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A Specter of Surfaces:

Modernism and the Decorative in Edouard Vuillard's *Large Interior with Six Figures*

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis examines the function of the decorative in Edouard Vuillard's 1897 painting *Large Interior with Six Figures*. Departing from previous scholarship, which positions the *Large Interior* as the fulcrum of Vuillard's earlier intimist paintings and his later bourgeois genre scenes, I argue that the *Large Interior* exacerbated his experiments with the depiction of decorated interiors and the subjects who inhabit them. The use of the decorative in the *Large Interior* shows space itself to be the consequence of a subject's relationship to interiors—her own interior, and the interior in which she finds herself. This thesis situates Vuillard's insight within the historical context of decoration's heightened literal, pictorial and metaphorical significance in fin-de-siècle France, from the chauvinist agenda for the French decorative arts to the alignment of decorated interiors with new psychological theories and corresponding

conceptions of selfhood. Through a close analysis of the *Large Interior* as well as other paintings from Vuillard's early oeuvre, I suggest that Vuillard's 1897 painting deploys the decorative to generate a space with equally radical consequences for painting and for subjectivity.

Only such a strong characterization of decoration could possibly merit the role it would perform for modernism: the great "decorative threat," supposedly vanquished by cubism and yet plaguing painting for decades to follow. Decoration remained for Clement Greenberg the menace that must be used against itself for art to prevail over contemptible elements—not just commodity culture and kitsch, but everything domestic, feminine, and excessive associated with decoration. If, as Peter Wollens has written, the decorative is modernism's symptomatic shadow, understanding its role in modernist aesthetics and ideology demands that we develop a rigorous concept of it. In doing so, this thesis interrogates what has been repressed by the marginalization of the decorative, and why. In a final section, it traces the reemergence of the decorative in Picasso's 1914 collage and sculpture to suggest some conclusions to this end, and to attest to the radical relevance of Symbolism and the decorative for the history of modernism.

The thesis of Joanna Marie Fiduccia is approved.

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## INTRODUCTION

Edouard Vuillard lived in a patterned world. His mother, the woman he called his muse, ran a dressmaking shop out of the apartment they shared until the end of her life.<sup>1</sup> In those rooms, the famous words of his fellow Nabi, Maurice Denis, “It is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order,” might have had another resonance.<sup>2</sup> For in Vuillard’s domain, Denis’ pronouncement is not just a bellwether of abstraction. It evokes fabrics heaped on tables and corsets in the making, a profusion of surfaces covered with colors, in the Vuillards’ typically over-apportioned bourgeois interior.

It is to this interior that we owe Vuillard’s greatest early paintings, as well as the impetus behind a curious work from 1897, the *Large Interior with Six Figures* (fig. 1). The painting’s title hardly accounts for it. In addition to six people, there are more patterns in this interior than can be counted, distributed with disorienting even-handedness across the six-foot stretch of canvas. This distribution, however, doesn’t unify the painting into a single ornamental plane. On the contrary, its decorative surfaces pry open the picture’s depth, even as they undermine it. The decorative in the *Large Interior* shows space to be the consequence of a subject’s relationship to interiors—her own interior, and the interior in which she finds herself.

The decorative therefore reemerged when pictorial space underwent its great crisis in cubism. Between the years of 1897 and 1914, decoration assumed the role of modernist

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Salomon recalls waiting with the painter around 1920 for Madame Vuillard’s train. As the car grew close,  
<sup>2</sup> “Se rappeler q’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.” The line is the opening remark of Denis’ 1890 tract, “Definition of Neotraditionalism,” written when the painter was only twenty years old. Originally published in *Art et critique* (Paris), 23 and 30 August 1890, and republished in Maurice Denis, *Théories* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin Editeurs, 1913), 1.

painting's greatest threat, a role it would play from a paradoxically marginal position. Yet before it was trivialized, the decorative briefly had reign over interiors and paintings alike. It appears in full force—hybrid, dissonant, and destabilizing—in Edouard Vuillard's *Large Interior*.

The *Large Interior* distinguishes itself from Vuillard's intimist paintings foremost in terms of its scale. Many times larger than these earlier works, its ambition elevates the experimentation in the works of the 1890s to the ranks of high seriousness. Those experiments—the obliteration of figure-ground distinctions through all-over patterning, and the play with pictorial depth combined with surface texture—made Vuillard's paintings heralds of abstraction.<sup>3</sup> Yet their mechanisms belonged to a category considered marginal and excessive, or marginal *because* excessive, in the history of modernism: decoration. The term encompasses the domestic quality of Vuillard's scenes, their female subjects, and the feminization of Vuillard himself as their portraitist.<sup>4</sup> It thus makes his work not only an unlikely candidate for the origins of abstract painting, but a clear ally of its great, if not its greatest, menace.

“The decorative is the specter that haunts modernist painting,” Clement Greenberg declared in 1957, “and part of the latter's formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself.”<sup>5</sup> The decorative, as Greenberg imagined it, was a poor proxy of abstract painting, a doppelgänger crucially deprived of any substance. Decoration connotes pleasure and artifice. Originally a term from the theater, it was the generator of illusions intended for the background only. Decoration is often considered synonymous with ornament, from the Latin *ornere*—to fit

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<sup>3</sup> In the words of John Russell, “People often discuss Vuillard in terms which imply the prefix ‘if only...’: if only he had gone on to invent abstract painting, if only he had continued the Mallarméan vision of the 1890s, if only he had dictated to Nature. And of course art history would have taken a different course if Vuillard had invented abstract painting ten years before Kandinsky.” John Russell, *Edouard Vuillard, 1868–1940* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1971), 70.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of this feminization and its counter-narrative in Vuillard as a progenitor of abstract painting, see Susan Sidlauskas, “Contesting Femininity: Vuillard's Family Pictures,” *Art Bulletin* Vol. LXXVIII no. 3 (March 1997): 85–111.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Milton Avery,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 43.

out, or complete. Yet whereas ornament has lost its connection to this root, coming to signify not completion but embellishment, the decorative carries this ambivalence with it.<sup>6</sup> To fit out, to complete, is to occupy an ambivalent relation to a structure. The *parergon* is extraneous insofar as it is not *ergon*—not “the work”—but vital insofar as it makes up for some perceived lack, completing what would otherwise be incomplete without it.<sup>7</sup> Considered as mere façade, the decorative describes a surface or series of surfaces with an arbitrary, if not deceitful relationship to what lies below it. But understood as a condition—the doubling of a room that creates an *interior*—the decorative is not a betrayal of space, but, in fact, its source.

Decoration owes most of its bad name to this interior. The nineteenth-century bourgeois interior was the domain of the domestic, feminine, and pleasurable—everything opposed, in other words, to supposedly serious virility of modernist painting. The banality and mass-production of decorative materials aligned decoration with a world of commerce, while its craft origins and hedonistic purpose made it seem quaint and trifling.<sup>8</sup> The industrialization of craft made newly accessible many luxury decorative items like wallpaper, but also led to a decline in quality, thereby further undermining decoration in later modernist eyes.<sup>9</sup> Decoration furthermore had particular political stakes during the two periods discussed here. In both the 1890s and early

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<sup>6</sup> For this reason, and for the purposes of my argument, I choose to distinguish between the ornament and the decorative. I differ in this regard from the recent work on the decorative by David Brett, who writes, “I shall treat decoration and ornament as a family of practices devoted mainly to visual pleasure; and treat this pleasure as a family of values, which includes social recognition, perceptual satisfaction, psychological reward and erotic delight.” See Brett, *Rethinking the Decorative: Pleasure and Ideology in the Visual Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5. While I agree that the ornament and the decorative have significant overlap, particularly with regard to a “family of practices” devoted to pleasure, to grasp the nature of the “decorative threat” for painting requires taking seriously its distinct ontological status and historical weight, which is far more complicated and far less material than ornamentation.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLoed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France, Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>9</sup> The decline in quality was accompanied by a formal change: the complex scenic decorations of the early nineteenth century were replaced by repetitive abstract motifs, which were, moreover, better suited to the smaller apartments of the less wealthy. See Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 135-136.

1910s, a chauvinist ideology had taken the decorative arts under its banner. They were therefore a sign of reactionary politics, on one hand, and the injurious effects of mass culture on the other, with its capacity to raze artistic accomplishments down to the level of mere decoration.<sup>10</sup>

But in late nineteenth-century France, the decorative meant something more complex than this traducement, “mere decoration,” would have it. “Merely” suggests everything wrong with the decorative—its superfluity, its frivolity, its piffling dissipations—yet it also has something of the minimization performed by off-color jokes on horrors otherwise too awful to bear. “Merely” is hardly the right word for a specter, and still less for the foe supposedly vanquished by heroic Abstract Expressionism.<sup>11</sup> For Vuillard and his associates, decoration played metaphorical and pictorial roles significant enough to justify its menace further down the road. “The revival of the decorative and the extravagant is symptomatic of the decline of modernism,” writes Peter Wollen, “but it is not an exemplary alternative or antidote. It was modernism’s symptomatic shadow from the very beginning.”<sup>12</sup> Understanding this symptomatic shadow will require returning to the historical height of decoration’s literal, pictorial and metaphorical significance. It will also ask that we reconsider decoration’s reemergence in

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<sup>10</sup> “For [Adolf] Loos, Hoffmann makes decoration not so much because he makes use of ornament but because he sees continuities where there are differences.... Loos’s position, on the other hand, is one of resistance against the leveling brought about by consumption.” Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture and Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 70.

