





THE NABIS

FROM BONNARD TO VUILLARD

Fundació With the exceptional support of the Musée d'Orsay
Catalunya 
La Pedrera  Musée d'Orsay

06.03 - 28.06

- Pierre Bonnard**
- Maurice Denis**
- Henri-Gabriel Ibels**
- Georges Lacombe**
- Aristides Maillol**
- Marc Mouclier**
- Paul-Élie Ranson**
- József Rippl-Rónai**
- Ker-Xavier Rousset**
- Paul Sérusier**
- Félix Vallotton**
- Jan Verkade**
- Édouard Vuillard**

The collection of major works presented here were created by artists active in France between 1888 and 1900. Calling themselves the Nabis — a term derived from the Hebrew word *Nevi'im*, meaning 'prophets' — these painters shared a common goal: artistic renewal.

The Nabi movement formed in the wake of Paul Gauguin's aesthetic experiments in the late 1880s, following the final Impressionist exhibition of 1886. Seduced by Gauguin's ideas, the Nabis absorbed many elements of his painting: his Synthetist and Symbolist approach and aiming for suggestion rather than a faithful representation of reality. Under the parallel influence of Japanese art, the Nabis embraced intense colours, simplified forms, and a two-dimensional conception of space.

While they explored common themes — daily life, intimacy, leisure and spirituality — the Nabis did not develop a uniform style. The group was characterised by the diversity of its personalities. First and foremost painters, they nevertheless sought to abolish the boundary between fine arts and applied arts. Encouraged by the gallerist and publisher Ambroise Vollard, they experimented with a wide variety of techniques, particularly printmaking, with the idea of producing mass-produced, affordable art objects. Convinced that art should beautify everyday life and be accessible to all, they made this ideal the driving force of their collective engagement. Their taste for innovation fuelled their mission as the prophets of a new art.

This exhibition, organized with the exceptional support of the Musée d'Orsay, is the first monographic exhibition in Barcelona dedicated exclusively to this movement. It presents the aesthetic principles, influences and concepts that characterize the Nabis' art. Through a wide selection of works, it showcases the beauty, diversity and creativity of the movement, which played a key role in the transition between Impressionism and the early avant-gardes of the twentieth century.

Organised into nine thematic sections corresponding to the key areas of their production, this exhibition highlights both the similarities and differences within the group.



Paul Sérusier
Le talisman. Paysage au bois d'Amour, 1888
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The Nabi Circle

The Nabis did not form an officially constituted group, but rather a shifting ensemble of artists. The initial core brought together Paul Sérusier, Paul-Élie Ranson, Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis, who all trained at Paris's Académie Julian. They were later joined by other artists: Henri-Gabriel Ibels, Georges Lacombe, Aristide Maillol, József Rippl-Rónai, Ker-Xavier Rousset, Félix Vallotton and Jan Verkade.

In its early days, the group functioned as a semi-secret society: each member was assigned a nickname and adhered to an aesthetic and intellectual pact underpinned by a shared taste for mystery, theosophy and esotericism, as well as for sacred or profane texts related to Symbolism.

The group met regularly to debate aesthetics. After exhibiting together on several occasions, the Nabis started to drift apart. Although certain friendships endured, by around 1900 the group was disbanding.

An Aesthetic Revolution

In October 1888, Sérusier showed the students of the Académie Julian a landscape he had painted in Pont-Aven, Brittany, under the guidance of Paul Gauguin. A combination of simplified forms and colours, the painting rendered a subjective vision of reality. Nicknamed *Le Talisman*, this small panel became an aesthetic reference for the Nabis. Held now at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, this iconic work is rarely lent out.

