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INTRODUCTION

Bonnard's career as a painter spanned a period of more than sixty years and during that time his work developed through a number of different stages. In the following chapters I shall endeavour to examine a number of his works which I feel most characterise each development of his painting career. I have confined myself to his paintings and have not covered his prints and drawings in any detail as I feel that would require a separate thesis.

Bonnard was primarily noted as a colourist and in the first chapter I shall deal with his work under that heading. While Bonnard will probably be most remembered for his use of colour, composition was also of utmost importance to him and in chapter two I shall discuss his work in terms of composition and pattern. Finally, in the third chapter I shall consider his choice of subjects.

CHAPTER I

COLOUR AND LIGHT

Throughout his life colour was a very important element in Bonnard's painting but his treatment of it varied quite considerably from his early work, when he was associated with the Nabis, to his intimist period, when he was working closely with his friend Vuillard, and finally his later work, especially his series of nudes done towards the end of his life.

While studying at Ecole des Beaux Arts, Bonnard had also signed up at the privately run Academie Julian, where he met several young painters with whom he became friends and who were to make up the Nabis group formed by Serusier in 1889. They were Paul Hanson, H. G. Ibels, Maurice Denis, Vuillard and K. X. Roussel. These painters reacted against Impressionism, which at that time was at its height. Their paintings, according to Maurice Denis, were nothing but "windows opened on Nature".¹ The Nabis disliked the way the Impressionists slavishly reproduced what they saw, and their practice of painting out of doors. Charles Chasse said in his book THE NABIS AND THEIR PERIOD that to them "a picture had merit only when it possessed 'style', that is to say when the artist had succeeded in changing the shape of the objects he was looking at and imposing on them contours or a colour that expressed his own personality. Resemblance was

of small importance or rather resemblance was the enemy."²

The Nabis' views are summed up in Maurice Denis' definition of 1890 "one should remember that a painting before being a warhorse or a nude woman or an anecdote is essentially a flat surface covered with colour assembled in a certain order."³

The Nabis viewed painting in purely decorative terms, as Verhade - one of the Nabis - wrote in his memoirs: "The battle cry rang out from one studio to the next: No more easel pictures! Down with useless furniture! Painting must not usurp a liberty that isolates it from the other arts. The painter's work begins at the point where the architect considers his finished. Walls, walls to decorate! Down with perspective! The wall must remain a surface, must not be spoiled with representation of distant horizons. There are no pictures, there is only decoration!"⁴

They took their departure from Gauguin. Gauguin's belief in the use of pure unmixed colour laid down in flat blocks was first seen by the group when Serusier brought a painting, THE TALISMAN, which he had painted under the instruction of Gauguin, back from Pont Aven. "How do you see that tree?" Gauguin had said. "It is green, no? Then put green, the most beautiful green in your palette, and the shadow? on the blue side? Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as possible."⁵

Bonnard was reluctant to acknowledge any master. As he stated in an interview for a Paris newspaper in 1891, "I belong to no school. I want only to do something of my own and I am at present unlearning what I took a lot of trouble to learn during four years at the Beaux Arts."⁶ However, there are certain aspects of Gauguin's work which are apparent in Bonnard's work at this time. Like Gauguin, Bonnard showed a preference for colour rather than

light. There is no vibration of light in Gauguin's work and very little or none in Bonnard's until 1909-10, when, to an extent, he became influenced by Impressionism. For Bonnard colour was an end in itself. He used it in a very decorative and arbitrary way, paying little or no attention to local colour. The flattening of form into a series of coloured shapes may also be due to the influence of Japanese prints, which were very fashionable in Europe at this time and which Bonnard had seen in the Japanese Art Exhibition held in Paris in 1890.

This use of broad, flat areas of colour can be seen in THE PARADE GROUND. (see Ill.No.1), painted in 1890. The painting is composed of blocks of flat colour. There is no influence of light, the colours all being very close in tone and the forms are not modelled. This has a flattening effect which reduces the feeling of depth. The ground plane rising vertically is treated in a purely decorative manner, as are all the other forms, which disintegrate into areas of coloured shapes. The blue of the soldiers' coats seems to form one large abstract shape. The colour is predominantly warm, being mainly composed of reds, reddish browns and greens. Even the blue of the soldiers' coats has a touch of green in it. Also strongly reminiscent of Japanese prints is the monogram. It is not just a signature but also an important decorative element whose form relates to the picture's total composition. Although Bonnard did not use this monogram for long, he always used a signature for which he chose place and colour so that it would form an integral part of the whole composition rather than acting like a superimposed element.

In 1894 Bonnard's palette, formerly an array of vivid colours,

began to darken and he began to move away from the influence of the Nabi circle. The influence of Gauguin and Japanese art had given him the taste for clear line and frank colours, reduced to their simplest forms. He began to blend his colour and, to a limited extent, was influenced by Impressionism, although at this time Bonnard's work was much darker. He began to model his forms and pay attention to the effect of light. The likeness to Impressionism of his work at this time is not very significant. While the landscapes and street scenes he painted at this time were Impressionistic subjects, they are very much darker and more sombre in colour and less atmospheric than any Impressionist painting.