<sup>11</sup> Late in life, Greenberg dolefully acknowledged the exclusions of his earlier arguments. Purity in the arts, as an illusory notion but useful idea, “has also worked to exclude the decorative — the decorative insofar as it functions solely as decoration. It’s as though aesthetic value, quality, could be preserved only by concentrating on ‘absolute’ or ‘autonomous’ art: thus on visual art — including even architecture — that held and moved and stirred the beholder as sheer decoration could not. Decoration is asked to be ‘merely’ pleasing, ‘merely’ embellishing, and the ‘functional’ logic of Modernism leaves no room, apparently, for such ‘mereness.’ This is part of the pity of Modernism, one of the sacrifices it enjoins....” Clement Greenberg, “Detached Observations,” *Arts Magazine* (December 1976), accessed on March 18, 2012, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/detached.html>. For an analysis of Greenberg’s many disparagements of the decorative, see Elissa Auther, “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg,” *Oxford Art Journal*, 27.3 (2004): 339–364.

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in David Cottington, *Cubism in the Shadow of War: Art and Avant-Garde Politics in Paris 1905–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 169.

cubism, not as a nostalgic throw-back to its heyday, but as a marker of what had changed with the demise of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior.

## TEXTILES

*“It must be stressed again that decoration is hardly banal finery intended to dress up a monument; that decoration is there from the start, from the first conception of the interpretation of a building project; that it is part of an edifice in the way that, not clothes, but muscles and skin are part of a man.” — Viollet-le-Duc<sup>13</sup>*

In the *Large Interior*, no surface is left uncovered. There are rugs—at least four of them, overlapping at odd angles—and wallpaper flecked on, a dusky dispersal of brown and vermillion. Striped window shades are drawn down against the afternoon light. A tapestry drapes a wall in the center of the painting, woven in leafy tufts of green and ochre. Decorative plates hover above a mantelpiece; a painting, smudges of color framed in a drab mat, hangs above a buffet topped with bouquets, themselves just vivid daubs of yellow and white paint. A bright red rhombus suggests a table runner. There is a heavy, rust-colored, rose-patterned curtain; a throw pillow and decorative box enigmatically left underfoot; an empty chair; two empty stools; surface atop surface, pattern atop motif.

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<sup>13</sup> “Il faut bien constater encore que la décoration n’est point une parure banale propre à revêtir n’importe quel monument ; que la décoration se manifeste dès le plan, dès la conception première sur l’interprétation d’un programme ; qu’elle tient à l’édifice, non comme le vêtement, mais comme les muscles et la peau tiennent à l’homme.” Qtd. in Jacques Soullilou, *Le Décoratif* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1990), 57.

Silhouetted in front of a window on the painting's far left, a woman sits in an armchair. Shadow obscures her face and her brown bulk of a body. Facing her, to her right, is a red-headed giantess. Spanning nearly the height of the canvas, she divides its left third from the rest. One hand claws at a striped purse, while the other is pinned behind her against the edge of a table. She stands, by all logic of perspective, nearest to us, but that hand—a hand that faces out to the viewer, close enough to touch—is a blur of flesh-tone and shadow, as indistinct as the seated woman's face. Bleariness, however, is far from universal in the *Large Interior*. Detail manifests everywhere: in the black-and-white striped throw between the women and on the books on the mantelpiece; even the stripes of the window shades are executed with a finer brush. Hands and faces, the organs of touch and countenance, have limits to their expressiveness here.

In fact, all six figures are painted less precisely than the decoration surrounding them. At the center of the composition, a large wood table lurches toward the viewer, carpeted end-to-end with books. A man sits reading behind this table. He holds the pages close to his face. The book is back lit by a golden light from some unspecified source—the window to his left, perhaps, or else the books themselves, whose covers are improbably bright in the gloaming. A woman stands behind him, looking over his shoulder. Her dress is painted in such rough blots that she seems almost to dissolve into the tapestry behind them. To the right, still further, on the other side of the buffet and a second shaded window, stands a woman all in black who reaches for a door. A curtain hangs to her right like a proscenium, staging her exit, and on its other side, a woman in a long brown-and-black striped skirt bends away from sight. She is nearly twice the size of the figure at the door, almost proportional to the redhead, but so coarsely contoured that she resembles instead a grim houseplant whose trunk frames the painting like a repoussoir tree in a landscape.

What should one make of this indifference to bodies in an interior that seems determined to include so many of them? The viewer seizes upon, not the language of faces and hands, but the articulation of patterns: the lively carpets, where Vuillard's brushwork mimics the wool tufts; the precise striping on the throw, as though it were threaded rather than painted on; the sunfall on the window shades; the dainty detail on the china vase holding the white flowers. The *Large Interior*, in fact, does not just deviate from the genre of a theatrical domestic scene through its unconcern for the players; it seems to retreat from painting altogether, replicating in its more lapidary regions the very decorative materials it depicts. As the Flemish painter and interior designer Henry Van de Velde observed in 1895, art in that decade had been moving toward the abolition of the easel painting—or rather, back to its status before it was reduced to “useless furniture.”<sup>14</sup> “The return of painting to a truly ornamental purpose could no longer be denied,” he writes, “after it endeavored to create the illusion of enamel, stained glass, carpets, embroidery. [As it got closer to the decorative arts] painting simultaneously regained hold of and negated itself.”<sup>15</sup> To forestall the alienation of painting from daily life, symbolist artists sought to transpose the decorative arts onto canvas, paradoxically dissimulating painting through the skillful imitation of artifice—brushstrokes that mimicked a rug's tufting or the enamel on a vase.

Many symbolists, however, had side-stepped the whole problematic by producing decorations *tout court*, and thus living out the watchword recalled by the post-impressionist painter Jan Verkade: “No more easel paintings! Down with useless furniture! Painting should not claim a freedom that isolates it from other arts!... There are no more paintings; there are only

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<sup>14</sup> In the words of Jan Verkade. See below.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Van de Velde, “A Clean Sweep for the Future of Art,” in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 120.

decorations.”<sup>16</sup> Vuillard had heard the call, and in the 1890s painted both intimist works and large decorative commissions. As intimist, he painted family members and friends in domestic scenes that were charmed, Claude Roger Marx recalls, by the quality of the “lived-before.”<sup>17</sup> As a decorative artist, Vuillard contributed to the theater, designing sets for the leading symbolist repertoires,<sup>18</sup> while a progressive Parisian elite sought out his decorative panels for their city apartments and country homes.

Vuillard scholars tend to uphold this distinction between his intimist and decorative works, perhaps because the paintings themselves hew to it.<sup>19</sup> The intimist scenes are small-scale, psychologically taut and loosely dappled. His decorative panels, by contrast, are large, frequently featuring outdoor sites<sup>20</sup> of sociability, like public parks and squares or gardens. And though certain don’t lack for eccentric details,<sup>21</sup> they are on the whole aerated and serene next to the febrile figures in works like *Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1893) (fig. 11) or *Interior with Red Bed* (also known as the *Bridal Chamber*) (1893). In this construction of Vuillard’s 1890s work,

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<sup>16</sup> “Vers le début de 1890, un cri de guerre fut lancé d’un atelier à l’autre: Plus de tableaux de chevalet! A bas les meubles inutiles. La peinture ne doit pas usurper une liberté que l’isole des autres arts... Il n’y a pas de tableaux, il n’y a que des decorations.” Dom Wilbrod (Jan) Verkade, *Le torment de Dieu, étapes d’un moine peintre* (Paris: Roualt et Watelin Editeurs, 1923), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Claude Roger Marx, *Vuillard: His Life and Work*, trans. E.B. D’Auvergne (London: Paul Elek, 1946).

<sup>18</sup> Vuillard began designing sets for Paul Fort’s Théâtre d’Art and joined his old friend Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Œuvre as co-director in 1893. In the mid-1890s, Vuillard designed numerous sets and programs for the Théâtre de l’Œuvre’s production, including Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm* and *Master Builder*, Hauptmann’s *Les Ames Solitaires*, and Maeterlinck’s marionette play *Interior*. Vuillard also inherited from the theater his signature distemper technique. For a discussion of Vuillard’s involvement with the theater, see Belinda Thompson, “Vuillard and the Theater,” *Vuillard* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 77–104; and Nancy Forgione’s dissertation, “Edouard Vuillard in the 1890s: Intimism, Theater, and Decoration,” dissertation (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Easton’s description: “[Vuillard] chose interiors as the setting for the intimate subjects so close to his heart. Many of his larger decorative panels, on the other hand, depict panoramic landscapes or outdoor genre scenes. Made on commission, these works constitute a less private endeavor than the small easel pictures and lack the close weave and rich layering of the interiors.” Elizabeth Easton, *The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 3.