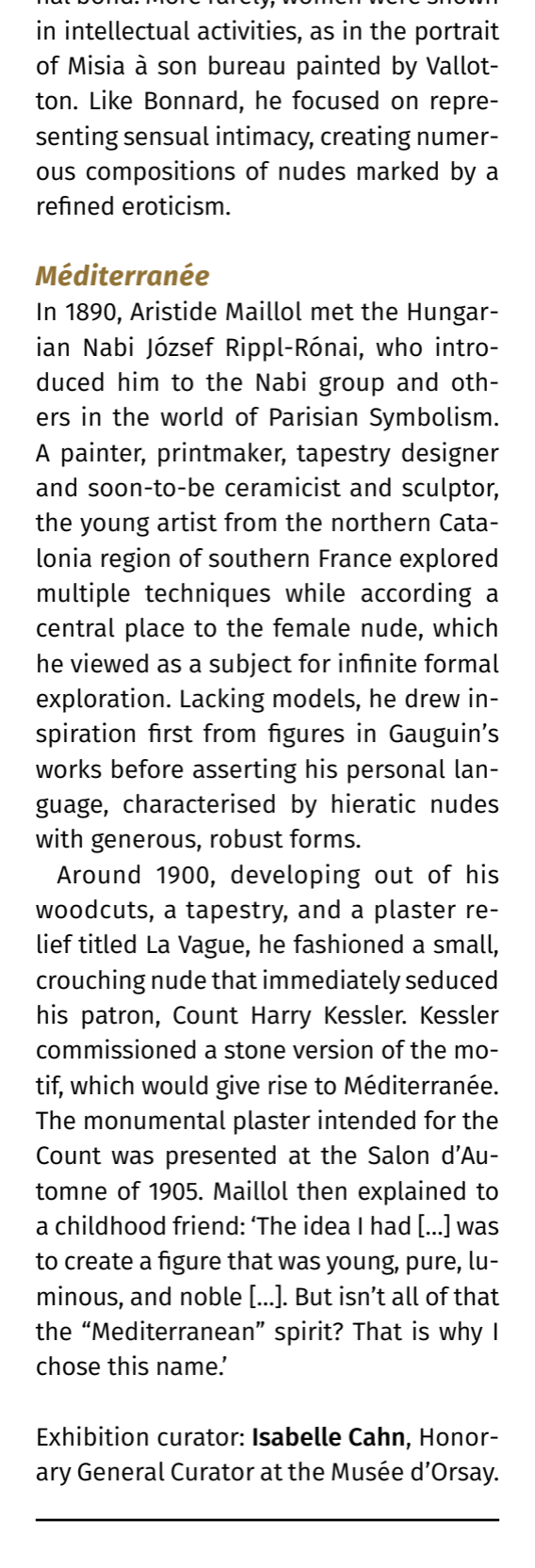
Two currents emerged within the group: Sérusier, Denis, Ranson and Verkade favoured a spiritual approach to art, marked by esotericism or Catholicism; Bonnard, Vuillard and Vallotton focused more on subjects of modern life and the expression of the psyche. All of them rejected Naturalism. Their art, close to Symbolism, drew inspiration from medieval Cloisonnism, folk images and, above all, Japanese prints. They discovered these mainly through the exhibition of Japanese prints organised in Paris in 1890, as well as Siegfried Bing's journal, *Le Japon artistique: documents d'art et d'industrie*.

'Remember that a painting, before being a warhorse, a nude woman or any anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.'
Maurice DENIS

La vie parisienne

Following the full-scale urban remodelling undertaken by Baron Haussmann during France's Second Empire, Paris had emerged as a resolutely modern capital by the late 1800s. Orderly buildings, wide boulevards, public gardens, and nocturnal illuminations transformed it into the City of Light. Pierre Bonnard became passionately drawn to this city in perpetual motion. He painted the flow of carriages, trams, and omnibuses. He painted the crowds, out of which the face or silhouette of a woman might be picked out, the play of nocturnal lights and the liveliness of cafés. Between 1895 and 1898, he created a series of prints for an album of urban landscapes entitled *Quelques aspects de la vie de Paris*.

The ever-changing spectacle of the city encouraged bold framing, the simplification of forms, marked chromatic contrasts, and an allusive and decorative language — all characteristics of the Nabis' aesthetic. Other artists in the group, such as Ibels, Vuillard and Vallotton, also became interpreters of urban life, rendering its feverish atmosphere with virtuosity and flair.



Pierre Bonnard
Danseuses, ca. 1896.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Theatre, Music, Spectacles

As lovers of live performance, the Nabis frequented opera, theatres, circuses and café-concerts, taking an interest as much in the spectators as the performances.

From the late 1880s, the Nabis became involved in Paul Fort's Théâtre d'Art, which championed a Symbolist and experimental repertoire. They designed stage sets for plays by Maurice Maeterlinck and for poetry recitals dedicated to Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé. Allusive and suggestive rather than explicit, none of these sets have survived. From 1893, the Nabis joined Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Œuvre. Vuillard, Bonnard, Denis, Rousset, Sérusier and Vallotton designed sets, costumes, programmes, and posters for the theatre's Symbolist, dreamlike and spiritual repertoire. Following the premiere of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* in 1896, some Nabis became involved in musical shows at the Théâtre des Pantins, while Bonnard collaborated with his brother-in-law, the composer Claude Terrasse, illustrating his musical scores and music theory books.

Symbolism: Esotericism, Dreams and Mysticism

The 1890s resurgence of idealism and neo-spiritualism resonated strongly among the Nabis. For Denis, spirituality and artistic creation were inseparable: his Catholic faith, the sacredness of music and the idealisation of women profoundly marked his work. Reflecting the Symbolist poets, he blended imaginary places with real, a vision imbued with religious mysticism.