At this time, too, Bonnard started to paint a series of secluded, lamplit interiors, as did his friend Vuillard, who had also moved away from the Nabis circle towards greater naturalism. Blacks, reds and browns predominate these paintings. His brushwork became freer, less decorative, with the colour more broken up and not laid on in such large, flat areas as in his earlier 'Nabi' paintings.

This marks the beginning of his intimist period.

YOUNG WOMAN IN LAMPLIGHT (see ill.No.4), painted in 1900, is characteristic of the many interior scenes Bonnard painted at this time. The forms are not as flat as in THE PARADE GROUND but they are also less defined as they are dissolved in the lamplight. The room's actual shape is barely defined. The tones are very close, the figures in the background barely distinguishable, as is the dog in the bottom righthand part of painting. In the foreground only the girl's face and arms are distinct, as is the plate in front of her and the bone in the

dog's mouth. There are two light sources - two lamps, one in the foreground which illuminates the girl, and one in the background which casts a little light on the two figures beside it. Again, as in THE PARADE GROUND, there is an overall warmth in the colour which is composed from a variety of reds, reddish browns, greens and yellows. However, the paint application is very much freer and less decorative than in the earlier painting.

From this time onwards Bonnard was increasingly sensitive to the effects that light had on form. Many of his paintings of interiors and nudes were painted in artificial light, as was this one. All these paintings have a similar colour range. Like the street scenes done at this time, they are quite dark in tone but, whereas the street scenes were often cold and bleak, being composed of various types of greys, these interiors are very rich and warm. Dark reds, blacks and browns contrast with patches of yellow and pink where the lamplight falls. Bonnard, during this period of his career, used light in two different ways. Sometimes, as in YOUNG WOMAN IN LAMPLIGHT, he used the light to dissolve the forms, keeping the tones very close in value. In other paintings, such as NUDE SEATED ON THE EDGE OF A BED (see ill.No.6), painted in 1908, he used the lamplight to cut the forms up with sharp contrasts in tone. The room is fairly dark, lit only by an oil lamp shedding a warm light on the front part of the bed and on the girl's torso and upper thighs. This painting differs from the previous paintings, as it is based on the contrast between the blacks, which he relished at this time, and the lighted areas. The black of the stockings and the shadow on the right of the composition dissect the girl's body. Again, it is composed of predominantly warm colours. The dark areas are composed of juxtaposed greens, reds and black and the

lighter areas are also warm. The torso and thighs of the woman are a golden yellow and the surface of the table and the bedspread are a yellowish green. There is extensive use of juxtaposed colour, with the wall in the background composed of reds and black, as is the head of the woman, and the garment she is taking off is composed of juxtaposed yellows and greens, as is the bedspread and the piece of clothing in the bottom left hand corner of the composition. This use of juxtaposed colour is one of the main things that his paintings of this time had in common with Impressionist work, for his range of colour was quite different.

Throughout his career, while the range of colours which he used varied at different times, Bonnard was to confine the colours used in a particular painting to a limited number, usually two or three. Often one colour is dominant and acts as a link between all the other colours on the canvas. This is true of THE PARADE GROUND and also YOUNG WOMAN IN LAMPLIGHT. In YOUNG WOMAN IN LAMPLIGHT yellow is the dominant colour. There is a touch of yellow in all the reds and browns and greens, which together form the painting. The use of a family of colours helps to unite the painting by creating a sense of overall warmth.

However, Bonnard also divided some of his paintings into two colour zones, one warm and the other cool, and then carefully linked them together by using a number of transitional devices. NUDE AGAINST THE LIGHT (see ill. No.7), painted in 1908, is a good example of his use of two contrasting colour zones. The left hand side of the composition is composed of subdued, cool blues and greens, very close to each other in tone. The colour is laid on in flatter areas in this portion of the canvas. By contrast, the remaining two-thirds of the painting, the area around the window and the wall to the right

of it and the couch are much brighter and the colour is more intense. These areas, while being much lighter in tone than the area to the left of the painting, are tonally very close to each other. Another unifying factor is that all these areas are heavily patterned with the lace pattern of the curtain and the flower patterns of the couch and wallpaper. This area of the painting is united by one common colour, yellow. There is a yellow light coming through the curtains, which is reflected in the wallpaper and piece of patterned carpet beside it. So there are a number of contrasting elements that separate the two picture zones. Besides the tonal contrast there is also a contrast between warm and cool colour. The tonally darker areas are also cool in colour, whereas the lighter areas are warmer. There is also a textural contrast, with the left hand side of the painting painted in broad areas of colour and the right hand portion more broken up and heavily patterned.

There are, however, transitional devices which link the two picture zones. The body of the girl and the floor she is standing on have the same tonal value as the tub and dressing table but are closer to the other portion of the painting in terms of colour, with the yellows and pinks and greens being reflected on her body. There are other links too. The reflection of the figure and the yellow chair in the mirror of the dressing table, that of the curtain in the water in the tub and the blue-green of the left hand side of the painting is echoed in the area of blue beside the yellow wallpaper.