<sup>20</sup> There are exceptions to this characterization among the decorative works, however—most notably, the five-panel work, known as *Album*, commissioned by Thadée and Misia Natanson, which consists entirely of interior scenes, and the 1896 commission for Dr. Louis-Henri Vaquez, which depicts a drawing room and library-workspace.

<sup>21</sup> Consider, for instance, the child cantering around in what seems to be a bunny costume in the first panel of *The Public Gardens*, or the ominous shroud on the nurse’s lap in the third panel. Vuillard’s decorative works are detailed in Gloria Groom’s *Edouard Vuillard, Painter-Decorator: Patrons and Projects, 1892-1912* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

private is opposed to public, psychic exploration to surface observation, recondite experiments to ornamental displays.<sup>22</sup>

The *Large Interior* eludes these distinctions. At nearly six feet long and three high, the painting was a titanic undertaking in comparison to Vuillard's intimist compositions. He had already executed decorative panels of that size and larger, although it is unlikely that the *Large Interior* was a commissioned decoration.<sup>23</sup> Instead, the painting occupies a odd position: Intimist in subject matter but decorative in scale, it seems to merge Vuillard's two modes. Accordingly, Gloria Groom has positioned it as a turning point that forecasts the end to both Vuillard's psychological explorations in the early intimist works, and the "purely ornamental" concerns of his commissioned panels.<sup>24</sup> Kimberly Jones seconds Groom, writing, "In terms of both its scale and its visual complexity, *Large Interior with Six Figures* represents a new direction in Vuillard's art, marking the transition from the tightly contained, claustrophobic interiors typical of his oeuvre of the early to mid-1890s to a more expansive, space-oriented approach to picture

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<sup>22</sup> Marx, in fact, questions Vuillard's ease in the decorative realm, speculating that his many commissioned productions may have been "dictated by... complementary exigency" in response to his fundamentally intimate (intimist) nature. While Marx believes Vuillard was capable of mediating between this nature and the demands of creating large-scale decorations, he concedes that only in the intimate realm did Vuillard "remain true to his more exquisite qualities," thus reaffirming the division in Vuillard's production over and above any success the artist achieved at finding a "mean" between decoration and intimism. Marx, *op. cit.*, 120. Russell seconds Marx's evaluation of Vuillard's temperament: "He was a micro-dramatist from the very outset of his career [and yet] Three things worked against this, quite apart from natural ambition. Vuillard's theatrical involvements led him before long to master a completely different *facture*: that of the scene-painter, who has to work fast, on a big scale, for immediate effect. The climate of feeling among his friends was against the easel-painting and in favour of the large decoration. And he had, from 1892 onwards, commissions which stretched his gifts far beyond their previous extension." John Russell, *Edouard Vuillard, 1868–1940* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1971), 29–30.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Easton states that the painting, "as far as can be established, was not painted on commission and was not intended for any decorative function." Groom concurs, to a degree, describing it as "decorative, albeit uncommissioned," although she acknowledges that it might have been intended for a large interior and then rejected. Thompson speculates that, given its scale, it may have been intended for the Natanson's property at Valvins, though it is unclear why it would have been rejected by such close friends of the painter. Furthermore, on the basis of letters exchanged between Vuillard and Bonnard that carefully track potential commissions, it seems unlikely that Vuillard would have not only begun but brought to conclusion such a sizeable work without being assured of its acceptance. Easton, 79; Groom, 96–97; Thompson, 44; Guy Cogeval and Antoine Sullivan, *Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance: Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2003), Vol. IV, 215. Antoine Terrasse, ed., *Bonnard/Vuillard: Correspondance* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Groom, *op. cit.*

making.”<sup>25</sup> By this latter approach, Jones means those bourgeois genre scenes of Vuillard’s later work, the portraits of a well-to-do Parisian set in their domestic settings.

In fact, works painted in the years following the *Large Interior* do flag this shift in Vuillard’s focus through their “expansive, space-oriented” compositions: the didactic illustration of social detachment in the enlarged intervals between family members in *The Roussel Family at the Table* (1899) (fig. 2), the fish-eye perspective of *Interior, The Salon with Three Lamps, rue Saint-Florentin* (1898), exploited to comic affect in *The Family in the Sitting Room at L’Etang la Ville* (1901), in which isolated individuals cast bovine stares into the bloated space around them. All of these works, however, spell a retreat from the radical pictorial play in the *Large Interior*. This play—the coincidence of Vuillard’s ruling passion for patterns and his interest in the compressed perspective of interior spaces—reaches its fever pitch in the 1897 painting.

Its first flushes, however, occurred earlier in that decade. The *Large Interior* looks less like a departure from these 1890s works, as Grooms and Jones suppose, than an exacerbation of their experiments. Consider the painted study *The Atelier* (1892) (fig. 3), another panoramic interior with six figures.<sup>26</sup> The figures, all women this time, busy themselves with lengths of fabric in a pandemonium of pattern. Mauve wallpaper with poppy-red rosettes competes with the seamstresses’ patterned dresses. They face different directions, alternating between three-quarter profile and *profil perdu*, poses that repeat themselves in the *Large Interior*. Toward the center, one woman holds up a pale, fleshy fabric in front of herself, which seems to spill out of the painting; the seamstress to her left raises a complementary, dusk-blue swath behind her, which draws her into the painting’s wallpaper. As if to reinforce this alternation between forward and

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<sup>25</sup> Cogeval in E-V, 208.

<sup>26</sup> The painting was intended as a study for the five-panel Desmarais screen, also known as *The Dressmakers* (1892–1893), although the final object bears very little resemblance to *The Atelier*.

backward motion—this subtle, rhythmic baseline in the mad melody of pattern—a chevron strip of floorboards zigzags across the canvas’s bottom edge.

In *Mumps*, painted that same year, Vuillard again tests the capacity of alternating planes—this time of pattern and solid color—to produce the illusion of space (fig. 4). A woman in black wearing a spotted kerchief leans into the center of the composition. A column of frenetic wallpaper covers the left foreground; to its right extend vertical gray bars of varying values, which mark the back corner and windowsill of an adjoining room. A segment of bright latticework covers the window, balancing the busy proscenium of wallpaper on the left of the canvas and a slimmer strip of dark pattern, which, like the wallpaper, runs the height of the canvas. Focus shuttles between the foreground, occupied by the wallpapered sides and central figure of the composition, and the barred tones and window lattice of the far space, which simultaneously compose and complicate the painting’s depth. They function like the many patterns in the *Large Interior*, such as the striped window shades that land like upbeats across the painting’s background. Pattern asserts itself not in spite of perspective, but as its fickle partner, at turns affirming and then contradicting it.

Pattern takes on even stranger roles in the *Large Interior*. It does not just articulate space, but undermines it. The tapestry behind the table of books, for instance, is so richly textured it briefly sustains the illusion that the man reads in a shaded garden and not a bourgeois salon.<sup>27</sup> There is moreover a conceptual unreality that comes from so much pattern and motif. Realistic descriptions, as Susan Stewart has observed, do not report all the information of the world; instead, they replicate our familiar hierarchies of it. When description and detail become

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<sup>27</sup> It is painted, in fact, in the same palette Vuillard would use two years later for the decorative pendants commissioned by Adam Natanson, landscapes of the hills surrounding L’Etang-la-Ville. A suburb near Paris, L’Etang-la-Ville was the residence at the time of Vuillard’s sister, Marie, and her husband, Ker-Xavier Roussel and daughter Annette. The pendants, known as *The First Fruits* and *Window Overlooking the Woods*, are currently in the collections of the Norton Simon Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago.

excessive, the effect is not realism, but the “*unreal effect of the real.*”<sup>28</sup> This is the strategy of the *nouveau roman*—an even-handed enumeration that disorders rather than confirms our sense of a scene.

In the *Large Interior*, rugs are charged with the task of maintaining some cohesion in this overabundant detail. On the left side of the canvas are portions of oriental rugs, but the majority of the room is spanned by two other carpets. Running from the bottom right of the canvas under the table and ending just past the feet of the redhead is an speckled rug—a static of chartreuse, tan and blue-black studded with red. It overlaps with the second large rug: an orange and black Persian rug that takes up nearly a quarter of the painting. Its right edge extends vertically down from the skirt of the rightmost woman, while its left juts diagonally, reaching halfway between the table’s legs. The majority of it lies unobstructed. The rug is painted with more vigor than any figure in the room. It refuses to lie flat; the orange book painted at its center seems like a feeble attempt to keep the rug from erupting into a vision of flaming tar.

