pianist were ended with her marriage to Thadée Natanson in 1893, at the age of twenty-one.

67 That Misia Natanson realised she had been portrayed as a *madame* is clear from her autobiography. Sert (1953), p. 51:

‘In short, I so irritated him that once the picture was finished he took his revenge by making an incredible caricature of a dinner-party at my house in which I was presented as a procuress.’
of Misia Natanson, who is flanked by Félix Vallotton to her left and Vuillard to her right. The physically imposing and overtly unflattering representation of Misia Natanson as the dominant and domineering member of this group is unequivocal. Picking up on the rather child-like though distinctive smock dresses featuring large bows which Misia Natanson often wore, Toulouse-Lautrec has transformed one of these decorative touches into a bow-tie. An overt signifier of masculinity, the bow-tie appears to turn the gendered connotations of Misia Natanson’s theatrical assumption of masculine costume [fig. 106] against itself. The bow-tie acts to separate an inflated and square-shouldered torso from a fleshily repellent and yellowish, though nonetheless shrewd profile, topped by a phosphorescent mound of orange hair. The figure of Misia Natanson threatens, indeed appears to have collapsed, the boundaries of sexual difference. Toulouse-Lautrec’s joke is really made at Thadée Natanson’s expense. Marginalised by his meagre delineation and location, Lautrec portrays Natanson as the unwitting, though self-imposed, victim of Misia Natanson’s lust for power. The privileged positioning and telling portrayal of both Vallotton and Vuillard at Misia Natanson’s side not only implies a certain degree of spitefulness and even jealousy on Toulouse-Lautrec’s part, it transforms Misia Natanson’s role as salon hostess and patron of the arts into one of brothel madame; a procuress and seller of commodified sexuality. Whether Vallotton and Vuillard are implicated as Misia Natanson’s clients or, more interestingly, as her filles de maison remains deliberately, even deliciously, ambiguous. It is clear, however, that whilst she appears to have been surrounded by artists, both here in the caricature and in the actual space of her salon, who vied and competed for her attention and the financial rewards it signalled, Toulouse-Lautrec sought to pictorially exploit and reverse the authority of this position in order to suggest that it was Misia Natanson who constituted the seller of her own image.

At whatever level of humour Toulouse-Lautrec’s caricature of Misia Natanson operates, his portrayal of this salon hostess as a procuress of commodified sexuality makes reference to and functions within a rich artistic tradition of representing the woman of ideas as both sexually transgressive and dangerously venal. This was an anxiety-ridden discourse which shifted in emphasis, representation and significance,
whilst remaining constant in its attention to the transgression of sexuality and identity.\textsuperscript{68} The increased awareness and discussion of feminine sexuality in conjunction with the rise of the \textit{femme nouvelle} and political feminism did nothing to abate this tendency during the 1890’s. In his exploration of ‘Le Demi-monde des jeunes filles’ of 1895, the novelist Victor Jozé identified the intellectual salon, not the street or the brothel, as the place where feminine virtue is lost and commercial sexuality attained. Jozé was explicit in mapping the language of the brothel, already deeply embedded within the language of domesticity, onto that of the intellectual salon, where ‘...ces jeunes filles qui, autrement élevées, pourraient devenir d’honnêtes mères de famille tombent dans le gouffre du vice...[c]hacune a son salon de préférence, sa \textit{maison}.’\textsuperscript{69}

Toulouse-Lautrec’s ‘humourous’ portrayal of Misia Natanson as a procuress might, in addition and relation to contemporary notions of the sexually transgressive intellectual woman, also be racially motivated. As both a woman of Jewish origins, whose family had converted to Catholicism, and as a Catholic woman who was married to an affluent Jewish immigrant, Misia Natanson’s identity and sexuality would have been regarded as doubly exotic and transgressive.\textsuperscript{70} It is certainly worth returning to Toulouse-Lautrec’s insistence upon transforming Misia Natanson’s naturally dark hair into a garish orange, a colour irrevocably and simultaneously associated with the Jewess, the \textit{femme-fatale} and the prostitute.\textsuperscript{71} Of further interest is Toulouse-Lautrec’s insistence upon connoting the ethnic identity of Thadée Natanson, and thereby the associatively transgressive sexual identity of Misia Natanson, with the grey and bulbous patch of colour which protrudes from the former’s otherwise scantily delineated profile.

The textual representation of Misia Natanson at this time operates within a complex and sometimes contradictory discursive nexus. This includes the discourses of domesticity, the literary salon, the brothel, the Jewess and feminine sexuality. Toulouse-Lautrec’s caricature of a dinner party held at the Natanson’s apartment demonstrates the extent to which Misia Natanson, though understood as a woman who internalised the male gaze, who undermined her intellectual authority and drew attention to herself as an

\textsuperscript{68} For constructions of the woman of ideas during the July Monarchy, for example, see Bergman-Carton (1995).
\textsuperscript{69} V. Jozé, \textit{La Ménagerie sociale}, 1895, pp. viii-ix.
\textsuperscript{70} Dottin-Orsini (1993), pp. 307-33.
\textsuperscript{71} Dottin-Orsini (1993), pp. 324-6. Also see Murray in Nochlin & Garb (eds.) (1995), pp. 56-82.

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object of desire, continued to problematise the conventions of domesticity and domestic womanhood. This, in effect, suggests that it was Misia Natanson’s femininity, the insistent enactment of the masquerade and the performative display of her sexuality and pleasure, which was considered problematic, which exceeded and undermined the fragile boundaries of domesticity.

In 1899 Vuillard produced a further painting, Près du piano [fig. 112], depicting Misia Natanson playing the grand piano in the salon of her Parisian apartment. Appearing to almost float above the scene, the viewer assumes a vantage point from which it is possible to survey an expanse of three-dimensional yet simultaneously compressed space. To the left and at quite a distance, the diminutive figure of Misia Natanson is seated at the piano, wearing a sketchily delineated yet fluidly textural dress of brilliant, shimmering gold. Her arms outstretched, as though playing the piano, Misia Natanson’s almost featureless face turns towards the implied position of the viewer. Across the room, in the right foreground the pipe-smoking figure of Thadée Natanson is seated with his back to the piano and the rest of the scene. Between these two figures and across the surface of the painting a rich display of variously shimmering and shadowy forms and colours constitute the almost vaporised objects and surfaces of the interior. Unable to penetrate the densely shadowed recesses of the space and yet dazzled by the arbitrary shimmering brilliance of its reflective surfaces, the viewer is immediately absorbed by the phenomenally rich play of both light and dark, illusory and material surfaces of the interior.

The decadently ephemeral quality of the surface, though technically and formally constructed, finds a significant equivalence of sensation and iconography in contemporary descriptions of the Jewess and her interior. Jewish culture has not, however, been allowed to enjoy an easy relationship with domesticity and domestic space. Texts such as Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu’s 1893 study of the European diaspora, though ‘positively’ motivated, continued to take its cue from such mid century ‘exposes’ as Théophile Gautier’s anti-Semitic travelogue, Le Voyage en Italie. The spectre of

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72 See, for example, the description of living conditions in ‘the torturous labyrinth of the Roman Ghetto’ in A. Leroy-Beaulieu, Israel Among the Nations, (1893), trans. 1895, p. 149:
‘Its alleys were narrow, dark, fetid; its high houses were old, dilapidated, tottering to decay...Through the doorways, where women of all ages were busy mending old rags, might be dimly seen the low, narrow chambers, almost devoid of light and air, and swarming with entire families that lived there cooped up together.’
the over-populated, primitive Jewish ghetto and the accompanying connotations of darkness, dirt and disease pervaded both Gautier’s and Leroy-Beaulieu’s texts. Jewish culture and identity, its very way of life, was constructed as the absolute antithesis, the other, of bourgeois domesticity. This, nonetheless, was a discourse that was gendered as much as it was racially constructed. For both within this context and yet in spite of it, the beautiful Jewish woman appears to live in exotic and luxurious splendour. This is a splendour which shines out of the primitive darkness, which covers over the dirt and disease of Jewish identity with a thin, invariably too thin, veneer of ostentatious glamour. It is likely, according to Gautier, that if one entered one of these overcrowded and diseased ghetto buildings, one would find there:

‘...des Rebecca et des Rachel d’une beauté orientalement radieuse, raides d’or et de pierreries comme des idoles hindoues, assises sur les plus précieux tapis de Smyrne, au milieu de vaisselles d’or et de richesse inappréciables entassées par l’avarice paternelle...’

