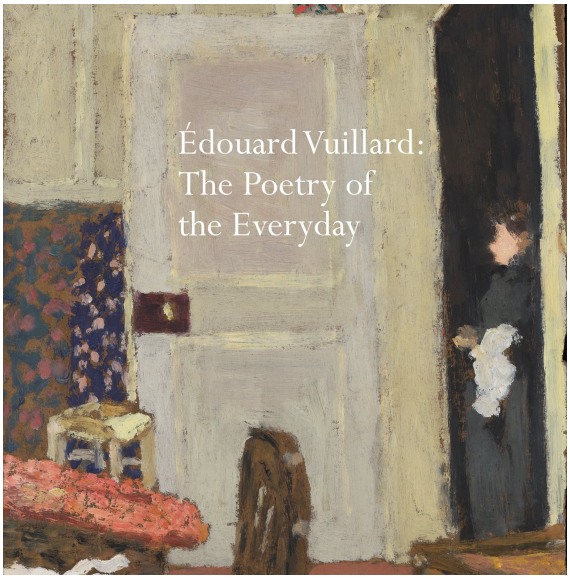
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Édouard Vuillard

The Poetry of the Everyday

Belinda Thompson

Chris Stephens

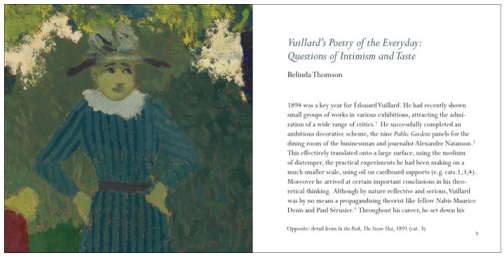
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- Explores Édouard Vuillard's early career combining intimate subject matter with abstraction by simplifying pictorial elements and observing decorative fabrics and wallpapers

During the 1890s and early 1900s Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) produced a body of work that combines intimate subject matter with abstract form through the simplification of pictorial elements and observation of decorative fabrics and wallpapers. Through these devices he developed an art that is unashamedly decorative and yet always replete with subtle suggestions of deeper meanings. In balancing form and content, psychological drama and abstraction, his pictures are about as close to poetry as any artist's, and all the more brilliant for their understatement and the near imperceptibility of their craft.

Illustrating many rarely seen paintings from private collections, this book offers a fresh look at the early career of this much-loved artist. Introduced by Chris Stephens, director of the Holburne Museum, and with an original essay by Belinda Thompson.

Belinda Thomson is a freelance art historian and Honorary Professor in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh. A specialist in late 19th-century French painting, particularly Gauguin and the Nabis, she published a monograph on Vuillard in 1988 (Phaidon). In 1991-2 she curated the Vuillard exhibition for the South Bank Centre which was seen in Glasgow, Sheffield and Amsterdam and in 1994 co-curated *Bonnard at le Bosquet*, London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 2010-11 she was lead curator of *Gauguin: Maker of Myth* at the Tate Modern, London, and at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. **Dr Chris Stephens** has been Director of the Holburne Museum since 2017. Prior to that he worked at Tate for over 20 years, as Head of Displays, Tate Britain, for much of that time, and also as Head of Modern British Art. Exhibitions in London and St Ives included *Barbara Hepworth: Centenary* (2003), *Francis Bacon* (2008), *Henry Moore* (2010), *Picasso and Modern British Art* (2012), *Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture for a Modern World* (2015) and *David Hockney* (2017). His book *St Ives: The Art and the Artists* was published by Pavilion in 2018.


Vuillard's Poetry of the Everyday:
Questions of Intimism and Taste
Belinda Thomson

1894 was a key year for Édouard Vuillard. He had recently shown small groups of works in various exhibitions, attracting the admiration of a wide range of critics.[1] He successfully completed an ambitious decorative scheme, the nine *Public Gardens* panels for the dining room of the businessman and journalist Alexandre Natanson.[2] This effectively translated onto a large surface, using the medium of distemper, the practical experiments he had been making on a much smaller scale, using oil on cardboard supports (e.g. cats 1, 3, 4). Moreover he arrived at certain important conclusions in his theoretical thinking. Although by nature reflective and serious, Vuillard was by no means a propagandising theorist like fellow Nabis Maurice Denis and Paul Sérusier.[3] Throughout his career, he set down his

Opposite: detail from *In the Park*, *The Straw Hat*, 1891 (cat. 3)

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Fig. 2: *The Bridal Chamber*, 1891

in-law, the painter Ker Xavier Roussel, who since they wed in 1893 had been living under her roof. At the time their marriage, following the loss of a baby and Roussel's reckless infidelity, was virtually on the rocks. Mme Vuillard decided to terminate the lease and move two doors down to a smaller flat.[13] If the proximity and enforced intimacy entailed by the four of them living together had a constraining effect on the Roussel marriage, it was also one of the drivers of Vuillard's art.

One of the most salient characteristics of Vuillard's homes in the early 1890s, as evidenced by his paintings, is the ubiquity of wallpaper. In *The Artist's Sister with a Cup of Coffee* (cat. 8) for instance, he presents

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the sitter, his sister Marie, more or less centrally but defines her shape imprecisely, the colour of her charcoal dress merging with the tones of the near black patterned wallpaper behind her. He diverts our attention to the much lighter room glimpsed through the open doorway where his mother – reduced to a simple blocky shape – busies herself in the light from the window with some mundane task. Wallpaper patterns sometimes enable one to identify rooms that might otherwise seem distinct, such as the two interiors associated with Marie and Roussel's marriage: *The Chat*, despite its gloomy lighting, features the same bed, screen and meandering black-on-buff wallpaper design as *The Bridal Chamber* (fig. 2), where the wall is lit much more brightly. One might even attempt to identify this paper with an 1878–9 Leroy design (fig. 3).[14] Commercial, machine-made

Fig. 3: Manufacture Isidore Leroy, machine-printed coloured wallpaper, 1878–9

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