The rug, however, does something else besides erupt: it moves backward in space. Its far border, parallel with the canvas’s bottom edge, rises higher—judging by the table’s angle—than it reasonably should. The woman at the door stands further back still, telescoped in her diminutive proportions. The longer one looks, the more confounding the room becomes. The tapestry on the far wall looks far closer than the door; the windows are the same size, but one is set lower and faces us straight on, while the other is angled to the right; the buffet pivots far back into space, while the painting hanging above it turns only slightly. The speckled rug leads in a gentle slope toward the upper left corner; is it set on an angle, or are we? Are we, in fact, set at *many* angles, viewing the interior from five different vantage points—or, in what amounts to the

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 27.

same thing, has the scene been folded in five ways, compressed before our eyes like a concertina?

As Cogeval has noted, this “apparent chaos” of perspective resolves into a regular alternation of concave and convex regions, a “wave-like aspect” to the composition that recedes near the seated woman and the woman at the door, and protrudes at the center and far edges.<sup>29</sup> The surface of the canvas seems regularly hinged, he notes, “like a large five-paneled screen or a set of mirrors in a zigzag arrangement.”<sup>30</sup> His simile calls to mind the decorative screens Vuillard had occasion to paint, as well as the Japanese screens admired by many of the Nabis.<sup>31</sup> But the conflation of both possibilities—a painted screen *and* a hinged mirror—deserves further remark.

The abundance of patterned surfaces, patched together at intervals, does in fact suggest the panels of a screen, whose angles are indicated by the slant of the table and the proportions of the figures. But it is the *patterns* that delimit space in the *Large Interior*, thrusting its depths back at us like a funhouse reflection. They do not evoke a painting folded in space, but rather *unfold* a space before the painting. Big enough to take over the space of a wall, the painting accomplishes pictorially something generally reserved for the decorative alone: it produces an interior, experienced by the viewer who reels before these perspectival switchbacks. The *Large Interior* nonetheless is not spacious. That kind of expansiveness is vouchsafed by a vanishing point, which Vuillard instead multiplies and conceals. Paradoxically, the *Large Interior* is a space made of surfaces—which is, after all, the nature of the decorative.

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<sup>29</sup> Cogeval, C-S, 348.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. See Émilie Daniel, “Vuillard, l’espace de l’intimité,” Thesis, Institut d’Art et d’Archéologie, Paris, 1984, pp. 187–190.

<sup>31</sup> The screen also has occidental origins in Flemish polyptychs. On the painter’s 1892 “Belgian escapade” with Ker-Xavier Roussel, Vuillard had seen van Eyck’s *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* and perhaps also Petrus Christus’s *Lamentation* (c.1472); Cogeval recognizes in the latter the similar dimensions and alternating perspectives found in the *Large Interior*. Cogeval, C-S, 349. The *Annunciation* by the Master of Flemalle, also in the Brussels Musée de Beaux-Arts, bear stunning resemblance to the screen Vuillard prepared for the Natansons, with its damier floor rising vertiginously toward the viewer, and its two figures grouped around a round table.

## FURNISHINGS

*“A canister that is the remains of furniture and a looking-glass and a bed-room and a larger size, all the stand is shouted and what is ancient is practical. Should the resemblance be so that any little cover is copied, should it be so that yards are measured, should it be so and there be a sin, should it be so then certainly a room is big enough when it is so empty and the corners are gathered together.”*

– Gertrude Stein, “Tender Buttons”

Vuillard did not just abide the *Large Interior*'s protrusions and recessions; he amplified them. An oil study of the *Large Interior* shows a similar composition to the final painting, except that to the right of the table, Vuillard has sketched two chairs angled toward the viewer (fig. 5). They form the vertices of an equilateral triangle with the woman at the door at its apex. In the *Large Interior*, however, one chair has been turned away from the viewer, while the armchair has been replaced altogether with a small, shiny stool tucked behind a table leg. Nothing therefore keeps the eye from plunging back to the far door; nothing stabilizes this lone chair or clarifies its function. Vuillard uses a similar technique in *Woman Standing in a Salon* (1896) (fig. 6), whose preparatory sketch shows a pair of armchairs, grouped in the foreground around a corner of a rug, forming a diamond with the eponymous standing woman—also at the door—at its peak (fig. 7). In the painting, however, Vuillard removes the foremost chair and aligns the rug parallel to the canvas edge. The woman seems no longer nestled among her furniture but standing far from it, no longer in the room but on its threshold.

The figure at the door in the *Large Interior*, too, is a threshold figure—on the point of leaving, but never actually going through with it. For there are no egresses in the *Large Interior*. No open windows letting in the sunlight. No doors leading onto other rooms. This hermetic scene reflects what Nancy Troy described as the “interiorization” of the 1890s, an inward turn that describes both lifestyles and aesthetics.<sup>32</sup> The interior was transformed by this turn. The decorated apartments of the Goncourts and Robert de Montesquiou were more than vehicles for self-expression; they were mandalas, complete universes unto themselves. In fin-de-siècle France, the interior became “no longer a refuge but a replacement for the external world,” writes Debora Silverman.<sup>33</sup> She notes the coordination of this elite, decadent relationship to the interior with a national program that had equal ambitions for it. In the 1890s, art nouveau transferred its attentions from public feats of engineering to the domestic arts, withdrawing from public space as well as the technological, future-oriented, international ethos that accompanied it in 1889, when the Eiffel Tower served as figurehead.<sup>34</sup> The resulting *rappel à l'ordre* sought to consolidate French identity in an aristocratic cultural tradition based in Rococo decoration—supported broadly, however, by art dealers like Siegfried Bing as well as post-impressionists like Jan Verkade, of the decorative Geronimo, who were more closely associated with *progressisme* and anarchism than nationalism.

The decorated interior was thus elevated to a full statement of the self for popular *and* eccentric agendas, chauvinist *and* anarchist politics. Such ideas were supported, moreover, by new concepts in psychology in fin-de-siècle France. Spearheaded by the Doctors Jean-Martin

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<sup>32</sup> The term “interiorization” is Nancy Troy’s, from an unpublished CAA paper titled “Interiorization in French Art and Design in the 1890s.” Groom, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 79. The great literary figure of this interiorization was R.K. Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes*, modeled on de Montesquiou. *Des Esseintes*’ ill-starred pet tortoise, who perishes under the burden of his bejeweled shell, furnishes an unsubtle—and therefore, one is inclined to think, unserious—allegory for fin-de-siècle decadence.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Charcot and Hippolyte Bernheim, the discovery of the unconscious, the new practices of hypnosis and its implications for the existence of divided selves, and the diagnoses of the pathological modern citizen, all contributed to a profoundly altered understanding of the individual's inner life.<sup>35</sup>

The interior domestic space, in turn, became a metaphor for the mind itself, a *chambre mentale*. The phrase belongs to Jules Bois, who writes, "In our mental rooms there are not only respectable and good-natured tenants, but also strange visitors...; they move through the interior theater of the mind like phantoms in haunted houses."<sup>36</sup> His vision of a haunting lends new sense to the shadowy figures in the *Large Interior*, who have gone unnamed up to this point. That fact is remarkable on its own in an oeuvre like Vuillard's, where not only figures, but whole family histories are carefully detailed in the process of most paintings' exegeses. The *Large Interior*, however, poses rare difficulties for Vuillard scholars. Recently, Guy Cogeval finally identified the room as the Ranson salon on the Boulevard de Montparnasse, but this conclusion followed years of competing hypotheses.<sup>37</sup> Cogeval determined the location from letters between Vuillard, his mother, his brother-in-law Ker-Xavier Roussel, and the work's first owner, the painter Félix Vallotton—letters that Cogeval initially sought out to explain the possibility of a revision of the painting between 1897 and 1898.

The *Large Interior* was first exhibited in a group exhibition of Nabi paintings at the Vollard gallery in April 1897. Although it was the largest easel painting that Vuillard ever

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., in particular chapter five, "Psychologie Nouvelle," 75–108.

<sup>36</sup> "Dans nos chambres mentales il n'y a seulement des locataires honorables et de bonne compagnie, mais aussi des visiteurs étranges... ; ils passent sur le théâtre intérieur qu'est le cerveau, comme des fânetes dans les maisons hantées." Jules Bois, "Les Guérisons par la pensée," *La Revue* 35 (1900): 29, quoted in Silverman, 332 fn. 17.

<sup>37</sup> In particular, Françoise Daulte identifies the setting as Odilon Redon's apartment and the seated individual as Redon himself, while Belinda Thompson proposes that the reader is Mallarmé and his companion in the composition, Misia Natanson. Both Felix Baumann and Ursula Perucchi-Petri suggest that the man is Ker-Xavier Roussel with his wife, and Vuillard's sister, Marie, a premise seconded by Gloria Groom, who however imagines Marie as the large figure in the foreground. Cogeval, *E-V*, 209; Thompson, 44; Groom, 97.

ventured, the work did not sell—perhaps because Vallotton, also among the exhibiting artists, had advised Vuillard to decline a parsimonious offer.<sup>38</sup> As a sign of gratitude, it seems, Vuillard offered the painting to Vallotton, who kept it until the estate passed the work to the Kunsthau Zurich, where it remains today. Vallotton included the *Large Interior* in two of his own works from 1898, *Woman in a Purple Dress by Lamplight* (fig. 8) and *The Red Room*.