In its intoxicating use of colour, texture and light, in its appeal to overwhelming visual and physical sensations, the interior of the Jewish woman, as imagined by contemporary non-Jewish observers, overwhelmingly spoke of the promise of exotic and erotic pleasure. The Orientalist’s fantasy of the Jewess’s ‘exotic’ physical appearance and transgressive sexuality has, inevitably, been displaced onto and into the fantasy of her interior, forming one luxurious, pleasurable and seamless surface of forbidden yet alluring desire. Sander Gilman, amongst others, has written of how the femininity and physicality of the Jewish woman in fin-de-siècle culture was accentuated; la belle juive was consistently constructed as the most feminine of women. Yet, despite this projected investment in herself as an image of desire, her apparent willingness to play the game of femininity and sexual difference, the Jewish woman’s desirability was upheld as a sign of her danger, her destructiveness. For the femininity which the Jewish woman appeared to assume and display so well was, in effect, so seamless that it threatened to

73 See T. Gautier, Le Voyage en Italie, (1852) 1904, pp. 126-7:
‘Plusieurs de ces maisons comptaient neuf étages, neuf zones de loques, d’ordures et d’industries immondes. Toutes les maladies oubliées de l’Orient semblaient ronger ces murailles galeuses; l’humidity les tachetait de plaques noires comme celles de la gangrène; les efflorescences du salpêtre y simulaienr dans le plâtre des rugosités, des verrues et des bubons de peste; le crépi, s’effritant comme une peau dartreuse, se détachait en pellicules furfuracées.’

74 Gautier (1904), p. 128.

betray itself, to spill over into overstatement, excess and even waste. This was an anxiety-ridden fantasy which, in turn, informed perceptions of the Jewish woman’s interior. Marie Colombier’s fictionalised, anti-Semitic 1883 biography of Sarah Bernhardt for example, makes consistent references to the aspirational yet overstated vulgarity, even dirtiness, of Bernhardt’s home.

A journal entry of 1894 suggests that, as with Gautier and others, Vuillard conceived of the Jewish woman in the stereotypical terms of a dangerously beguiling, conflictual play between light and dark, from which the artist derived a tangible if illicit degree of scopic and erotic pleasure. Writing in his journal in 1894 of the Jewish women who frequented theatrical events staged at Aurélien Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Œuvre, Vuillard referred to ‘...all those sensual Jewesses, their silks shimmering in the shadows.’ Though devoid of any explicit reference to dirt and disorder, the shimmering effect of glittering lights reflected off dark surfaces in Vuillard’s Près du piano [fig. 112] has quite a dazzling effect upon the viewer. Floating just above the two seated figures of the composition, the viewer is unable to achieve an easy position within the surrounding three-dimensional space. In the immediate foreground a low table emerges from the shadows to remind the viewer that they might trip over at any moment. In the meantime, the viewer’s gaze travels back and forth between the two figures, across the horizontal surface of the piano and the luxurious objects both on and behind it, which form the centre of the composition. There is too much to take in though, too much play of light and dark, colour and texture, an excess which makes the

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77 In describing the apartment of Sarah Barnum (Colombier’s thinly disguised fictional name for Bernhardt), Colombier wrote: ‘it resembled...a curiosity shop’, ‘brand-new furniture jostling against threadbare pieces, the general effect vulgar’, ‘here and there irrefutable signs of disorder, of filth even...grease spots everywhere; the carpets, the curtains, all stained’. M. Colombier, Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum, 1883, quoted in C. Ockman, ‘When is a Jewish Star Just a Star? Interpreting Images of Sarah Bernhardt’, Nochlin & Garb (1995), p. 128.

78 Institut de France, Journal, MS 5396, carnet 2 (7 November 1894), pp. 54r-55v [trans. and quoted in B. Thomson, Vuillard, 1988, p. 85]. Note the contrast Vuillard made between the image of the ‘sensual Jewesses’ and the tranquil image of ‘Lerolle and his sister-in-law’ who are described in the preceding sentence:

‘Yesterday afternoon Lerolle and his sister-in-law - the calm impression given by these likeable people, reserved but congenial, not too many trifling matters. Set that against the evening at Lugné’s theatre - all those sensual Jewesses, their silks shimmering in the shadows. Think about pictures that oppose one another in expression.’

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physical relationship between the objects unintelligible. Each surface and colour evaporates into the space that surrounds it. The light which should have rendered these objects visible has instead, created an illegible, or to use Denis’ terms, ‘semitic’ mess at the very centre of the painting.

The familiar discourse of the Jewish woman’s luxurious yet vulgar interior inevitably originates with the Orientalist discourse of exotic female sexuality. This is a fantasy that was endlessly played out in the numerous textual and visual representations of the harem interior with its feast of lascivious non-white flesh laid out for the western viewer’s simultaneous repulsion and delectation. It was a fantasy that continued to be played out in the brothels and pleasure palaces of late nineteenth-century Paris. Like ‘the Negress’, ‘the Jewess’ constituted a specific and integral brothel type, functioning as both a foil to the display of white flesh and an attraction for those with more ‘exotic’ and by implication, debased tastes. Though fictional descriptions of the Jewish prostitute forever exploited the promise of her luxuriously different sexuality they insistently returned to the double-edged nature of her beauty, her danger, most consistently articulated through some vulgar, often seeping, physical defect. In his fictional description of *La Maison Philibert*, for example, Jean Lorrain proclaimed that ‘[l]e type de la juive orientale sévissait en Rébecca’ who would have been ‘un superbe animal de luxe’ had it not been for the leucoma in her left eye, which ‘...roulait, laiteux et bleuâtre, entre les cils gouachés de kolh...’.

Both the indispensable role of ‘the Jewess’ as a distinct brothel type and the related notion of the luxurious vulgarity of the Jewish woman’s domestic interior raises the spectre of the relationship between domesticity and the brothel in the sexual imagination of fin-de-siècle France. Linda Nochlin has drawn attention to the blurring of the boundaries of the family and its mutually ‘parodic supplement’, the brothel, in relation to the work of Edgar Degas. By exposing the hypocrisy of appearances which underpinned ‘the oppositional authority of both as imaginary spaces of moral distinctiveness’, Nochlin was able to tease out the historical reality of human relationships between the occupants of both sites. Following Nochlin, this study will

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proceed to explore the relationship between the appearance and decoration of these two spaces, the home and the brothel, as sites of sexuality and pleasure. It will analyse their illicit and repressed conflation in the contemporary sexual imagination with reference to the rue Saint-Florentin apartment inhabited by Misia and Thadée Natanson, painted by Vuillard.

The home was the legitimate site of sex and sexuality in the nineteenth century, but a sexuality that was intended to be procreative, not pleasurable. Though notes of discord concerning the absence of sexual pleasure in bourgeois marriage had been sounded earlier in the century, by its final decade, opinion had become increasingly vocal in bemoaning the emotional sterility of domestic sexuality. Louis Dumur, for example, published a series of articles in Le Mercure de France which attempted to expose the hypocrisy of bourgeois marriage. In one essay of 1890 entitled ‘De l’instinct sexuel et du mariage’, Dumur directed his paternalistic advice to an imaginary fifteen-year old boy, stating that marriage is not sex but ‘le devoir conjugal’ and that marriage and the sexual instinct are mutually exclusive categories. Where sexuality is ‘si brutal’, marriage is ‘si majesteusement calme, si pondéré, si calculé’. Though clearly demonstrating an unambiguous justification of the double standard of bourgeois morality, in a subsequent essay Dumur aimed his criticism at women’s debased position in bourgeois marriage. Published in 1891, ‘De la vénalité de l’amour chez la femme’ demanded financial equality for women on the basis that within marriage they perform a role equivalent to that of the prostitute, but a role which is ‘hypocritically’ as opposed to ‘honestly’ venal.

Any suggestion of sexual pleasure between Thadée and Misia Natanson fails to manifest itself in those paintings by Vuillard that depict the couple together. Indeed, for paintings which appear to function as ‘intimate’ interpretations of domestic and private life, one particular facet of intimacy, sexual intimacy, seems largely absent. Of course,

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85 That the word ‘intimes’ functioned as a widely used euphemism for sexual relations throughout the period of the Third Republic certainly implies that sexuality was an integral, if repressed, facet of notions of domestic intimacy. See Anne-Marie Sohn’s important research on this elusive subject. Sohn, unpublished Ph.D. diss. (1993), pp. 723-7.
to depict sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is to transgress it, but even physical contact is avoided in these paintings. In works such as *Misia and Thadée Natanson* [fig. 98], as referred to above, Vuillard appears to afford the viewer a privileged insight into the nature of his subjects’ relationship, making the lack of physical contact between its protagonists appear even more stark against the exuberant comfort of their home. This absence of physical contact progresses to an inability or unwillingness even to engage with or to acknowledge each other in works such as *Près du piano* [fig. 112]. Whilst Thadée Natanson turns his back to his wife’s performance, Vuillard has placed the two figures at the greatest possible distance from each other, leaving the sentimental void to be filled with an exuberant mess of unintelligible forms. Vuillard was to employ compositional devices developed in paintings such as these, including the use of simultaneously vacuous yet charged pictorial space in order to signify the emotional as well as physical distance between two figures, to even greater effect in paintings such as the uncompromisingly bleak work of 1900, now known as *La Vie conjugale* [fig. 113]. In paintings where Vuillard does allow the subjects some physical proximity, *Misia and Thadée Natanson* [fig. 114] of c. 1898, for example, the closeness of the figures appears to spark off some disagreement. Though the viewer is not able to witness the facial expressions of the two subjects, the male figure brings his right arm up to the side of his head, blocking the crouching and seemingly inquisitive figure of Misia Natanson, with an apparent gesture of defiance. The heavy length of patterned cloth, which in other paintings would have been pushed back by the lid of the piano to form voluptuous folds revealing the black and white keys beneath, here remains unpromisingly flat.