Ranson, passionate about esotericism, peopled the forests in his paintings with unsettling figures such as witches. Sérusier and Lacombe, like other Symbolists, turned the Breton forest into a sacred and mythical place. Rousset extended this fascination to the sacred wood — a space of dreams and mystery, conducive to the exploration of parallel worlds. These paranormal subjects allowed them to deepen their aesthetic innovations by making the visible and the invisible coexist within their works.

Édouard Vuillard
Le banc rose, 1890
Private collection

Landscapes and Gardens

Despite being urbanites, the Nabis did not neglect landscape, either in the city or the countryside. Gardens, squares and parks played an important role in their art. These places of sociability and urban mixing offered the Nabis the spectacle of a theatre of ordinary life. Bonnard, Vuillard and Rousset observed children playing, and the nannies and mothers watching over them, capturing the lighthearted atmosphere in a series of Paris 'snapshots'. Vuillard produced numerous small oils in bright colours, sketching his fleeting impressions on pocket-sized cardboard panels.

The vast garden at Bonnard's family property in Isère inspired open-air compositions enlivened by the presence of his nephews and nieces, and animals from the adjoining farm. For Rousset, settled in the then-rural fringes of Paris, the figures took on a Symbolist character. Whether nymphs or muses, their poetic presence became decorative, blending the human figure with nature in a harmonious and timeless vision.

Modern Decor

Driven by the desire to abolish the hierarchy of artistic practices, and to overcome the separation between fine arts and craftsmanship, the Nabis regarded the decorative as an essential element of their art. From the outset, they created decorations designed for private interiors, commissioned by their patrons. At the same time, they explored the possibilities of colour lithography, which allowed for the mass production of works that could be widely circulated.

In collaboration with Siegfried Bing, founder of the Maison de l'Art Nouveau, the Nabis participated in the first Salon de l'Art Nouveau in December 1895, where they presented decorative panels, designs for fans, wallpaper and decorated porcelain. Ranson and Maillol also designed tapestry cartoons, which were executed by their wives. Vallotton, Bonnard and Maillol produced small sculptures of women intended to adorn bourgeois interiors. The Nabis' engagement in the applied arts was part of the wider, European aesthetic renewal driven by Art Nouveau.

Félix Vallotton
Misia à son bureau, ca. 1897
Musée de l'Annonciade, Saint-Tropez

A Theatre of the Everyday

In Nabi painting, domestic space was presented as the site of traditional feminine activity: household chores, childcare or sewing. The latter occupied a central place in the work of Vuillard, whose mother ran a corset workshop in their apartment. Enlivened by the comings and goings of seamstresses and clients, this intimate universe was a place of work, modelling, chatter and domestic tensions, which the artist suggested through subtle plays of light and shadow and colour contrasts.

Denis, the father of a large family, dedicated a key part of his production to the representation of maternity, approached both in its daily dimension and in an idealised, almost sacred vision of the maternal bond. More rarely, women were shown in intellectual activities, as in the portrait of *Misia à son bureau* painted by Vallotton. Like Bonnard, he focused on representing sensual intimacy, creating numerous compositions of nudes marked by a refined eroticism.

Méditerranée

In 1890, Aristide Maillol met the Hungarian Nabi József Rippl-Rónai, who introduced him to the Nabi group and others in the world of Parisian Symbolism. A painter, printmaker, tapestry designer and soon-to-be ceramicist and sculptor, the young artist from the northern Catalonia region of southern France explored multiple techniques while accordng a central place to the female nude, which he viewed as a subject for infinite formal exploration. Lacking models, he drew inspiration first from figures in Gauguin's works before asserting his personal language, characterised by hieratic nudes with generous, robust forms.

Around 1900, developing out of his woodcuts, a tapestry, and a plaster relief titled *La Vague*, he fashioned a small, crouching nude that immediately seduced his patron, Count Harry Kessler. Kessler commissioned a stone version of the motif, which would give rise to *Méditerranée*. The monumental plaster intended for the Count was presented at the Salon d'Automne of 1905. Maillol then explained to a childhood friend: 'The idea I had [...] was to create a figure that was young, pure, luminous, and noble [...]. But isn't all of that the "Mediterranean" spirit? That is why I chose this name.'

Exhibition curator: **Isabelle Cahn**, Honorary General Curator at the Musée d'Orsay.

NEXT EXHIBITION

«Anselm Kiefer»
2 October 2026
to 24 January 2027

FOLLOW US ON

@fclp_fundacio
#NabisLaPedrera

Fundació
Catalunya
La Pedrera

The Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera fulfils its commitment to promote art and culture through a carefully curated programme of exhibition experiences, thereby reaffirming one of its founding goals: to be a cultural catalyst for society.