In the first of Vallotton's paintings, the *Large Interior* hangs on a wall in Vallotton's apartment. Its surface is bleary. Only one figure emerges clearly: a man in a dark overcoat and hat, standing at the door. In *The Red Room*, the *Large Interior* appears again, this time in the corrected reflection in a mantelpiece mirror (fig. 9). Again, only one figure distinguishes itself in the glass, standing in the same location as the be-hatted man: the likeness of Ida Rousseau, poet and mother-in-law to Paul Ranson, the selfsame who hesitates at the door in Vuillard's painting today.

While it is possible that Vallotton had himself switched the gender of this figure in *Woman in a Purple Dress* to heighten that painting's ominousness, Cogeval claims otherwise. On the evidence of the aforementioned letters between Vuillard and his mother, and between Vallotton and Ker-Xavier Roussel—a great philanderer and great friend of Vuillard, but also, problematically, his brother-in-law—Cogeval suggests that the painting was *revised* to suppress one of Roussel's indiscretions.<sup>39</sup> In 1897, Roussel was bungling the end of an affair with Germaine Rousseau, Ida's daughter and Ranson's sister-in-law. Cogeval identifies her as the figure tensely encountering Madame Vuillard in the leftmost part of the composition. Vuillard, he concludes, initially depicted Ker-Xavier at the door—symbolically decamping from the affair—but later replaced him with Ida Rousseau. The only image of this spectral Ker-Xavier

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<sup>38</sup> Groom, 97. Vallotton perhaps reckoned that the low-asking price on such a substantial work would depreciate the value of Vuillard's other canvases.

<sup>39</sup> Cogeval in C-S, 346–348.

now lives in Vallotton's work. In the short interval between *The Purple Dress* and *The Red Room*—in the delay, no less, of the mirror on the mantelpiece—*Roussel* thus becomes *Rousseau*. It takes only a syllable. The refracted interiors play host to the verbal slippage and transference we might otherwise situate in the subconscious. The mother slides into the position of the adulterer. Like two strange visitors, they pass silently on the mind's stage.

The philosopher Alfred Fouillée echoed Bois' *chambre mentale* by describing the nineteenth-century mind as animated by a “troupe of different, multiple actors enact[ing] an interior drama”<sup>40</sup>—a collective self within the self. Fouillée's notions aligned with both progressive politics and the social conditions of the fin-de-siècle creative class.<sup>41</sup> A new spirit of collectivity had gained momentum in the 1890s, with an avant-garde that used the bourgeois interior as its gathering place.<sup>42</sup> This spirit often had radical ambitions. It sought to overturn not only the hierarchies of the arts, but social structures more generally. As Julia Kristeva has theorized with regard to Mallarmé's poetics, the overhaul of an aesthetic suggested an analogous reorganization of social structures, just as anarchist programs required rethinking the structures of subjectivity.<sup>43</sup>

David Cottington also affirms the connection between symbolist writers and progressive politics: “Insofar as it was the institutions of the bourgeois state that determined relations

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<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Silverman, 90.

<sup>41</sup> In Vuillard's case, the *Revue Blanche* circle, organized around the journal's editors, Alfred and Thadée Natanson, and the latter's extraordinary wife, Misia.

<sup>42</sup> “We also identify in many of our interiors a complex aesthetic articulation of the ever-changing but organic relationship of individuals to collectives within utopian politics in this period [of the late nineteenth century].” While this was certainly more clearly the case in England, as studied in the collection of essays edited by Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart, the complex aesthetic articulation and the strength of collective ventures were equally present across the channel. Edwards and Hart, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart, eds. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co., 2010), 14. As we will see, this spirit was not to last.

<sup>43</sup> “Certain tendencies in anarchism... far from stopping at contestation of state and social structures, demanded a profound transformation of the concept of the speaking subject itself,’ while reciprocally ‘writers engaged in an interrogation of the subject in language met the preoccupations of anarchists in combat with social structures.’” Qtd. in David Cottington, 75, from Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974).

between subjectivity, language and sexuality, the political affiliation of symbolist writers was with any movement, from the liberal right to anarchist, that demanded the reshaping of or rupture with, those institutions.”<sup>44</sup> The connection stands for Symbolist painters as well, who pursued the reorganization of pictorial language, gender representation, and subjectivity by experimenting with the representation of the heart of their society: the bourgeois interior.

The *Large Interior* suggests not the destruction of this heart, but its transformation into a mind occupied by multiple selves. These selves are signaled by the painting’s troupe of figures, and suggestively amplified by the Roussel-Rousseau substitution, but they are enacted through the multiplicity of viewpoints suggested by the painting’s perspective, and the ability of these viewpoints to seize every corner of the room. For again, there are no egresses in the *Large Interior*. No open windows that excerpt a world of out reach. No doors leading onto rooms we cannot see. Every surface is accounted for, described in broad or fine strokes. If the presence of something indescribable marks that part of experience that remains forever locked within us, in the impregnable vault of our bodies, then its inverse—a state of *absolute describability*—connotes the opposite. With every description, Stewart writes, “the social utopia of language, the belief in the signifying capacity of language and uniform membership in that capacity on the part of speakers, is confirmed.”<sup>45</sup> In its excessive describability, the *Large Interior* confirms this membership over and over again. The mind is a room with many players, it suggests, a perfectly communicable collective.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. For a discussion of Symbolism and Anarchism, see Eugenia Herbert, *The Artist and Social Reform: France and Belgium, 1885–1898* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) and Silverman.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart, op. cit., 26.

## FOLDING SCREENS

*“Inward and outward woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture—half, tint and trace and accident of homely colour and form, from the wood and the bricks; half, mere soul-stuff, floated thither from who knows how far.”*

– Walter Pater, “The Child in the House”

But not everywhere, all the same, or not peaceably so, for the *Large Interior* expresses not just the indifferentiability people from one another, but the indistinguishability of people from their surroundings. The woman on the far right, her skirt belted at her waist like a trussed-up curtain, has no features or visible flesh; she is as much fabric as the drapery beside her. Ranson’s wife’s torso dissolves into the tapestry, and his own legs are nowhere to be found. Meanwhile, all the sharpness one imagines in Madame Vuillard’s confrontation of Germaine lies not on her face but on the striped fabric beside her, while even the rug is more expressive than Ranson’s blank brow. “The fitting name of the ‘situation,’”—*this* situation, no less—“as the powerless-momentary indifferentiation of subject and object,” writes Theodor Adorno, “is the bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century.”<sup>46</sup> In this *intérieur*, no gap appears between a subject and her surroundings.<sup>47</sup> There is no sense in speaking of “interior space,” but only space as the boundary against which the *intérieur* announces itself. Through this indifferentiation, this

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<sup>46</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 40–41.

<sup>47</sup> “The harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself from the heteronomous, indeterminate, or simply mean world, the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediatedly, in subjectivity.” *Ibid.*, 38.

airless proximity, the “mere decoration” of these surroundings is transfigured from commodities into extensions and expressions of the self.

This state registers, according to Susan Sidlauskas, in two aesthetic problems: “In painterly terms, it is a problem of how *difference* is expressed in a pictorial field that stresses parity of emphasis and fusion of parts... In conceptual terms, it is a problem of how the elusive, ever-changing self is represented as a material entity.”<sup>48</sup> Vuillard forged a style from these problems in the years leading up to the *Large Interior*. On one hand, his use of patterning subverts the figure-ground distinction, as subjects deliquesce into their surroundings. Given his supposed indifference to his figures, Vuillard seemed to his modernist critics to be on the verge of purging them from his compositions altogether, and thus producing “pure” abstractions.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, the subversion of figure-ground distinctions in the space of the interior, given the interior’s expressive functions in nineteenth-century France, entails a more troubling proposition. Adorno’s “situation” implies the breakdown of a private, bounded self. That private self established a model for the artwork, whose surface, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, “exist[ed] in relation to its ‘depth’ much the way that the exterior of the human subject is understood to relate to his internal, or true, self.”<sup>50</sup> The artwork, in turn, affirmed the image of a self-contained creator. This system of mutual reinforcement could remain intact even without figuration, of course, but only if the artwork sustained a relation to depth—which is precisely what the decorative seems to deny. The patterns that undermine the figure-ground distinction in Vuillard’s work approach trance-like repetitiveness. They are like wallpaper: repetitively

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<sup>48</sup> Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self*, 94.

<sup>49</sup> See Sidlauskas, “Contesting Femininity,” 88, on the critical reception of Vuillard by critics such as Julius Meier-Grafe and Alfred J. Barr, who celebrated precisely this “indifference” as a hallmark of Vuillard’s paintings’ incipient abstraction.

<sup>50</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 3.

rendered (and thus without psychological depth) and meant to adorn (and thus without serious aesthetic value). Vuillard's strategy, however, was to produce value and resonance *through* the decorative. He did not seek to use decoration to transcend the decorative, as Greenberg advised, but to build a technique around the decorative's destabilization of the private self and the conception of artwork modeled after it.