The discursive repression of sexual pleasure within the realms of bourgeois marriage and domesticity appears to derive from the gendered categorisation of these institutional structures. The notion of lack by which medical discourse already defined women’s sexuality, intensified within the procreative arena of marriage, impelling more outspoken critics of the period, such as Dr. Henri Thulie, to suggest how marriage compounded this physical absence into an absolute and legally binding loss of self.86

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86 Dr. H. Thulié, *La Femme*, 1885, p. 427:
*Le mariage, qui devrait être une association, est une absorption de la femme où tout disparaît pour elle: la fortune, la liberté, l’autorité sur les enfants, la possession de soi, jusqu’à la nationalité...La femme, je
More than this, bourgeois domesticity was fundamentally identified with procreativity and motherhood. The bourgeois domestic interior was a maternal space. But to imagine the mother’s physical pleasure, other than in relation to her children, was unthinkable. Inevitably, any notion of a married woman’s sexual pleasure was to be located outside the material and metaphorical spaces of the home and was thereby imagined to be both illicitly and adulterously pleasurable.

In a portrait of 1902 entitled *Misia and Thadée Natanson* [fig. 115], Pierre Bonnard pre-supposes a demi-mondaine context for Misia Natanson’s sexual pleasure. As with a number of Bonnard’s contemporary images of gendered relations located within a domestic setting, including *L’Homme et la femme* of 1900 [fig. 116], a work originally purchased for the Thadée Natanson collection, sexual difference is explicitly constructed by the compositional properties of the painting. In the latter painting of manifestly illicit domestic sexuality, a folding screen forces an emphatic division between the space of the naked female body to the left and the equally naked male body to its right. Though more subtly portrayed, the erect pose of the figure of Misia Natanson in Bonnard’s portrait and the crisply vertical fall of her dress which continues in the striped pattern of the wallpaper, perform an equivalent structural function in the gendered division of the canvas. The poses and normative gender connotations of *L’Homme et la femme* are, however, reversed in Bonnard’s portrait of *Misia and Thadée Natanson*. It is the figure of Misia Natanson who adopts the erect pose and foreground location taken up by the male figure of the earlier painting, whilst it is the figure of Thadée Natanson who performs the role equivalent to that of the seated female figure. Pushed further back into the domestic space, his eyes are lowered as he pampers a small dog whose erect pose distinctly echoes that held by the figure of Misia Natanson. Thadée Natanson is, however, oblivious to his wife who appears to be moving towards the dark space created by an open door. It is the viewer alone who is privy to Misia Natanson’s knowing look and half-smile which, in conjunction with the self-composed stance of this figure, suggests something of the compositional and possibly, significatory structure of Édouard Manet’s notorious *Nana* of 1877 [fig. 117]. As with Toulouse-Lautrec’s caricature of a dinner party held at the Natanson’s home in which Misia Natanson is

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le répétera, dès qu’elle accepte un époux, n’a plus aucune liberté: en entrant dans le mariage elle sort de la possession de soi."

portrayed as a brothel *madame* [fig. 111], it is Thadée Natanson who is implicated as the unwitting victim of his wife’s deceitful desire for illicit sexual pleasure.

The perceived absence of sexual pleasure within domesticity is evidenced by the latter’s deployment as a veneer of respectability to legitimise and disguise commercial sexuality in the form of the *maison de rendez-vous*. This was a mode and site of prostitutional activity which, as Alain Corbin has described, experienced a phenomenal period of expansion in Paris during the final decade of the nineteenth century.\(^8\)\(^8\) As Corbin suggests, the success of the *maison de rendez-vous* as a site of commercial sexuality during the *fin-de-siècle* was not simply a testament to the successful consolidation of the bourgeois model of domesticity and interior decoration. As ‘the shrine of venal adultery’ it marked a demonstrable shift in bourgeois sexual attitudes towards a taste for ‘adulterous practices’. For the dynamic that fuelled the success of the *maison de rendez-vous* was that it evoked the material appearance and implicit privacy and legitimacy of the bourgeois domestic interior whilst providing a space away from the bourgeois home which nonetheless, was constructed for and was conducive to, the staged simulation of a domestically located adulterous seduction. If, however, any connotations of a maternal space remained in the sexual imagination of its visitor, the staging of the repressive, even punitive rituals of domesticity, followed by their violation, undoubtedly provided some with the source of their erotic pleasure. Where the deluxe *maisons de tolérance* catered for the extreme tastes of those who wanted to play out elaborate fantasies of perversion, the *maison de rendez-vous* was equally able to cater for the fantasies of those who wanted to break the ultimate bourgeois taboo, that of a manifestly domestic yet emphatically non-procreative sexual pleasure.

Both the appearance and rituals of the *maison de rendez-vous* successfully mirrored those of the bourgeois home. Often situated on the second floor of buildings located close to the department stores of the fashionable *arrondissements*, these *demi-mondaine* apartments were arranged and decorated in a style similar to those of their bourgeois clientele. As Corbin notes, the objective was ‘to suggest the hygiene and comfort of a bourgeois home’, not the ostentatious and sometimes abject glamour of the deluxe *maisons de tolérance*.\(^8\)\(^9\) Interestingly, the form of the meeting between client and

\(^8\) In 1888 there were about 15 *maisons de rendez-vous* in Paris, by 1904 the Police knew of 114. Corbin (1990), pp. 174-5.
\(^9\) Corbin (1990), p. 175.
prostitute appears to have replicated that of the domestic salon. Prospective clients were contacted through invitations asking them to visit the salon of ‘Madame X’ in order to ‘...inspect her collection of fashions, pictures, or jewelry, learn a language, or visit her Oriental pied-à-terre.’ As with domestic salons, meetings at the maison de rendez-vous would take place during the afternoon and end before seven o’clock in the evening. The mistress of the maison de rendez-vous would welcome clients in, whereupon a discreet payment would be made. The visitor would then be ushered into the salon of the apartment to meet the non-residential woman of their choice, who would be wearing the ‘afternoon clothes’ of a respectable woman. The retreat to the appointed bedroom would always be preceded by some conversation and sometimes a little piano playing on behalf of the prostitute.

The brothel in general, though more obviously the deluxe maisons de tolérance which catered to the acquired tastes of an upper class clientele, had always functioned as a testament to the seductive power of both domesticity and interior decoration. Descriptions of the high-class maison de tolérance interior never fail to impress upon the reader the multifariously seductive appeal of its décor, its overwhelming and somewhat disconcertingly seamless appeal to the client’s sensorial pleasure. More than this, the deluxe maison was managed and organised by its patronne in a hierarchical manner equivalent to that of a bourgeois household. Its ideological purpose being, like that of its domestic counterpart, to provide its male visitor with a comfortable and protective refuge from the outside world.

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90 Corbin (1990), p. 178.
91 For a more detailed description of these practices see Corbin (1990), pp. 174-85.
92 See, for example, Leo Taxil’s description of a maison de tolérance salon, quoted from a text by Yves Guyot. L. Taxil, La Prostitution contemporaine, 1884, p. 114: “Salons luxueux et fort confortables; des emblèmes, comme des poissons accompagnés d’hameçons, dessinés sur les fauteuils et les tabourets...[II] faut le dire, ces corps assortis par l’habilité de la tenancière, blond et bruns, grands et petits, forts et minces, quelquefois mis en relief par le bronze de la peau d’une nègresse, au milieu de glaces, de tapis, de draperies, de rubans, d’étoffes voyantes, de chatoiements de bijoux, ces poitrines en avant, ces reins cambrés, ces torses qui recherchent la pose qui les rend plus provocants et en fait ressortir les avantages et les particularités, font un tableau coloré, plein d’appels irritants.”
93 See Laure Adler’s description of the management and organisation of a high-class maison, in which every care is taken to maintain the privacy and anonymity of the individual client. L. Adler, La Vie quotidienne dans les maisons closes, 1830-1930, 1990, pp. 54-69: ‘Le bordel est une maison, un espace régi domestiquement par une maîtresse, secondée par une sous-maîtresse, elle-même aidée par des bonnes...La règne une atmosphère feutrée. Les tapis épais, des domestiques silencieux, la circulation des filles et des clients parfaitement agencée contribuent à faire de ces maisons de sublimes hôtels du sexe où l’appétit de jouissance est d’emblée excité par la vue...A
The erotic link between the spaces and surfaces of prostitution and domesticity in the fin-de-siècle sexual imagination, as described by contemporary cabinet fiction, forms the basis of inquiry for Emily Apter’s important essay of 1989, ‘Cabinet Secrets: Fetishism, Prostitution, and the Fin-de-Siècle Interior’. Taking as her starting point the fin-de-siècle vogue for collecting, Apter argues that the fetishistic appeal of the juxtaposed objects displayed in the cabinet or collector’s interior finds its origins in the erotic system of the brothel. Apter suggests that one has only to consider the frequent slippages in texts such as Huysmans’ A Rebours, ‘from object mania to eromania, from household fetishism to brothel decadence’, to realise the metonymic link between the collector’s cabinet and the maison close.94 The most significant aspect of the appropriation of the erotics of the brothel by the collector’s interior in cabinet fiction is to be found in the construction of its viewing subject. Both the brothel interior and the collector’s interior were designed and organised in order to protect and cater to the viewer’s voyeuristic gaze. The systematic design of the deluxe brothel interior, with its padded double doors and spy-holes, its complex network of adjoining antechambers and army of attentive and escorting servants is predicated upon the protection of the unseen movement and consuming gaze of the individual client. Like its feminine other, the boudoir, the collector’s cabinet originated as a gendered space within the domestic interior, catering to the protection and exclusivity of its male occupant’s desiring gaze.95 In its assemblage of disparate objects and heaped up merchandise, the cabinet or collector’s interior, like the brothel interior, predicated and ‘...catered to visual feasting.’96 As Octave Uzanne’s 1878 description of ‘Le Cabinet d’un erotobibliomane’, with its explicit appropriation of the erotics of the brothel interior demonstrates, the protected male viewer’s most desired visual feast constituted the objectified female body. Having been invited by an elderly aristocrat to visit his secret collection of eighteenth-century paintings of nudes, the narrator finds himself at the

