



## The space-time of Bonnard's gardens

Bonnard always loved gardens, and they constitute a major theme in his work. It would not be excessive to say that they offered an ideal subject, one that enabled him to fuse his vision of nature and his imagination. His brush turns gardens both large and small into a teeming, colourful universe that is permanently expanding, expressing the vitality of the world and of creation. The artist was not attracted by orderly bourgeois gardens where plants and shrubs lined up like battalions of soldiers. He preferred the thick clumps of vegetation, unkempt grasses and baroque flowerings of his "wild garden" in Normandy to the flower beds that his friend Monet grew in Giverny, which were organised like the paint on a palette. He

Bonnard sitting outside his house with Renée,  
Charles, Jean and Robert, in around 1899.

Paris, Musée d'Orsay © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt

also loved the splendour of the exotic vegetation on the Côte d'Azur, which he discovered in 1909, and which would feature in his paintings throughout the rest of his career. This luxuriant environment is also the setting for allegorical scenes with frolicking nymphs and satyrs

Born in Fontenay-aux-Roses on 3 October 1867, Bonnard grew up in the still green suburbs of south-western Paris, where they continued to grow roses into the mid-19th century. He spent his family holidays in the family property in Dauphiné, Le Clos au Grand-Lemps, where, for several months each year, the park and orchard afforded invigorating rest from Parisian life. This childhood garden is an enclosed garden, like the Garden of Eden, sheltered from the outside world. So powerful were Bonnard's impressions and memories of this park at Le Grand-Lemps that it provides the setting for his first large-



## Bonnard's gardens

“I too have my little enchantment today what with the snow and a [persimmon] tree with orange fruit still on its branches wearing a little hat of snow.”

Letter from Bonnard to Vuillard [January 1939], *Bonnard/Vuillard Correspondance*, edited by Antoine Terrasse. Paris: Gallimard, 2001 p. 97

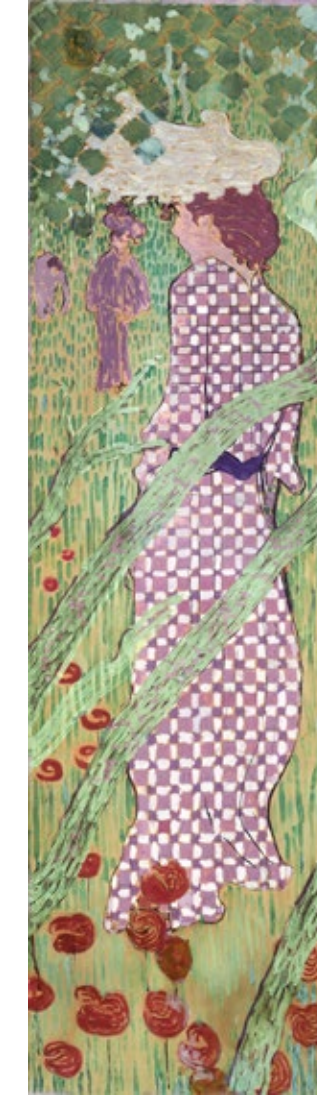
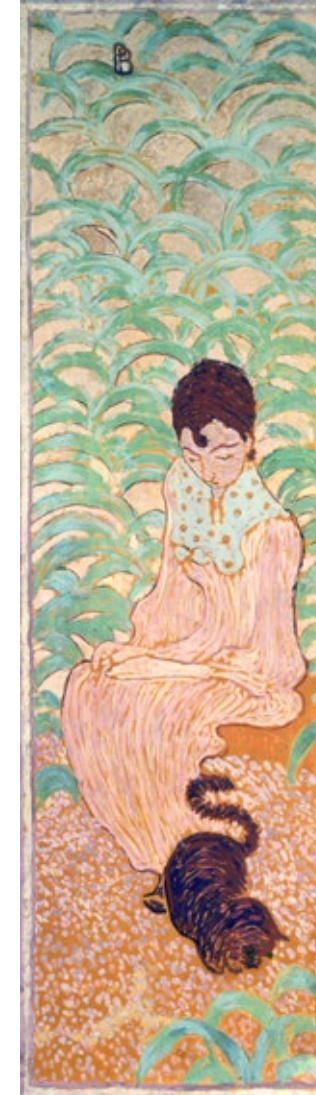
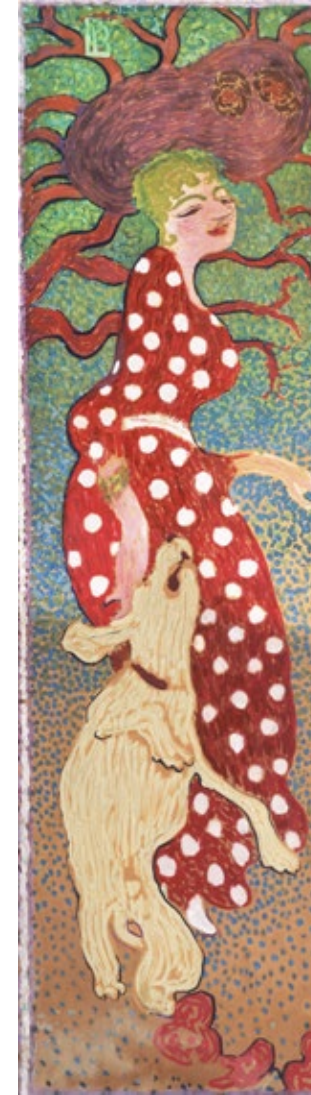
**Bonnard with Renée and another little girl. In the background, Roussel squatting, 1900**

Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Gift of M.A. Terrasse, 1992. © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski

“The new forms of the décor are still imprecise. The more mathematical minds look to the science of forms and colouring for combinations of harmony disconcerting in their dryness and coldness. [...] Others look to directly observed nature for the ornament of infinitely varied, rich scrolls. [...] But their ideas of nature are very different. [...] M. Pierre Bonnard does a very personal form of Japonisme.”

Pierre Louis [Maurice Denis],  
“Notes sur l’exposition des Indépendants,” *La revue blanche*, no. 8, April 1892, pp. 283-84

**Women in the Garden**, 1891. Four panels originally conceived as a screen.  
Tempera, charcoal and gouache on paper mounted on canvas. Each panel 160 x 48 cm.  
Paris, Musée d’Orsay, donation in lieu by Florence Gould. © www.bridgemanart.com



“M. Bonnard, the most Japanese of all French painters, likes to render the subtleties of the lines, to catch the rhythm of their arabesques. It is in a garden at the twilight hours, with clearer figures whose lines stand out in their simplicity against the complication of the trees and plants; charming interiors decorated with elegant faces; dogs and birds whose forms stand out against the green grass.”

Charles Saunier,  
“L’Art nouveau,” *La Revue indépendante*, no. 66, April 1892 p. 47

**Twilight or The Game of Croquet**, 1892. Oil on canvas, 130 x 162.5  
Paris, Musée d’Orsay, gift of Daniel Wildenstein. © www.bridgemanart.com



“He is above all a *promeneur*. He [Bonnard] has strolled through ideas and among men, in gardens where children dance, where old people rest, where dogs play, and where cats sleep. He has walked through harbours, which will always be the paradise of strollers. He has walked in farmyards where, since his early youth, he has befriended cockerels, hens and rabbits.”

René-Marie [Francis Jourdain],  
“Bonnard et son époque,” *Le Point*, no. 24, 1943 p. 37

**The Big Garden**, 1894-95. Oil on canvas, 168 x 221 cm

Paris, Musée d'Orsay, Gift of Jean-Claude Bellier in memory of his father Alphonse Bellier. © Photo RMN / Herve Lewandowski





“A shimmering world of mother-of-pearl. Here, in gardens and in front of fountains, two dancing figures, svelte and dressed in tunics. Their profiles, their hair, their slender legs, are Florentine in their refinement. [...] All these indistinct, charming images are framed with singular imagination.”

Henry Bidou,  
“Le Salon d’automne,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, November 1910, p. 378

**Pleasure or Games** [decorative panel painted for Misia Edwards], 1906-1910. Oil on canvas, 246 x 300 cm  
Paris, Musée d’Orsay, donation in lieu. © Patrice Schmidt / Musée d’Orsay distribution RMN

“This year there is none of the grey song of the views of water at Vernon, of the skies of Île de France, where ‘the air has an air of an autumn sigh’; Bonnard’s latest canvases were painted in the light of Grasse, of Saint-Tropez, of the Dauphiné. Pure colours make new, purified harmonies.”

“Le mois du peintre. Exposition Bonnard (Galerie Bernheim Jeune),”  
*La Phalange*, July 1912 p. 84

**The Mediterranean** (triptych), 1911. Decorative panels painted for the main staircase of Ivan Morozov’s Moscow townhouse. Oil on canvas, 407 x 152 cm (central panel), 407 x 149 cm (side panels).  
Saint Petersburg, Hermitage Museum. © www.bridgemanart.com