This technique appears in one of Vuillard's many scenes of the dressmaking workshop his mother operated out of their apartment, *Seamstress with Scraps* (1893) (fig. 10). The form of a woman bent over her work is eked out with same dry smudge of pigment that Vuillard uses for the flowered wallpaper. A cottony democracy of brushstrokes sets the whole room into a hazy mid-ground. Vuillard learned this chalky application of pigment, or distemper, from his work in the theater.<sup>51</sup> The process required that Vuillard install an elaborate kitchen in his atelier: sacks of pigment, electric stoves, and numerous pots and pans were used to dissolve the glue, or size, that served as a base for his colors.<sup>52</sup> The effect of distemper on Vuillard's process was two-fold: it slowed him down, increasing his intervals of deliberation,<sup>53</sup> and it gave new presence to the unpainted ground. Using this ground as a mid-tone, Vuillard modulates between highlights and shadows without contouring his figures, letting the ground percolate through the pigment. Surface and void interpenetrate, the former often painstaking, the latter stark and plain, in a "paradoxical interplay between ornamental overburdening and nothingness."<sup>54</sup> His technique

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<sup>51</sup> On Vuillard's apprenticeship in and experiments with distemper, see Forgione, *op. cit.*.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Salomon, "Vuillard's Technique," in Russell, 138. By the nineteenth century, distemper was used exclusively by backdrop-painters, but Vuillard no doubt enjoyed that it was formerly the technique of choice for painting decorative screens and panels in the eighteenth-century.

<sup>53</sup> Salomon reflects that the process likely "helped [Vuillard] keep his excessive facility under control, and allowed him to deliberate more fully over his work, if only during the pauses while his colours were drying." *Ibid.*, 138–139.

<sup>54</sup> Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Fantasy and Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), xvii.

recalls Cézanne's signification of forms through the absence of paint.<sup>55</sup> One senses simultaneously Vuillard's economy and his existential frame of mind.

An exemplary moment of this interpenetration is Vuillard's *Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1893), perhaps the most terrifying mother-daughter portrait of the nineteenth century (fig. 11). A stout and sturdy Madame Vuillard sits in a pose reminiscent of Dominique Ingres's *Louis-François Bertin*,<sup>56</sup> while her daughter cowers beside her as though oppressed by the painting's encroaching upper edge. The wallpaper pullulates around Marie, infecting the pattern of her dress and fusing with her hair.<sup>57</sup> She strains against its latticework, the bright oval of her face barely detaching from the wall's busy surface.

Through either the theatrical technique of distemper or the decorative swarm of pattern in his paintings, Vuillard resists separating his figures from their interiors. In a journal entry dating from 1891, he writes,

“[T]he way in which forms separate themselves [*se détachent*] from one another has this idea [*sic*] the relationship of light and consequently color, as well as of form (occupied space) in which a form is with what surrounds it; ‘distinguishes itself’ [*distinguer*] would be better than ‘stands out’ [*détacher*], which implies the idea of distancing this idea of distancing is an idea and not a primary sensation... And well this feeling, the awareness of this relationship is the Truth.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>56</sup> The connection has been made by several writers, including Easton, 140, n. 31; Cogeval et al; and Sidlauskas, “Contesting Femininity,” 91.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Blanc reflects that a woman's dress should be coordinated with the curtains and wallpaper, which “are not limited to decorating the walls, but serve as a ground for furniture and people.” He continues, “The finery of a woman is, in turn, like the frames around paintings, serving as much to highlight them as to provide them a gentle transition with the wall.” Qtd in Soullilou, 63.

<sup>58</sup> “... la façon dont les formes se détachent les unes des autres a cette idée le rapport de lumière et par conséquent de couleur, de forme aussi (espace occupé) dans lequel une forme est avec ce qui l'environne; se distingue vaudrait mieux que détacher, qui implique l'idée d'éloignement cette idée d'éloignement est une idée non une sensation

To represent his figures detached from their surroundings would imply a level of intellection that Vuillard tried vigilantly to expel from his work. Vuillard was after the *feeling* of the interior. This was a feeling without distance, without intervals to separate a contained self from its surroundings. As Adorno notes, “In the *intérieur*, space is semblance.”<sup>59</sup>

Decades after Vuillard’s journal entry, Walter Benjamin wrote in the manuscript to the *Arcades Project*, “The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is his *étui*.”<sup>60</sup> An *étui* is a cover, a sheath, a protective shell.<sup>61</sup> It is subjective space that fits the person perfectly, being only a perfectly tailored jacket. This makes it impossible to speak about space *in* the interior separate from the surface that encloses it. The airlessness and intense proximity of subjects and objects in the interior resembles not the fleshy huddle of bodies and things within a determined architecture, but rather the dense interlocking of surfaces that constitute the room. (“A form is with what surrounds it,” thus Vuillard.) The interior is suspended between two kinds of doubling: the doubling of the room’s architecture by decorative surfaces, and the doubling of the room’s architectural limits by the individual’s corporeal limits.<sup>62</sup> Interiority is duplicated in surfaces. To be in an interior, to be aware of it as an extension and an envelope, is to experience one’s own interiority twofold—as *decoration*.

In his ambitious essay *Le décoratif*, French theorist Jacques Soulillou traces a genealogy of the term. Over the course of modern times, a new anxiety about decoration replaced the classical notion of the decorative threat, which had been based around an aversion to excess, rather than decoration *per se*. In the nineteenth century, however, the decorative came to be seen

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première... Et bien ce sentiment, la connaissance de ce rapport est la Verité...” Vuillard, *Journal*, 2 April 1891, Vol I.2, fol. 32V–33.

<sup>59</sup> Adorno, 43.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé <of 1939>,” *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>61</sup> Arnaud Lévy describes subjective space in strikingly similar terms: “Subjective space surrounds us like an envelope, like a second skin.” Qtd. in Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self*, 104.

<sup>62</sup> My thanks to Nico Machida for guiding this insight.

as a parasite that successfully lodges itself on a structure's weakest limb.<sup>63</sup> Decoration thus indicated a weakness or *lack* in the architecture. But its distinction from the architecture generated a "truth effect" for it, the "specter of the 'real thing'" drifting somewhere beyond the *parergon*.<sup>64</sup>

To better grasp this paradox, Soullillou distinguishes between the ornament, whose significance emerges through social recognition, and the "purely decorative." The latter refers to those abstract, non-structural elements that can be contemplated without vainly meditating on someone else's opinion. They are thus "detachable" from a physical and social structure. Yet they also symbolize hidden truths. Soullillou's example is the Seagram building's decorative stanchions, which echo or double the support beams embedded in the building's structure.<sup>65</sup> Like the decorative arts for a nation eager to affirm its essence, or an eccentric eager to manifest his own, the Seagram building's decorative beams telegraph an identity at its core. The decorative is therefore "the entity at once the most detached from the structure and the most expressive of its profound reality," simultaneously intensifying and undermining the visible.<sup>66</sup>

It therefore exceeds the logic of the supplement and the parasite, both of which can be physically and conceptually separated from a structure without effect, and both of which can be materially specified. The decorative, conversely, is not a thing so much as a condition. Paradoxically arbitrary and expressive, the decorative is a phantasm, writes Soullillou.<sup>67</sup> It irrupts in the fissures of the normative structures that separate interior from exterior, façade from

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<sup>63</sup> In the words of Viollet-le-Duc, "It is natural to try to dissimulate weakness under a parasitical decoration." Qtd. in Soullillou, 12-13.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-26

<sup>66</sup> 26. See intro.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

essence, proper from heterogeneous, *decorum*—what is right or fitting—from *décor*—what is artifice.

This is how the decorative operates in Vuillard’s 1890s work: not, or not merely, as a “look,” but as a technique. Vuillard executes the interpenetration of ornamental surface (artifice) and ground (interior)—the basis of his figure-ground confusion—through the juxtaposition of pigment (essence, at least of painting) and voids (exterior, at least to the gestures of painting). By placing in parallel but inverting the structures enumerated above, he creates a decorative condition in his paintings, which works on and through figures, playing out on their bodies the consequences of surrendering a private self, and on their setting, the consequences of abandoning its complementary model for the artwork.

Consider again the swarming pattern in *Mother and Sister of the Artist*. Neither borders nor depth are entirely obliterated by it. Marie’s body is “both delimited and dispersed through paint”<sup>68</sup>; individual strokes mark her limits while others contradict them. Contradictions also abound in the painting’s perspective. The dark, solid strip of baseboard flies backward, telescoping the room, but its vanishing point is obscured by a dresser behind Madame Vuillard. Its upper surface slants downward, irreconcilable with both the angle of the baseboard and the window ledge above it. *Mother and Sister* describes space through an imperfect patchwork of surfaces. Flatness collides with vertiginous depth.