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95 Apter points to the luxurious décor, secret cavities and hidden surveillance equipment that characterise both Edgar Allan Poe’s ideal interior of the ‘Philosophy of Furniture’ and des Esseintes’ leather-bound study in Huysmans A Rebours as cabinets which ‘theatricalize erotic fantasy’ and ‘facilitate the voyeuristic gaze, the “look” of the bordello client trained on feminine wares.’ Apter (June 1989), p. 9.
96 Apter (June 1989), p. 10.
centre of a luxuriously decorated octagonal room with its entire ceiling replaced by a mirror. The effect is to create an enclosed and seamless surface of dislocated flesh; an intoxicating visual feast which nonetheless, threatens to undermine the scopic authority and corporeal integrity of its male viewer:

‘...on ne voyait qu’un éblouissement de chairs roses, qu’un rut de peaux mates, de fossettes gracieuses; qu’une débauche de postures allonguies et énivrantes, qu’une nuée d’amour polissons et rieurs dont le lèvres s’entrebaisaient. - La déprivation de tout un siècle s’étalait dans la lubricité de ces peintures, souriantes de luxure et aimablement vicieuses; ces torses cambrés, lascifs, endiables émergeaient des cadres, se reflétant dans la grande glace du plafond, tandis que les jambes velues des faunes et des sylvains nerveusement gonflées d’un priaprisme intense, semblaient secouer dans l’air une odeur âcre de bouc qui montait au cerveau.’97

Whilst in no way equivalent to the overt eroticism of Uzanne’s ‘cabinet d’un eroeto-bibliomane’, both visual and literary descriptions of the Natanson’s rue Saint- Florentin apartment suggest that it was, nonetheless, an illicit space which catered for the ‘visual feasting’ of its visitors. Moreover, Vuillard’s painting Près du Piano [fig. 112] implies that it was an interior capable of producing a disarming visual and even physical effect upon its visitor. Marcel Proust is thought to have considered the apartment an ‘exotic but forbidden’ place, an opinion which may have prevented the writer from attending Misia Natanson’s rue Saint-Florentin salon, despite his stated desire to do so.98 Proust’s reticence was more than an issue of class or cultural prejudice. The transgressive yet domestic status of Misia Natanson’s roles as the hostess of an intellectual salon and wife of an arriviste Jew were perceived as being projected onto the material properties of her interior, both in terms of its decoration and structural arrangement. Gloria Groom, who has carried out extensive research into the interiors where Vuillard’s decorative works were hung, suggests that the rue Saint- Florentin apartment reflected a ‘personal decorative style’.99 In line with contemporary guides to interior decoration that cajoled women into creating a space that would function as a cosmetic extension of their commodified bodies, Misia Natanson created an interior which consistently referred to herself as the object of desire. Leora Auslander has suggested that, freed from the confines of bourgeois marriage,

99 Groom (1993), p. 84.

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respectability and domesticity, some independent women took the autoerotic tendencies of this narcissistic inclination to the point of creating interiors and accumulating collections that self-consciously played with the decorative and spatial motifs of the brothel interior. 100 Though married, it could be argued that Misia Natanson’s socially and racially liminal position vis-à-vis bourgeois respectability manifested itself in the seamlessly self-referential and illicitly unconventional interior of her and Thadée Natanson’s rue Saint-Florentin apartment.

In 1895 Vuillard was commissioned to produce the five panel series, L’Album [figs. 74-78], that was to hang in the rue Saint-Florentin apartment. The series depicted fashionable, red-haired young women pressed together in luxurious domestic spaces and engaged in a variety of suitably leisurely or amateurish feminine pursuits. The surfaces of these panels abound with a mixture of fluttering, stippled or rubbed on touches of oil paint which tend to mask the underlying compositional structure. This surface formlessness is further enhanced by a recurrent floral motif. The female figures either emerge from or are occluded by floral patterned wallpaper and large bouquets of flowers. Photographs of the rue Saint-Florentin apartment, including one taken by Vuillard of Misia Natanson tending a houseplant [fig. 118], demonstrate the insistent seamlessness with which this floral motif extended across the many surfaces of this interior. In a disarmingly similar way to Vuillard’s L’Album panels, the leaves of the centrally located houseplant appear to dissolve into the floral pattern of the tablecloth beneath. This particular floral pattern is repeated in the fabric of the dining chairs located at the edge of the room and further adorns the walls, rendering the disjunction between chair and wall almost imperceptible. The seamless floral surfaces of the rue Saint-Florentin interior effectively destroy the appearance of the individual properties or materiality of each object, thus forcing an uncanny disturbance in the viewer’s optical and physical acquisition of the space.

The rue Saint-Florentin apartment’s disturbingly seamless appearance was further heightened by its unusual spatial and structural arrangement. As Gloria Groom’s research suggests, at some point during its history and by the time Vuillard both photographed and painted the apartment a number of its internal walls had been removed. This act produced an unusual domestic space consisting of one large,
centrally located room that functioned as the main living space, adjoined by a number of smaller alcoves. The many paintings and photographs which Vuillard produced of the apartment at this time, each marked by the consistency of the floral patterned wallpaper, are of the same large room, viewed from a number of different vantage points. The rue Saint-Florentin apartment, therefore, constituted a very different prospect and artistic project from the shallow, enclosed, maternal spaces of the various apartments that Vuillard shared with his mother [see, for example, figs. 7, 21 & 35]. This was both a spatial and structural difference whose cogent effect would have been felt in a number of significant ways. The apartment at rue Saint-Florentin was, by comparison at least, an emphatically non-maternal and thereby potentially illicit domestic space. Not least because the laws of sexual difference around which domesticity and the domestic interior were normally structured and arranged were effectively dismantled with the de-materialisation of the apartment’s internal walls and, by consequence, its gendered spaces. Vuillard would certainly not have been afforded the type of professional, personal and gendered refuge otherwise associated with his bedroom-studio.

Of particular significance to this study is the role played by the decoration and spatial arrangement of the rue Saint-Florentin apartment in the construction of its viewing subject. Both the self-referential, seamless décor and the centrally located salon with its centrifugally dispersed alcoves functioned, like the deluxe brothel interior or collector’s cabinet, to simultaneously protect and direct the visitor’s gaze inwards, towards the nucleus of the space and the body of its most desirous object, Misia Natanson. It is tempting to suggest that, as her autobiography and Vuillard’s paintings appear to demonstrate, the rue Saint-Florentin apartment provided Misia Natanson with a stage upon which to enact the performance of her self as ‘a work of elaborately coded femininity’. Indeed, it has been noted that as a frequent patron of

102 Though Gloria Groom has previously referred to the deconstruction of gendered space in the rue Saint-Florentin apartment, its significance for Vuillard’s perception of Misia Natanson demands further analysis. Groom (1993), p. 82.
103 See P. F. Marcou’s description of a circular salon for an equivalent effect. Marcou (1893), p. 327: ‘...the drawing-room is in the raised wing at the angle, and is of circular form, which has the evident advantage of being free from corners. It thus seems to make everything converge towards a certain point, namely, the mistress of the place. There she holds her social court...’
104 Solomon-Godeau (Winter 1986), p. 76.

