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Edouard Vuillard
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Three-part Vuillard catalogue compiled by Montreal Museum of Fine Arts published after 50 years in production

The volume aims to be totally immersive, images rooted in their biographical context with detailed annotations

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The great post-Impressionist Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) has long been misunderstood. “Countless commentators have trotted out the same old story of a monkish recluse, voluntarily cut off from the modern world’s innovations and pleasures, indifferent to the political events of his time”, and yet, according to Guy Cogeval, principal author of the first comprehensive catalogue of the artist’s work, “the exact opposite was true”.

Mr Cogeval, director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts since 1998 and longtime professor of 19th-century art at the Ecole du Louvre, is curator of the vast Vuillard retrospective now at the Royal Academy in London (until 18 April). Having meticulously read Vuillard’s journals—which the artist’s brother-in-law, Ker-Xavier Roussel gave to the Bibliothèque de la Institute de France

with a 40-year embargo until 1981—Mr Cogeval clears up chronology and iconography and reveals hitherto unknown facets of the artist's life and personality.

The book begins with a foreword by publishers and dealers Alec and Guy Wildenstein and an introduction by Mr Cogeval followed by a catalogue of nearly 3,000 paintings and pastels, the majority illustrated in colour, distributed in three volumes arranged chronologically: 1868-1900, 1898-1914, and 1914-40. An appendix adds a chronology by Mathias Chivot, a bibliography, and lists of exhibitions and titles, with indexes of collectors, galleries and museums, and names cited in the text.

The chronicle is subdivided into 12 sections, each prefaced by an essay presenting biographical, socio-historical, and theoretical material along with analysis of Vuillard's stylistic development during the period examined.

Entries for individual works provide all the standard data (title, date, medium, metric dimensions, signature and dating information, current owner with accession number where applicable, as well as provenance, exhibition history, and bibliography) and many are supplemented by summary descriptions by André Chastel or Jacques Salomon, who also worked on the project. For some 800 works, Mr Cogeval has written extended entries that present often new biographical details of the sitters and patrons, quotes from Vuillard's journal (transcribed by Sylvie Yeu), and critical observations on technique and composition. The effect is of total immersion in the artist's life and oeuvre.

In the essays at the heart of the catalogue, Mr Cogeval reveals an ill-tempered Parisian intellectual who knew the Ballets Russes, primitive art, Cubism, contemporary music, literature, and theatre. A "semi-anarchist" in his youth, he became a "bourgeois-leftist" in old age, and a close friend of Leon Blum. He remained friends with his fellow-artists in the Nabi circle, Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis for 55 years, late in life sharing commissions in the same palaces. Despite his apparent fixation on his family, he enjoyed intimate relationships with women, including the wife of his dealer Hessell who appears in 400 paintings. "People say he was out of the world, a monk not interested in sex. Faux!" scoffs Mr Cogeval. "He was the archetypal Frenchman."

Crucially, Mr Cogeval elucidates the family dynamics that were his pre-eminent theme. Of the little 1891 gouache that shows the artist kissing a girl long thought to be his sister, Mr Cogeval cites discrepancies in age, height, and coiffure and concludes that she is probably one of

Vuillard's mother's sewing apprentices.

The famous interior with Vuillard's sister standing beside her seated mother is a pictorial manifesto of "the two women's repressed neuroses and the poisonous atmosphere filling this corner of the family dining room" in which the mother's "stony fixity" is contrasted with the daughter's "feverish anxiety" as she bends "as if to fit inside the composition, while at the same time pressing against the wall—to prevent herself from being swallowed up by the vibrant motifs of the wallpaper." Despite the seeming melodrama, Mr Cogeval's analysis is utterly persuasive and exquisitely instructive.

Work on the catalogue began half a century ago when the artist's niece Annette Roussel and her husband Jacques Salomon asked the young André Chastel to inventory the atelier. Salomon devoted his life to Vuillard, and in 1945 published the first book on the artist. In the 1950s, he began to write descriptions of each painting and pastel, hiring assistants to research provenance and exhibition histories.

In the 1960s, his son Antoine (now 78) continued to gather photos, preparatory drawings, and autobiographical papers. Later he hired Annette Leduc Beaulieu and Brooks Beaulieu to write a book-length study to accompany the anticipated catalogue raisonné on which she worked for five years. She says her text was accepted in 1993 for publication by Adam Biro, and collaboration "was at an advanced stage when, in 1996, Antoine Salomon abruptly changed publishers. The new publisher, the Wildenstein Institute, rejected our texts and commentaries, and, as a consequence, our names were removed from the title page of the catalogue raisonné. [They are listed among the catalogue's earlier collaborators.] A copy of our manuscript remains on deposit in the Archives Salomon in Paris where, through a contractual agreement with Antoine Salomon, we retain exclusive rights to its use."

Mr Cogeval says that at first he agreed to rewrite her text, but it was rife with errors and misidentifications, and he was contracted to reconstruct the project. "I had to rewrite it top to bottom," he says. Mr Cogeval situates Vuillard's work within its cultural context and his highly readable critical and theoretical approach is a far cry from the customary account-taking of catalogues raisonnés, and yields a study of interest beyond its intended professional and academic audience.

"Of course I give a very personal outlook on Vuillard's life," he says, noting his "very great empathy" for the artist. "I was born in place Vintimille," says Mr Cogeval, "and even blind I

could find the places Vuillard used to go. I had the ring hoop, the little boat, and dressed like kids in his paintings. I used to look at the theatre in the shadows in the Tuilleries that he has represented so well. We owe so to the same Parisian culture! It helps,” he continues. “You have to do an interpretation between the lines. Earlier workers on the catalogue were crushed by the volume of what he left, but I could determine what was crucial to his life and what was not. Aspects that seem like scholarship are a matter of kinship for me.”

o Guy Cogeval and Antoine Salomon with the collaboration of Mathias Chivot, Vuillard: the inexhaustible glance: critical catalogue of paintings and pastels (Wildenstein Institute, Paris, and Skira Editore, Milan 2003), 3 vols, 1,739 pp, 334 col. ills, e500 (hb) ISBN 8884911192

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