In the *Large Interior*, Vuillard pursues this collision. The result is a painting whose surface seems to pleat like a folding screen. There is perhaps no better model for the decorative than that. The screen, by doubling the structure of a room, reveals and intensifies our relationship to it. It creates sites of intimacy and detachment. Bending it around us like our own private *étui*, the decorative screen amplifies the functions and metaphors of the decorated interior. To say that

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<sup>68</sup> Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self*, 105.

the *Large Interior* is like a folding screen implies two things: Firstly, that the painting's wave-like perspective quite simply recalls the screen's form. Secondly, that it uses a combination of flatness and depth to produce a space made of surfaces, in which figures and patterns distinguish but do not detach themselves. And since this, after all, is true for all paintings (which, as two-dimensional things, never see their figures or patterns truly detach themselves), the *Large Interior* doubles the structure of painting itself, intensifying it and undermining it. Decorative threat, indeed.

## WALLPAPER

*"Depth must be hidden. Where? On the surface."*  
— Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, *The Book of Friends*

Before the illusion of the folding screen, however, came the wallpapered door. Perhaps the most famous example is Vuillard's 1893 *Interior with Worktable*, also known as *The Suitor* (fig. 12). Set in his apartment's principle workroom, the painting juxtaposes the squirrely brushwork of the wallpaper and latticed window with continuous strokes of color on the furniture and seamstresses' fabrics. Marie stands in the foreground with her back to us, wearing a black speckled dress. Her face is turned toward Ker-Xavier, who skims into the room like a paper doll through a slit in the wall. A trapezoid of darker tones clotting the wallpaper to his left is the only

indication of depth where he stands: Ker-Xavier enters, in fact, through a wallpapered door, one of Vuillard's favorite tropes in those years.<sup>69</sup>

It is not hard to guess why. When the wallpapered door opens, it becomes the very image of the decorative separating from architecture, undermining the wall but also intensifying the space within it. The *Suitor* makes this intensification palpable in the scene's subtle eroticism. Marie and Ker-Xavier stand not unlike the pairing of Madame Vuillard and Germaine Rousseau in the *Large Interior*—one figure with her back to us in *profil perdu*, the other facing us in three-quarter profile—but their confrontation has a different tone. Marie still holds the fabric in her hands, but she has looked up from the worktable to catch Ker-Xavier stealthily slipping through the door to see her. A woman to their right continues her work, oblivious to their voluptuous exchange of gazes.

As in Vuillard's other early work, neither Marie nor Ker-Xavier have drawn contours; Marie's head is mostly indicated by the absence of paint, while Ker-Xavier's hair is dusted with the same blues as the wallpaper behind him. But the figure-ground relationship in *The Suitor* is much more complicated than this: it is not just a matter of figures dispersing into the wallpaper, but of a doubling of figures that destabilizes them. Marie and Ker-Xavier seem like mirror reflections that paradoxically do not confirm their identity through repetition, but rather open themselves up to difference. Another false mirror—and another pairing of the three-quarter profile and *profil perdu*, organized around a breach in the pictorial space—comes to mind: Picasso's *Two Nudes* (1906) (fig. 13). The differences between the paintings are instructive. Whereas Picasso's canvas is corporeal and opaque—Leo Steinberg called the nudes “timber

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<sup>69</sup> Other paintings featuring wallpapered doors include *La Porte entrebaillée* (1891), *Mumps* (1892), *Woman Darning*, *The Seamstress with Scraps* (1893).

lately enwoman'd"<sup>70</sup>—and the breach in the canvas is a fleshy fold that suggests a bodily, *carnal* depth, *The Suitor*'s surface is porous. If *Two Nudes* invites the viewer to penetrate its space, *The Suitor* presses the surface close to its figures and its viewer. The patterns produce a continuous circulation where an anxious and fleeting unity emerges from difference—male to female, figure to ground.<sup>71</sup> The surface of the bodies begins to look decorative. It begins, moreover, to *act* decorative—undercutting the fortifications of the self, but also creating a space for its reimagining as multiple.

As a phenomenon of the surface but also of revelation, the decorative in *The Suitor* and the *Large Interior* sounds, after all this, like the Symbolism we already know. But it differs importantly from the Parnassian image of the Symbolist writer or artist, the genius capable of decoding the world's signs, who dwells at remove not only from commodity culture, but from others (and, like the epithet suggests, exists on a creative mountaintop rather than in a bourgeois interior).<sup>72</sup> This is the vision of Symbolism used to explain the defiance of the twentieth-century avant-gardes—in particular, the campaign waged by cubism and cubist collage.

Picasso and Braque's collage, Christine Poggi argues, was a critique not just of the proliferation of mass culture and kitsch, but of the Symbolist's futile response to it.<sup>73</sup> According to her, the Symbolist recourse to decoration was nostalgic, fueled by a longing for a lost age.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," *October*, Vol. 44 (Spring, 1988): 47.

<sup>71</sup> "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." Yve-Alain Bois, "On Matisse: The Blinding," *October*, Vol. 68 (Spring, 1994): 90. Bois' description of Vuillard's work in this essay is remarkably sensitive, particularly with regard to time as it passes before one of his paintings. Nonetheless, I find the "entropy of the gaze" more compelling here than its eventual resolution in a figure; figures do emerge in Vuillard's painting—as noted above, Vuillard is continuously marking their limits—but they also ceaselessly threaten to disperse.

<sup>72</sup> "Indeed, in the eyes of the artist, of the one who must *express absolute entities*, objects, that is, relative entities that translate ideas... have a significance only insofar as they are objects. The artist sees them only as *signs*, letters of an immense alphabet that only the genius knows how to read." G.-Albert Aurier, "Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin (1891), in *Symbolist Art Theories*, 199.

<sup>73</sup> Poggi, *op. cit.*, 128–129.

<sup>74</sup> "They wanted to lead art back to the simplicity of its beginning, when its decorative destination was still uncontested," explained Denis. Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 138.

Picasso and Braque, conversely, sought out their collage materials because of their banality and repellently quotidian up-to-dateness. Krauss's conception is more nuanced. She takes issue with views that Picasso intended absolutely to defy art's autonomy and to flout cultural hierarchies, but also with David Cottington's persuasion that Picasso was thoroughly Mallarméan—that is, aestheticist and uninterested in the commercialism of his means, except insofar as its transcendence would demonstrate his artistic force.<sup>75</sup> Instead, Krauss argues that the collages are a careful balance of “fiction”—the Symbolist constructed formal world—and “counterfeit”—the commercial, worldly remainder. The quotidian or decorative quality of the collage elements nonetheless remains a means for cubism to resist Symbolism.

The Greenbergian explanation for cubist collage was likewise based on resistance through the strategic use of a collage element. Greenberg's 1959 essay “Collage” describes the development of *papier collé* as a series of increasingly daring maneuvers to prevail over the literal flatness of cubism's support. This nonreconciliation to flatness was sustained by “keep[ing] the ‘inside’ of the picture—its content—from fusing with the ‘outside’—its literal surface. Depicted flatness—that is, the facet-planes—had to be kept separate enough from *literal* flatness to permit a minimal illusion of three-dimensional space to survive between the two.”<sup>76</sup> This, in turn, could be done by explicitly indicating the surface of the painting, first through Braque's thusly “eye-*undeceiving* trompe-l'oeil” tacks and tassels, and then through pasted patterned surfaces—chair caning oilcloth, faux-bois paper, and wallpaper. Spatial illusion could continue to exist in a cubist composition so long as there was something still flatter to offset it. This set the elements of collage into a continuous oscillation between surface and depth.

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<sup>75</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 72–73. Krauss cites Poggi as an example of this second position.

<sup>76</sup> Greenberg, “Collage,” *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 71–72.

In “Collage,” the *papier collé*, and wallpaper more specifically, produces this effect, “reconstructing the picture surface with what had once been the means of its denial.”<sup>77</sup> But in an earlier version of “Collage” published in 1958 and titled “The Pasted-Paper Revolution,” the result folds back onto its means; the “revolution” in question is explicitly a transformation of wallpaper. “The *point of Cubism* as a renovation of pictorial style,” writes Greenberg, “was to *restore and exalt decoration* by... endowing self-confessedly flat configurations with a pictorial content, an autonomy like that hitherto obtained through illusion alone.”<sup>78</sup> The motivation behind the elision of the terms “decoration” and “flatness” now seems clear: it is not just flatness, but the decorative that must be transfigured by this hard-won autonomy. Flatness alone is nothing to restore and exalt; rather, it is the quashing of decoration that represents cubism’s real victory, allegorized in cubism’s transformations of wallpaper. Wallpaper’s formal role—successfully unifying the composition in an oscillating vista of planes—serves as the means for wallpaper’s transcendence and, since it was serving metonymically, the overcoming of mass culture itself by advanced art.