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the Parisian theatre, Misia Natanson harboured a transgressive desire to exchange her place in the auditorium for one upon the stage.¹⁰⁵

In deploying the decoration and arrangement of her interior in such a way as to direct the gaze towards herself, Misia Natanson demonstrated an astute understanding of the female body’s aesthetic and erotic appeal, in accordance with contemporary guides to flirtation. This budding literary genre took the premise of women’s guides to interior decoration a step further in its conflation of the female body, aesthetic theory and domesticity. Liberal guides to flirtation, such as Émile Bayard’s *L’Art d’être femme ou l’art d’améliorer et de corriger la grâce par le geste esthétique*, recognised that the domestic interior functioned as a crucial site for flirtation and attraction, of sexuality even, for bourgeois women. Indeed, these guides drew an overt link between sexuality and domesticity, the relationship between the female body and the furniture and decoration of domesticity that was akin to or perhaps, even appropriated, the erotics of vision identified with the brothel interior. In a book which evidently aimed the minute detail of its text at a female reader and the erotic appeal of its photographs at a male viewer, Bayard selected a number of domestic situations and locations in which the female body might most advantageously display itself. According to Bayard even the most innocuous of domestic habits, sitting at a table, playing the piano or, more suggestively, reclining on a *chaise-longue*, could provide an opportunity for flirtation and seduction.¹⁰⁶ As such, Bayard’s text ultimately attested to the circularity of the condition of feminine subjectivity, even within the private space of domesticity, as ‘to see oneself as one is seen’.¹⁰⁷ That is, to be ever conscious of and possibly, to gain pleasure from, watching oneself being watched.

Both photographs and paintings of the *rue Saint-Florentin* apartment suggest that Misia Natanson reserved one section of the large salon for an area dominated by a

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¹⁰⁵ As Misia Natanson light-heartedly noted in her autobiography, friends would comment that ‘I had a remarkable gift for acting, that my place was on the stage, and that I had no right to deprive the world of my exceptional talent...’. Sert (1953), p. 58. In their biography, Gold and Fizdale comment that Misia Natanson considered actresses to be her idols, making ‘a cult of Sarah Bernhardt’ in particular. Gold & Fizdale (1980), p. 43.

¹⁰⁶ É. Bayard, *L’Art d’être femme ou l’art d’améliorer et de corriger la grâce par le geste esthétique*, 1907.

¹⁰⁷ Solomon-Godeau (Winter 1986), p. 76. Solomon-Godeau’s notion of the condition of feminine subjectivity is informed by Laura Mulvey’s influential work, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18 and Mulvey’s assertion that Woman connotes ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (p. 11).
floral patterned *chaise-longue*. Vuillard represented this space in a painting entitled *Le Peignoir rouge* [fig. 119] of c. 1897, which depicted the anonymous but familiar figure of Misia Natanson reclining upon the *chaise-longue* whilst in conversation with a male figure resembling her brother, Cipa Godebski. The painting’s title, *Le Peignoir rouge*, which evidently describes the female figure’s luxurious outfit, in conjunction with both the *chaise-longue* and the resplendent languorousness of the female figure’s pose suggest that this is an image that flirted with notions of the *boudoir* and its hidden pleasures. In his previously cited text of 1884, *L’Art dans la maison, grammaire de l’ameublement*, Henry Havard listed the *boudoir* as the most secretive of domestic spaces. Quoting Littré, Havard claimed that the word *boudoir* derived from the verb *bouder*, because it is to this room that women retire ‘when they want to be alone’. As such, the *boudoir* provided ‘an important and precious service’ as the sole place in which women might seek refuge within the refuge of the home. In response to the feminised secrecy of the *boudoir* and the voyeuristic pleasure gained in revealing its secrets, literature had, Havard suggests, built ‘a small pornographic legend’ around this word.108 As countless paintings and prints of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attest, the dominant voyeuristic narrative of the *boudoir* granted it a similarly enduring and illicitly erotic value for visual representation [see, for example, fig. 120]. By introducing both the furniture and, according to Vuillard’s painting, *Le Peignoir rouge*, the clothing of women’s private domesticity into the most public space of the interior, the salon, Misia Natanson appears to have taken the collapse of the boundaries between public and private space, and by implication sexual difference itself, to its furthest extreme.109 Not least because the decoration and structural arrangement of the *rue Saint-Florentin* salon merged the properties of the most feminine yet private space, the *boudoir*, into those of its most masculine yet equally private counterpart, the collector’s interior. Both moreover, constituted sites which, like the brothel interior, conjured up connotations of a domestic yet illicit sexuality, whilst simultaneously privileging the voyeuristic pleasure of the male gaze.

108 Havard (1884), pp. 411-17.
109 In Baroness Staffe, *Le Cabinet de Toilette*, trans. 1892, pp. 23 & 28, the author considered both the *chaise-longue* and the *peignoir* to be accessories integral to those rooms referred to as ‘woman’s sanctum’.  

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Some suggestion of an illicit sexual pleasure is played out in Vuillard’s painting. Not least in the languid, outstretched pose of the female figure. A pose considered by Bayard to be superior in terms of its seductive power, leading the writer to suggest that it be reserved for moments of solitude or for a ‘conjugal tête-à-tête’. In terms of visual representation, the reclining position primarily functioned within a pictorial tradition of representing harem women. Identified with the loose sexuality of the oriental seductress, including the Jewess, it was a pictorial motif that easily spilled over into late nineteenth-century portraits of demi-mondaines, most notably courtesans, artist’s wives and actresses. Continuing his analysis of the aesthetic and seductive possibilities of the reclining position, Bayard was keen to instruct the reader that under no circumstances should a woman who is in the company of a man other than her husband, allow her feet to leave the floor, ‘...le geste alangui de torse suffit amplement.’ Though Vuillard’s depiction of Misia Natanson’s body in Le Peignoir rouge implies that this figure is fully outstretched, an element of ambiguity is retained. Indeed, uncertainty surrounds the depiction of the female figure’s body in its entirety. Whilst the voluptuous sweep of the torso and hips tapering away to the legs is emphasised by the diminishing curves of the heavy material, Misia Natanson’s body is largely concealed beneath the red peignoir. It is as though the voluptuous body is simultaneously evoked and denied, trapped in a tension between the peignoir’s smudgy, vaporous sensuality and its dark, emphatically drawn boundaries. This is a suggestion of the voluptuous body’s containment, even stasis, which is made doubly emphatic by the repeated and juxtaposing rectangular forms of the verdigris mantelpiece. The fireplace’s dark, inner space, the hearth, serves to fix, in particular, the pelvic region of the female body within the metaphorical confines of domesticity. With both the serpentine languorousness of the pose and the smudgy, molten intensity of the scarlet peignoir against the shadowy interior, it seems likely that Vuillard was tapping into the familiar discourse of a luxurious sensuality that most commonly surrounded the Jewess. With the fireplace and dark boundaries of Le Peignoir rouge Vuillard attempts, however, to contain or repress the potentially dangerous flow of ‘languor bordering on

112 Bayard (1907), p. 209.
formlessness’ that the Jewess’ irrepressibly different body threatened to emit. This was a sense of formlessness issuing from perceptions of the erotic physicality of the Jewess’ body which, it could be argued, informed the formal or ‘semitic’ excesses of the L’Album panels [figs. 74-78] as much as it did Vuillard’s Prés du piano [fig. 112] or Pierre Bonnard’s exuberant portrait of 1908, entitled Misia [fig. 121].

The tension between the fluidity and containment of the voluptuous female body that mitigates the portrayal of Misia Natanson in Le Peignoir rouge suggests that Vuillard was concerned to stave off the threat of this body’s difference. This is a defensive action which is compounded and it might be suggested, enabled by, the turning of Misia Natanson’s face away from the viewer’s gaze. Though it is plausible that Vuillard was concerned to protect the identity of his sitter when presented within such an ambiguously intimate context, it is an action which also and inevitably serves to protect the authority of the artist’s gaze. The aversion or at least, obfuscation of Misia Natanson’s gaze is a consistent feature of Vuillard’s depictions of this subject. A letter written by Vuillard to Misia Natanson several years later articulated some sense of the painter’s unease in front his subject, with the admission: “I have always been shy in your presence.” The aversion of the female figure’s gaze was a consistent feature in many of Vuillard’s paintings of interiors during this period. It was, however, a motif most emphatically and it might be suggested, most significantly deployed to represent the female figure in one particular though non-domestic interior: the studio. During the early years of the 1890’s when Vuillard was sharing studio space at 28 rue Pigalle with several of the Nabis he produced a number of rare studies of studio nudes. These works included the 1890-1 painting Seated Nude [fig. 122] and a work of 1892, Nu couchée [fig. 123]. In his 1946 monograph of Vuillard, Claude Roger-Marx wrote a telling, if typically understated, account of the artist’s modesty when studying professional models:

‘Ill at ease in the presence of professional models, he preferred to glimpse the body though the folds of a dress. Even then he used his eyes very modestly.”

