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Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors

By Alfred Mac Adam



Installation view: *Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors*, Skarstedt, New York, 2026. Courtesy Skarstedt.

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Édouard Vuillard is hardly a household name these days. His presence seems faint in a late-nineteenth-century French context cluttered with wildly diverse geniuses like Paul Cezanne, Odilon Redon, Edgar Degas, and Pierre Bonnard. All different, yet all oddly linked in their collective attempt to explore the obscure nooks and crannies of the relationship between art and representation. The Impressionists studied the effects of light by venturing out of the studio to engage in plein air painting, but these painters of the next generation stayed in the studio, venturing into problems of perception on both physical and metaphysical levels. No less daring than the Cubists, these artists are nonetheless relegated to the backwaters of the nineteenth century because they refused to break completely with the things of this world.

To counter Vuillard's relative obscurity, Skarstedt has decided to present nineteen of his paintings, all small and all produced between 1890 and 1905. This is a cause for rejoicing. The exhibition is by no means an attempt to present all of Vuillard, but instead a focused look at the Vuillard we should know more about. Yes, Vuillard was a close associate of the Symbolist group known as the Nabis (prophets), and yes, he shared studio space with Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis, and yes, he was influenced by Japanese woodblock prints. Skarstedt, however, knows that it is not his associations or influences that make Vuillard important for us today but rather his accomplishments in the field of painterly perception and the uncoupling of art from geometric perspective.

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Odilon Redon stands apart from the painters mentioned above because he paints ideas. His work, even when he depicts a vase and flowers, is allegorical. This kind of art, Symbolism in the vein of a Gustave Moreau, has some influence on Vuillard, but only because of his literary contemporaries, especially Stéphane Mallarmé, whose 1897 “Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard” turns the printed page into a picture in words, a spatial musical score. In practice, Vuillard eschews allegory and embraces ambiguity to focus on problems of perspective rather than meaning. His concerns lead us to Gestalt theory, an attempt to codify the laws of perception by bringing together physics and sensorial perception. When we view the world, we unconsciously organize it into comprehensible totalities: objects are identified on the basis of incomplete visual data, while the eye builds their environment based on context cues (objects in the foreground are larger than those in the background, for example). The Renaissance brought this kind of spatial organization into art. Vuillard rejects it.

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Woman by an Open Door (1893), an 11-by-9-inch oil on cardboard, is a case in point. As with so many Vuillard works, we are looking into a room. In the foreground, a chairback, some kind of table, a stool—at least in theory. Then the woman mentioned in the image’s title, like us, looking into the room, the white of her apron playing off against the white tumbled cloth in the foreground and the duller white of the open door. But the “natural” spatial relationships between objects is askew, and the room beyond the open door stands closer to the picture plane than it should, more like a continuation of the wall alongside the door. The angle of the ceiling beam above the door is out of kilter. Vuillard is not painting the room of visual experience but a different room, the room of art



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The Drawer (ca. 1892), an 19-by-14-inch oil on canvas, deploys another character caught in the act of looking. An innocuous domestic scene: a woman in full-length on the right seeming to look toward another figure, ambiguously male or female, in the background digging through a drawer. At the left, a tiny man hangs on to the edge of the painting and peers out at us. At the right, in the foreground, a woman (perhaps) clings to a door while standing on one foot, her scarf an allusion to Art Nouveau's flowing arabesques. Vuillard is inviting us into his picture but not into any coherent illusionistic space.

Young Woman in Bed (1894), a 10-by-14-inch oil on board, goes further, thoroughly obliterating perspective. The subject inevitably recalls Edouard Manet's 1863 *Olympia*, a visually perfect portrait of a young woman in bed drawn to the precise specifications of traditional interiors. Vuillard, by contrast, creates what is virtually a snowstorm in a boudoir. The entire painting is a broken plane with a tiny, Klimt-like face staring not at us but into the whiteness of the bedclothes in which the figure is embedded. Manet's sexually audacious *Olympia* has been replaced by an art not keyed to representation but to shifting gradations of color. The subject, a young woman, no longer matters, having been displaced by a greater subject: the liberation of art from objects.

All in all, this look at Vuillard's less-appreciated visual gamesmanship comes together in a show that transports us to a past as modern as tomorrow.

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