Yet it is precisely in Picasso’s use of wallpaper that something different begins to transpire. Starting in 1913, both Picasso and Braque began incorporating achromatic painted stipples into their collage works. In 1914, Picasso began to introduce color into these stippled swaths. Rosalind Krauss describes this shift as a decisive moment for cubism, one directly responding to concurrent developments in divisionism.<sup>79</sup> In the mid-1910s, Seurat and Signac’s influence had made sudden gains. Its inheritors, notably Delaunay and Severini, promoted the

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>78</sup> My emphasis. Greenberg continues, “Elements essentially decorative were used not to adorn but to identify, locate, construct; and in being so used, to create works of art in which decorativeness was transcended or transfigured in a monumental unity.” Greenberg, “The Pasted-Paper Revolution,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> Krauss, *op. cit.*, 178–179.

potential of divisionism's "simultaneous contrast" to produce pure abstraction, freed from pictorial conventions and the onus of representation.

That divisionism accomplished this through optical means, with their pretense to immediacy and unmediated sensation, meant that it simultaneously infringed on cubism's territory while contravening its aims. Cubism needed a way to leverage divisionism toward its own ends. For Krauss, the solution came in a roll of stippled mauve wallpaper that fell into Picasso's hands that spring. The wallpaper was most likely a gift of Duncan Grant, who discovered two rolls in the closet of his room in the improbably named Hôtel de l'Universe et du Portugal, and presented them to the Picasso.<sup>80</sup> He was delighted.<sup>81</sup> Immediately, the wallpaper began to feature in Picasso's collages as both background and illusionistic wall-space in works like *Pipe and Musical Score* (spring 1914) and *Bottle of Bass, Ace of Clubs, Pipe* (spring 1914).<sup>82</sup> In addition to snidely flagging the passage of divisionism into mass culture—that is, into kitsch—the stippled wallpaper yielded for Picasso "the experience of color itself, but color now bracketed as sign."<sup>83</sup> Picasso could thus suppress divisionism by submitting it to the logic of collage.

As the year wore on, however, the mauve wallpaper took on increasingly ornamental guises, from the single sheet that served as the ground for the trompe-l'oeil antics of *Pipe and*

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<sup>80</sup> Grant describes the paper as a "rich mauve, sprinkled with purple and white dots," which seemed to "summon the specter of neoimpressionism, with its pointillist stroke and its chromatic analysis." Qtd. in Mary Ann Caws and Sarah Bird Wright, *Bloomsbury Art and France: Art and Friends* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163.

<sup>81</sup> Picasso's appreciation may have been simple *Schadenfreude* at the commodification of divisionism, however his pleasure in decorative materials is documented by Pierre Daix, who reports Fernande Olivier's recollections: With his financial advancements in 1910, Picasso was finally "able to give free reign to his taste for collecting: old tapestries, African masks, musical instruments – all in a jumble of canvases and sculptures scattered across the floor. 'In matters of decoration, Picasso's taste—often with irony—led him to buy the most ordinary objects.' How aware of this irony was Fernande? 'The dining room walls were decorated with cheap chromos in straw frames, which would have been at home in the concierge's sitting room; he laughed at them.' In short, it amused him to find a charming quality in things which for others would be the height of the ridiculous." Pierre Daix, *Picasso: Life and Art*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New York: Harpercollins, revised edition, 1993), 97-98.

<sup>82</sup> Seven works in all use this wallpaper.

<sup>83</sup> Krauss, op. cit., 180.

*Sheet Music* (1914) (fig. 14) to the profusion of bright chromatic stippling in *Fruit Vase and Bunch of Grapes* (1914) (fig. 15). Picasso had moved, in other words, from the inclusion of the mauve wallpaper as a sign for color to painted surfaces as a sign for the wallpaper's ersatz painting—in the process, however, inverting the relationship between literal and depicted flatness central to Greenberg's argument. Krauss notes the risk Picasso wagered in taking so quickly to the wallpaper: although it gave him access to color, it also smuggled into cubism the “ornamental enemy”—the “‘decorative *unintentionality*' of modernism”<sup>84</sup> implicit in depicted flatness.<sup>85</sup>

Picasso seemed on the point of abdicating to this ornamental enemy in the spring of 1914, when he took the divisionist stipples into sculptural form (fig. 16). In the edition of bronzes titled *Glass of Absinthe*, the stipples now adopted not just the look, but the function of wallpaper—that is, covering a surface in space. To make matters worse, *Glass of Absinthe* was a *painted* bronze measuring only eight and a half inches tall, a decorative object if Picasso ever made one in those years. He had six of them cast, and painted them all differently. The least ornate remained in the artist's collection; four of the remaining five were painted with red and black stipples.

This travestied paperweight represents an absinthe glass, which, like an inversion of Umberto Boccioni's 1912 bronze *Development of a Bottle in Space*, seems to be in the process of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>85</sup> There was, it bears saying, a decorative *intentionality* for modernism in those years, from which Picasso and Braque maintained careful distance. In 1912, in the same month that Braque would produce the first *papier collé*, a second wave of craft revivalism in France crested notably in the Salon d'Automne, which featured “La Maison Cubiste.” Organized by André Mare, La Maison Cubiste consisted of a series of rooms modeling bourgeois interiors and displaying the works of the “Salon Cubists.” Lisa Florman provocatively suggests that coincidence of the Maison Cubiste and the introduction of wallpaper into Picasso's collage in the fall of 1912 may be more than simple happenstance. The suggestion that Picasso may have been, at least in part, *reacting* to the Salon suggests that wallpaper may have played a far more politically complex role than Greenberg's narration of it. The Maison Cubiste appeared in cahoots with a solidarist ideology and an elite sensibility of the hand-crafted in France, a far cry from the radical *art social* advocated in the 1890s by Roger Marx and other associates of the symbolists, and moreover a position that likely had little appeal for an expatriate avant-garde in 1912. But nor was the decorative denied outright by Picasso and Braque; instead it became the very engine of their “seeing machine.” Lisa Florman, “The Flattening of ‘Collage,’” *October*, Vol. 102 (Autumn, 2002): 81–82, fn. 67; Cottington, 175. See also 73, on the counter-discourse of aestheticism in the avant-garde.

wrecking rather than forming itself. One side of the glass erupts in a series of curved tabs while the other flattens into a flipper. The stem is an inverted cone separated from these debauched forms by a sort of upturned collar. The rim, set at a jaunty angle, carries a real absinthe spoon with a bronze sugar cube on top of it.

The gesture of this mini monument to absinthe was atypically nostalgic for Picasso.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps it was an homage to his supposedly favorite symbolist, Rimbaud, who might have appreciated the crapulent condition of Picasso's glass.<sup>87</sup> Strange things have happened to it in its altered state. The raked rim and gouges in its side suggest a fountain, whose running spirits would gather in the collar at the top of the stem. The glass also resembles a face—the collar a protruding lip, the tabs on its side, eyes, the curved plane gliding down from the rim, a nose, and the spoon and sugar cube, a hat. Glass as fountain, it merges interior and exterior; glass as face, it merges the drink with the drinker. In addition to these troubling doublings, Picasso added one more with his stippling: a wallpaper motif now adorns an object of café life, merging the private space of the bourgeois interior with the public space of the café.

The porousness of the glass both literally and allusively recalls Vuillard's figures and grounds, but it also announces the end of Vuillard's interior world. "The interior is the truth of space for bohemia, those last believers in the nineteenth century," reflects T.J. Clark.<sup>88</sup> Even then, it was a space of surfaces, "only falsely circumambient... fac[ing] us like a piece of wainscoting." But with the introjection of café life in the *Glass of Absinthe*, the interior of *Large Interior* had come to a close—or, as it were, an opening.

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<sup>86</sup> Brooks Adams notes that Picasso may have made the bronze in response to the outrage provoked by the publication of his guitar and violin constructions in the November 13, 1915 issue of the *Soirées de Paris*, but locates its subject matter in a tribute to fin-de-siècle pleasures. Brooks Adams, "Six Drinks to the End of an Era," *Artforum* (April 1970): 31.

<sup>87</sup> Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool, *Picasso: The Formative Years, A Study of his Sources* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1962), 17.

<sup>88</sup> T.J. Clark, "Picasso and Truth," National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Lecture, March 29, 2009.

As a result, the decorative threat seemed to shift. It became more clearly the mere mass cultural rendition of modernist painting. Yet the vehemence of Greenberg's words and the tenacity of the stipples in Picasso's work in the 1910s suggest that something of its old menace remained below the surface in the history of modernism. In 1897, the social and political valorization of the decorative arts was aligned with the metaphorical weight of the domestic space, and an artist with interest in both of them painted the awkward epiphany of the *Large Interior*. This painting explores the possibility of a collective self and the abandonment of a private self through the place where both these selves temporarily resided: the bourgeois interior. One can only speculate about why it ended there, for Vuillard and for Paris. Perhaps it was the Dreyfus Affair, which rent apart the Nabis and forestalled Fouillée's psycho-political projections, as the Affair meant that minds republican and nationalist alike could no longer tolerate the ambiguity of a collective self. Or maybe Vuillard simply stared his decorative vision in the face and found it too disquieting. In the decades that followed, he beat a steady retreat from the *Large Interior* and the extraordinary techniques that enabled it. It would be up to the next century to see its symbolic shadow through.

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