113 Ockman (December 1991), p. 528.
114 Solomon-Godeau’s definition of the anxiety produced by the sexually active woman as ‘the anxiety that attaches to the figure of woman that of a difference that escapes the discourses of containment’ is critical to this analysis of Le Peignoir rouge. Solomon-Godeau (Winter 1986), p. 103.
115 Sert (1953), p. 52.
The employment of a professional model within a studio context positively demands the enactment of the formal relationship between sitter and artist that Vuillard’s favoured method of observing, sketching and painting ‘...des gens chez eux’ strove to undermine. Both the professional model and the artist would have been acutely aware of the former’s status as the object of the artistic gaze. Roger-Marx’s description of Vuillard’s uneasiness when confronted by the professional model and the artist’s modest use of his eyes in order to glimpse the body articulate something of a protective gesture on behalf of the artist. For the word ‘glimpse’ implies a looking which is covert, surreptitious, even voyeuristic. Though the female body is not glimpsed through the folds of a dress in the two studio nude paintings, indeed Vuillard has not shied away from depicting the fleshy physicality of the naked female body, the face and gaze of both figures is obfuscated. In both studies the aversion of the model’s gaze is enacted by the figures themselves, either by turning away or sheltering the face from view. Both are gestures which, though protective of the figure’s identity, simultaneously articulate a palpable sense of shame.

The aversion of Misia Natanson’s gaze in *Le Peignoir rouge* functions to protect Vuillard’s gaze. It may even negate the artist’s sense of shame, a shame issuing from the pleasure that Vuillard took in looking. More than this, the aversion of Misia Natanson’s gaze allows the artist’s and subsequently the viewer’s gaze a free-rein, the time even, to take pleasure in what is seen. A pleasure evidenced in the warmth and intimacy of the colours, textures and structural arrangement of the painting where, in Camille Mauclair’s metaphorical terms, the body is displayed as ‘un spectacle permanent, ouvert, comme un paysage, à l’admiration’. Indeed, the female figure’s averted gaze, the painting’s landscape format and the molten, malleable body’s languorous curves, traced by and contained within undulating arabesque lines, forces a further connection with Mauclair’s previously cited description of the female portrait subject’s reductive if painterly significance as ‘un paysage décoratif de plis, de lignes, de couleurs’. Whilst visually feasting upon this ‘decorative landscape’, the viewer is drawn

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117 See T. Garb, ‘The Forbidden Gaze’, *Art in America*, (May 1991), pp. 147-51 & 186 for the threat to both masculinity and Art posed by ‘the woman who looks’, in the context of late nineteenth-century academic debates concerning the admittance of women to the life class. Of particular concern was the need to maintain the male artist’s and Art’s ‘...capacity to transcend the physical.’

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into a fantasy of physical proximity to the female figure’s body. As much as the aversion of Misia Natanson’s gaze is a consistent feature of Vuillard’s paintings, so is the enactment of the latter’s implied physical proximity to this figure [see, for example, fig. 108]. They appear to go hand in hand. A phenomenon which Toulouse-Lautrec indicated, with some humour, in his caricature, *À table chez M. et Mme. Thadée Natanson* [fig. 111], where Vuillard is obsequiously located at Misia Natanson’s side. In *Le Peignoir rouge*, the pleasure gained from the artist’s physical proximity to Misia Natanson’s body develops into the viewer’s fantasy of lying close to the female figure’s body. The nearside edge of the *chaise-longue* upon which this figure reclines almost touches the composition’s forward plane, invoking the physical proximity of its viewer. The relatively low viewpoint, combined with the horizontal axis of the canvas and the eye’s lingering movement up and down Misia Natanson’s body, seduces the viewer into imagining their own languid horizontality. Though keen to sample the many other surfaces and colours of the space, the eye consistently returns to the smudgy tactility of the scarlet *peignoir*, its textural plenitude heightened by the many lines inscribed there by the wooden tip of a brush, eventually dropping to rest upon the warm, dark patch formed by the narrow space between Misia Natanson’s torso and the yielding surface of the *chaise-longue*.

This chapter has been concerned to explore the motives and effects of Vuillard’s ‘pleasure’. A pleasure contained within the artist’s often repeated claim: “Je ne fais pas de portraits, je peins des gens chez eux”. In a period when new definitions of femininity were challenging the pre-existing tropes of women’s representation, Vuillard appeared to problematise and reject the formalities of the portrait genre in favour of a more casual working method that allowed the artist to, in Thadée Natanson’s terms, ‘*portraitise à plaisir*’. It is easy to assume that Vuillard’s working method produced a more authentic image of his subjects, the majority of whom were women, advantageously located within the idiosyncratic confines of their interiors. From a different perspective, however, it could be argued that Vuillard’s working method of observing and sketching his subjects at home whilst painting their image in the privacy of his bedroom-studio, opened his subjects to new and extended forms of artistic scrutiny whilst diminishing their capacity to participate in the production of their own image. As such, this chapter has aimed to
weigh Vuillard's pleasure against that of Misia Natanson, his favoured subject. Though transgressive in the cultivation of her role as the hostess of a vanguard artistic salon, Misia Natanson persistently undermined the intellectual and social authority of her status by striving to direct the male gaze towards herself as the object of desire. As such and as a 'work of elaborately coded femininity' who internalised the male gaze Misia Natanson constitutes a problematic subject for feminist art history. At the same time, her narcissism, or 'radical alienation' as Solomon-Godeau would describe it, is useful as a means of exploring the complex and often conflictual condition of feminine subjectivity under late nineteenth-century patriarchy, that is 'to see oneself as one is seen'.

Evidence suggests that Misia Natanson regarded the professional relationship between herself and the artists who surrounded and portrayed her as one of mutual reciprocity, much like that depicted in Toulouse-Lautrec's 1894 lithographic poster advertising the commercial services of Le Photographe Sescau [fig. 124]. Here the female figure, performing an exuberantly feminine masquerade, willingly gives herself up to the camera's penetrating lens that simultaneously protects and projects the photographer's phallic gaze in a relationship, presumed by Toulouse-Lautrec to be, both mutually beneficial and satisfying. Like the female figure of this image, Misia Natanson cultivated and perfected her role as a willing and responsive object of the artistic gaze, for it was beneath the paintbrush's adoring caress, in the void left by the dissolution of the distinction between subjecthood and objecthood, that feminine subjectivity and sexual pleasure was thought to reside:

'I would sit on the grass, leaning against a tree, engrossed in some entrancing book; he [Toulouse-Lautrec] would squat beside me, and, armed with a paint-brush, dexterously tickle the soles of my feet. This entertainment, in which his finger sometimes played a part at propitious moments, sometimes lasted for hours. I was in seventh heaven when he pretended to be painting imaginary landscapes on my feet.'

Whilst Toulouse-Lautrec and Bonnard literally tended to regard Misia Natanson as 'une page blanche' to be filled with familiar racial and social stereotypes, the variety of Vuillard's works suggests a pictorial response that was both less impulsive and more

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118 Solomon-Godeau (Winter 1986), p. 76.
complex. Nonetheless, the formal and sometimes formless play between light and dark and the fragile balance maintained between the fluidity and containment of Misia Natanson’s body suggest that these paintings constitute a more telling representation of Vuillard’s desire, and anxieties, than they do Misia Natanson’s. It was her illicitly and exotically sexual identity, informed by a nexus of beliefs about contemporary feminine types, together with her willingness to function as a desirous object of the male gaze and the scopic dynamics fostered by the unconventional rue Saint-Florentin interior, which rendered Misia Natanson, the portrait subject, particularly susceptible to artistic manipulation. As more of ‘un cadre où nous plaçons nos rêves’ than a ‘document psychologique’ in these paintings, it is possible to imagine Misia Natanson’s potential, as an alternative vehicle to decorative landscape painting, for Vuillard’s intimiste implementation of the Nabis’ concern to erase the distinctions between easel and mural painting, in easel paintings that simultaneously functioned as decorative, domestic objects. It is in these paintings, and Le Peignoir rouge in particular, that Mauclair’s ‘conception décorative se continuera distincte et parallèle’ from the seemingly less painterly concerns of documentary female portraiture which new definitions of bourgeois femininity were currently demanding of pictorial representation. Moreover, Vuillard’s leisurely method of observing and painting ‘...des gens chez eux’ dismantled the formalities of portrait painting and in doing so protected the voyeuristic pleasure of the artist’s gaze (to which the rue Saint-Florentin interior was eminently suited), the integrity of his professional status and, by association, his masculinity. In doing so Vuillard positively extended and compounded Misia Natanson’s condition of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, whilst further denying this woman the capacity to be present at, or participate in, the artistic production of her own painted image.

The iconographic effects of Vuillard’s working method may be illustrated with a comparison between the painting Misia and Thadée Natanson [fig. 98] and a photograph taken by Vuillard that pictures Misia Natanson alone in the salon of her rue Saint-Florentin apartment [fig. 125]. Whilst the photographic treatment of the domestic interior is similar to that of the painting, the role played by the photograph’s female subject is quite different. It is suggested that the painting of Misia and Thadée Natanson functions most successfully as a self-portrait of the artist in his preferred place of work, an armchair. Whilst Thadée Natanson appears ludicrously diminutive, the face
and gaze of Misia Natanson has been obliterated and her body awkwardly positioned, not least its right arm which emphatically yet uncomfortably covers the figure’s pubic area. As noted earlier, the length of time required to take a photograph when inside would have necessitated the complete mental and physical engagement, not least the actual physical presence, of its subject. As such, the photographic process would have required Vuillard, the figure behind the camera, to re-introduce the formality of the relationship between artist and subject. The photographic process would have demanded the concrete enactment of the artist’s gaze at the same time as it would have allowed his pictorial fantasies and anxieties less free-rein. Though fixed to the spot for some considerable time the sitter is, conversely, granted a greater degree of authority in the production of their photographic image. As such, the scopic relationship between artist and subject has shifted. The photograph clearly demonstrates the extent to which Misia Natanson was able to regain some authorial intervention in the production of her image which Vuillard’s painterly working method otherwise undermined. In this photograph Misia Natanson holds a direct, serious and authoritative exchange of looks with the camera, its operator and the viewer. Unusually pictured alone, sitting on the floral chaise-longue that dominated the more private area of her salon, the photograph suggests the rather illicit connotations of a solitary afternoon visit made by Vuillard to Misia Natanson’s somewhat transgressive salon. Wearing a summer dress with a close fitting bodice, Misia Natanson’s lower arms, shoulders and the slight curve of her cleavage are clearly exposed as she looks directly into the camera’s lens. Resisting the awkwardness of Misia and Thadée Natanson [fig. 98] or the ambiguous containment of Le Peignoir rouge [fig. 119], Misia Natanson’s body re-asserts its easy position within the domestic interior where it is unashamedly offered to the artist’s gaze. The distance between sitter and lens suggests, however, that in a reversal of the scopic dynamics that structure Toulouse-Lautrec’s lithograph of the penetrating yet protected gaze of Le Photographe Sescau [fig. 124], Vuillard has physically stepped back, even shied away from, Misia Natanson’s embodied and self-satisfying look. Denied the protection of his normally voyeuristic gaze and physically absent painting method, and the fantasy of physical proximity these enabled, this photographic encounter exposes the artist’s vulnerability as much as it reveals his pleasure.
Conclusion

This study opened with a series of statements and questions about how the asymmetrical distribution of social and spatial relations according to the biological laws of sexual difference might determine gendered artistic practice. Having cited the influence of several key feminist art historical texts concerning the relationship between the gendered demarcation of space and late nineteenth-century women’s artistic practice, the introduction proceeded to consider whether it was possible or even valid to apply an equivalent analysis to Vuillard and Intimisme. Though men and women approached the concept of the domestic interior from radically different subject positions, the situation for a male artist in ideologically feminine space was not the direct antithesis to that defined for a female artist in ideologically masculine space. In experiential terms, it is obvious that men inhabited domestic space and as the many previously cited textual sources have demonstrated, the domestic interior was assigned meaning according to the terms of male subjectivity. The domestic interior would not, therefore, have constituted the geographically distant and experientially indifferent prospect for a male artist that the urban centre of Paris did for a bourgeoise such as Berthe Morisot. It was, nonetheless, feminist art history’s identification of the social, institutional, professional and pictorial consequences of the asymmetrical distribution of gendered spatial relations that prompted the primary concern of this thesis. Was Vuillard’s work and practice able to traverse the ideological boundaries of gendered space and artistic practice in the unproblematic way so easily assumed by previous art historical accounts of Intimisme? Needless to say, feminist art history has provided the methodological tools with which to consider this and other issues pertaining to the fin-de-siècle male artist’s complex relation to the domestic interior as a subject of significant artistic inquiry.

Feminist art history’s continuing commitment to the identification and analysis of artists as symptomatic historical agents and psychic subjects produced in and by the power relations of language and discourse and working within gendered systems of visual representation has prompted this study to question the facile coherency of the
traditional Vuillard narrative. In its place, this study has argued for an alternative model of artistic agency that foregrounds the issue of difference, most notably that of sexual difference. By holding the concept of sexual difference in a pivotal place, this study has argued for the radical differences inscribed within Vuillard’s subject position and the artist’s physical and psychic relation to the domestic interiors he painted. More than this, the application of psychoanalytical theories of the family has enabled this study to emphasize the profound psychic and emotional ambivalence at the core of familial relationships in patriarchal bourgeois society. In the place of *Intimisme* as a privileged and intimate though objective account of personal familial relationships, this study has argued for an alternative model in which relations of close physical and emotional proximity foreclose identification rather than enable it. At the same time, psychoanalytical theory recognises the emotional and psychological intensity of familial relationships, thereby enabling the plausible theory that Vuillard’s paintings operate at a personal, even unconscious, as well as more public, symbolic level. In this instance, the facility of *Intimisme* is disrupted as it is re-conceived, with particular reference to the paintings of Madame Vuillard, in the psychoanalytical terms of an archaic struggle for subjectivity and artistic agency. As well as locating these paintings within the significatory framework of an archaic, one-sided dialogue between a son and his mother, psychoanalysis has provided the tools with which to analyse the scopic mechanisms of the artist’s gaze. Whether it is the voyeuristic and self-gratifying gaze that pervades the paintings of Misia Natanson or the discriminatory, even woefully ignorant, gaze that is oblivious to the seamstress’s labour, framing the relationship between the artist and his subject in these terms has allowed this study to consider the pleasures and anxieties that structure looking.

Applying a simultaneously psychoanalytical and socio-historical methodological approach has enabled both the construction of a symptomatic psycho-social subject ‘Vuillard’ and a new, historically specific, definition of *Intimisme*. As part of its commitment to explore their ideological capacity, this study has focused upon the historical conditions under which these paintings were originally produced, exhibited and received. Amongst others, the concepts of ‘intimacy’, ‘the interior’ and ‘domesticity’ have been analysed for their historically specific significance and as the means to identify a discursive position for these paintings within the wider representational field. Having identified its concrete relation to the illusory claims of the *fin-de-siècle* cultural ‘retreat
to the interior’, Intimisme has been re-configured as illusion. That is as an illusorily intimate identification with domesticity and the domestic interior, an illusion that has been maintained and reproduced in the discourses of art history. It is, however, important to acknowledge that Vuillard’s work manifests a significantly greater and more nuanced degree of concern with the material and gendered relations of domesticity than is evidenced in the fantastical womanless spaces that dominated the late nineteenth-century cultural pursuit of interiority. Unlike many of the works that invest exclusively in the concept of the intérieur, and thereby manifest the symptoms of an externally produced, escapist fantasy of interiority, Vuillard’s practice does concern itself with the intérieur’s all too real other, the ideological and material space of the foyer domestique. But as the critical response suggests, Vuillard’s pictorial notion of domestic intimacy tended to appeal to its audience in broadly ideological terms that reinforced the power relations of contemporary bourgeois society. The solipsistic pictorial language of maternal containment and the relative visibility of the professional homeworker’s labour in many of these paintings suggests Vuillard’s pictorial concept of domesticity provided a powerful ideological and discursive tool for the republican rhetoric of ideal femininity and domestic motherhood.

Produced in and by a particular historical moment in the relationship between art and the commodity, the significance of these paintings is inseparable from the late nineteenth-century expansion and consolidation of the independent Parisian art market and the development of domestic consumption practices. Favourably displayed at the gallery of Le Barc de Boutteville, one of a number of petits salons currently exploiting an aesthetic, spatial and ideological affiliation with the domestic interior, Vuillard’s tableautins are likely to have benefited from the gallery’s conducive, if illusorily authentic, environment. The particular mode of viewing created by the petits salons would have encouraged an intimate physical and imaginary relation between viewer and object that was sympathetic to the physical properties of Vuillard’s tableautins. With their repetitive iconographic themes and exuberantly patterned surfaces that necessitate a meditated gaze capable of registering the various female figures crammed into shallow, emphatically self-contained interiors, these diminutive paintings appear to mobilise a formal rhetoric of ‘the intimate’. Installed at the 1895-6 Maison de l’Art Nouveau, Vuillard’s larger panels and other decorative works contributed to, whilst benefiting from, the gallery’s curatorial and environmental manipulation of the latent consumerist
desires of an élite clientele. For some critics, Vuillard’s work threatened to overstate its bid to satisfy the commercialism that underpinned fin-de-siècle artistic culture.

The critical response to the ‘veneer of femininity’ that adorned these and other works in the form of the cosmeticised female body or the artist’s ‘feminine’ style, leads finally, to the question of Intimisme and female subjectivity. Given Vuillard’s project, it is surprising to find, even when considering paintings featuring identifiable subjects such as Madame Vuillard, the extent to which the female figure subscribes to the status of a representational type. In formal terms, the capacity of Vuillard’s work to reconfigure Naturalism’s predilection for everyday subjects with the Symbolist drive to simplify form, produced a familiar pictorial vernacular of the feminine composed of reductive physiological shapes and a layer of contrasting pattern. These feminine types are clearly recognisable in Vuillard’s decorative panels and the paintings of the sewing atelier, where in works such as *L’Atelier* [fig. 11] of 1893, the doll-like female figures are almost indecipherable from each other and from the domestic space they occupy. Their identities subsumed into the length of pale blue cloth that unites them, the female figures form a significant contrast to the fragmentary presence of a male figure. As an intruder into the pictorial and imaginary space of the domestic interior, the male figure’s individuality is enshrined within his marginal relation to the space. Lost between the formal rhetorics of Naturalism and Symbolism, female subjectivity is hardly reconstituted in the complex relationship between genre painting, portraiture and the interior that characterises the more personal iconography of Intimisme. Posited as an important psychological metaphor for the individual and as such, a powerful tool for portraiture, the domestic interior was, however, rarely able to function in this capacity for the female subject. Paintings of Madame Vuillard, such as *Le Placard à linge* [fig. 21] of c. 1892-5, suggest that the maternal subject was too subsumed into the self-reflexive language of domestic containment for the interior to fulfill its metaphorical role. The domestic interior can only articulate, with any certainty, the conditions of the maternal subject’s containment and interiority. Similarly, Vuillard’s method of observing, sketching and painting ‘...des gens chez eux’ failed to produce a more convincing image of the female portrait subject. Whilst the paintings of Misia Natanson tend to celebrate the domestic aspect of her role as a salon hostess, several, including *Le Peignoir rouge* of c. 1897 [fig. 119], mobilise a formal and iconographic rhetoric of illicit and exotic sexuality pertaining to stereotypical constructions of transgressive Jewish femininity. In paintings
such as this, the interior directs the gaze towards the female figure’s transgressive identity, encouraging the viewer to take pleasure in, whilst acting to contain, the dangerous excesses of Misia Natanson’s irrepressibly different body. It is these paintings which prompt the conclusion that the *Intimiste* interior fails to substantiate female subjectivity. It occludes, disperses and dissipates it and in doing so, merely reproduces the female subject’s discursive position within the dominant ideology.

Whether leaving his bedroom-studio to study and paint his own domestic environment or visiting the illicit space of the *rue Saint-Florentin* salon, Vuillard’s *Intimisme* was mediated by the artist’s physical, social and psychic relation to the spaces and figures he represented. Though granted professional access to the public and, in some instances, private spaces of the domestic interior, the artist approached his subject from a radically different subject position. As with the fragmentary male figure of *L’Atelier*, the artist’s marginal relation to the domestic interior is inscribed within the formal and iconographic properties of the paintings. Whilst Vuillard may, therefore, have traversed the boundaries of gendered space and artistic practice, physically penetrating the *sanctuaire inviolable* of the *foyer domestique*, *Intimisme* inevitably failed to dismantle the ideological myths through which these categories were constructed and ascribed meaning.
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10. Gustave Caillebotte, *Déjeuner*, 1876, oil on canvas, 52 x 75 cm, Private Collection
Une quatrième jeune femme quelconque se laisse froidement dévorer la tête par un crocodile empaillé,
Cabriol, Déjeuner: "Est-ce bien du chocolat?", from Le Journal, supplement, 26 November 1892, p. 1
16 Édouard Vuillard, *Self-Portrait in a Mirror*, 1888-90, oil on canvas, 44.5 x 53.7 cm, Mr. L. Wasserman, Beverly Hills
17. Édouard Vuillard, *Madame Vuillard by the Window*, 1893, oil on cardboard, 22.9 x 22.9 cm, William Kelly Simpson, New York
18. Gustave Caillebotte, *Young Man at his Window*, 1876, oil on canvas, 116.2 x 80.9 cm. Private Collection
Édouard Vuillard, *Bonjour M. Vuillard (Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat)*, c. 1891-2, oil on canvas, 36.2 x 27.9 cm, William Kelly Simpson, New York
20. Édouard Vuillard, *Madame Vuillard in Profile*, 1898, oil on canvas, 33 x 38.9 cm, Mrs. John Hay Whitney, New York
21. Édouard Vuillard, *Le Placard à linge*, c. 1892-5, oil on cardboard, 25 x 20 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris
23. Honoré Daumier, *La République*, 1848, oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
25. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Maternité, ou femme allaitant son enfant*, 1885, oil on canvas, 74 x 53 cm, Private Collection
Je vais au Congrès féministe ! Tu prépareras le dîner pour huit heures précises, tu m'entends ? et surtout, que rien ne cloche !...
27. Édouard Vuillard, *Le Palier, rue de Miromesnil*, 1891, oil on canvas, 33 x 24 cm, Mrs. Samuel Godfrey, Toronto
28. Édouard Vuillard, *La Cuisine*, 1892, oil on composition board, 17.1 x 33.7 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
32. Édouard Vuillard, Madme Vuillard cousant, c. 1895, oil on panel, 19 x 23.5 cm, William Kelly Simpson, New York
33. Gustave Caillebotte, *Portrait of Madame Martial Caillebotte*, 1877, oil on canvas, 83 x 72 cm, Private Collection
34. Édouard Vuillard, *Woman at the Cupboard*, 1895, oil on paper mounted on wood, 37.1 x 33.2 cm, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne
35. Édouard Vuillard, *The Yellow Curtain*, c. 1893, oil on canvas, 34.9 x 39.1 cm, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
36. Édouard Vuillard, *Les Couturières*, 1891, oil on canvas, 47.6 x 54.9 cm, Josefowitz Collection, Lausanne
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42. Berthe Morisot, *In the Dining Room*, 1880, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm, Private Collection
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44. Arthur Munby, Photograph of Hannah Cullwick scrubbing the front steps, 1872, dimensions unknown, Trinity College, Cambridge
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47. Édouard Vuillard, *Interior (Interior at l'Étang-la-Ville)*, 1893, oil on canvas, 33 x 40.6 cm, Private Collection of Jane Forbes Clark
48. Édouard Vuillard, *Interior*, 1894, oil on cardboard mounted on canvas, 26 x 50.8 cm, Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.
Édouard Vuillard, *The Vuillard Family at Lunch*, c. 1896, oil on canvas, 31.8 x 45.7 cm, Private Collection, New York
50. Édouard Vuillard, *Ouvrières au chiffonnier*, 1892, oil on cardboard, 23.3 x 30.5 cm. Josefowitz Collection, Lausanne
Édouard Vuillard, *Ouvrières au chiffonnier*, no date, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 cm, Private Collection, Paris
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Édouard Vuillard, *Misia and Thadée Natanson*, c. 1897, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 104 x 71.1 cm, Private Collection
99. Édouard Vuillard, Photograph of Thadée and Misia Natanson, *rue Saint-Florentin*, c. 1897-8, Archives Antoine Salomon, Paris
100. Édouard Vuillard, *Portrait of Misia*, c. 1897, oil on cardboard mounted on canvas, 53.3 x 49.2 cm, Private Collection, Mexico City
101. Gustave Caillebotte, *Intérieur, femme lisant*, 1880, oil on canvas, 65 x 80 cm, Private Collection
102. Pierre Bonnard, *La Revue blanche*, 1894, lithographic poster in four colours, 80 x 62 cm, whereabouts unknown
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *La Revue blanche*, 1895, lithographic poster in four colours, 125.5 x 91.2 cm, Clarence L. Buckingham Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago
104. Jules Chéret, *Palais de Glace*, 1895, lithographic poster, dimensions and whereabouts unknown
107. Édouard Vuillard, *Salon, rue Saint-Florentin*, 1897, oil on paper mounted on wood, 45.4 x 51.4 cm, Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection, Zurich
108. Édouard Vuillard, *Le Déjeuner*, c. 1897, oil on canvas, 40 x 35.1 cm, The Katharine Ordway Collection, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
109  Édouard Vuillard, *Misia au piano et Cipa l’écoutant*, c. 1897, oil on cardboard, 63.5 x 56 cm, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe
110. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Piano Lesson*, c. 1889, oil on canvas, 56 x 46 cm, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha
112. Édouard Vuillard, *Près du piano*, 1899, oil on cardboard, 55 x 80 cm, Josefowitz Collection, Lausanne
113. Édouard Vuillard, *La Vie conjugale*, 1900, oil on cardboard, 20 x 22 cm, Private Collection
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116. Pierre Bonnard, *L’Homme et la femme*, 1900, oil on canvas, 115 x 72.5 cm, Paris, Musée d’Orsay
117. Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877, oil on canvas, 154 x 115 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg
118. Édouard Vuillard, Photograph of Misia Natanson, *rue Saint-Florentin*, no date, Archives Antoine Salomon, Paris
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120. Octave Tassaert, "Vous nous le paierez", Boudoirs et mansardes, 1828, lithograph, Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
Pierre Bonnard, *Misia*, 1908, oil on canvas, 145 x 114 cm, Fondaçion Coleccion Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
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Édouard Vuillard, *Nu couchée*, 1892, medium, dimensions and whereabouts unknown
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