This painting is also significant as it marks an important development in Bonnard's work. It marks the end of his intimist period and the shift from the use of artificial light in his

interiors to natural light. Daylight has replaced the artificial light of his earlier nudes but, unlike those and his late work, the forms are not dissolved or dissected by the light. In fact, the form of the girl is defined by the light. At this stage, too, his range of colours brightened. Pale blues, greens, pinks and yellows replaced the darker colours of his earlier paintings and landscape began to play an increasingly important part in his work, losing its decorative appearance and becoming more Impressionistic with a greater feeling for atmosphere. Unlike the Impressionists, however, who used to depict large panoramic views, Bonnard's landscapes are much more intimate and secluded, often glimpsed through an open window or confined to a garden.

In 1910 Bonnard went to work in the south of France, where he was to go frequently, to Antibes, Cannes and Saint-Tropez, where he met Signac, Renoir and Manguin, whose house he stayed in when he made his first visit to Saint-Tropez. The change of light coincided with the change in his colour. Bonnard himself said of the southern light: "In the South of France everything is lighted up and the painting vibrates all over".⁷ The change in his work, however, was gradual and the full explosion of colour did not erupt until the 1930's. Bonnard was less rapidly conquered than Matisse by the light of the South of France and he often said that he preferred the light of the north, "which changes ceaselessly."⁸ There are, however, a number of similarities between both artists' work. Both painters worked in the South of France and were influenced by the southern light, Matisse probably more so than Bonnard. Matisse's INTERIOR WITH A VIOLIN (1917-18), shows his fascination with the Mediterranean light and the sharp contrasts it produces. The yellow light coming through the window recalls the

many light filled interiors Bonnard painted from 1908 onwards, when yellow was so often the dominant colour. NUDE AGAINST THE LIGHT is one such example. However, the Matisse painting is also similar to the earlier intimist paintings of Bonnard, particularly NUDE SEATED ON THE EDGE OF A BED, with the sharp contrasts between the yellows and blacks.

In 1912 Bonnard bought Ma Roulette, a little house at Vernonnet near Giverny, the home of Monet, whom he often visited. From this time landscape began to play an increasingly important role in his work, as did light. This can be seen in the paintings of interiors done from this time onwards. Unlike his earlier paintings of interiors, the exterior now occupied a part of the picture space and filled the interior with light. Bonnard started to develop this idea in DINING ROOM IN THE COUNTRY (see ill.No.9), painted in 1913. It is based on a similar idea to NUDE AGAINST THE LIGHT in that it deals with two picture zones fused together by carefully worked out transitional devices but, whereas in NUDE AGAINST THE LIGHT he dealt solely with the interior even though the light source comes from outside, in this painting he gave equal importance to both interior and exterior. The interior is darker in tone than the exterior, yet the tones within the interior are close. The colour, too, within the interior is composed of muted reds and reddish browns, laid on in broad, flat areas. This contrasts with the landscape outside, which is composed of lighter, cooler colour - pale blues and greens - which is much more broken up. Again there are transitions which link the two picture zones. The blue of the sky is reflected in the door and the table in the lower portion of the painting. The yellowish green bush outside is also reflected in the door and on the chair beneath the window.

The dress on the girl looking in the window is the same red as that of the wall of the interior.

At this time, too, around 1913-14, Bonnard's paintings were somewhat similar to those of Matisse. At this stage Bonnard was still to some extent applying paint in broad, flat areas and was just beginning to define his forms by the use of tone and light was beginning to enter his interiors. At the same time Matisse was also becoming interested in the effects of light and his forms at this stage were still modelled and his colour was much less intense than in later work. Good examples of this similarity are the previously mentioned DINING ROOM IN THE COUNTRY and Matisse's INTERIOR, FISH IN BOWL, PAINTED IN 1914.

DINING ROOM IN THE COUNTRY is a good example of the many paintings Bonnard did at this time based on the fusion of two contrasting colour zones, but gradually a change took place, especially in his paintings of interiors, where he allowed more and more light to enter from the exterior and unite the whole picture in the same colour range. Generally this colour was yellow, which Bonnard became very fond of using from this time on. These interiors glow in a warm sunlight, the forms being partly dissolved by it. Jaques Rodrigues, one of Bonnard's friends and dealers, recalled that one day, while looking at a Signac water-colour, he commented to Bonnard "There is too much yellow in it". Bonnard replied "one can't have too much". (quoted by Annette Vaillant)⁹

This change in Bonnard's work can be seen in THE DINING ROOM (see ill.No.11), painted in 1925. It is the same room as depicted in the earlier DINING ROOM IN THE COUNTRY with a similar

composition in both paintings. The landscape is much more natural than in the earlier painting without the slightest decorative element. It has shrunk in relation to the interior but the light enters more freely and unites the entire painting in a warm yellow glow. In all these paintings the tones are very close and it is subtle changes in colour that define the forms.

Between 1925 and 1937 Bonnard did a number of paintings of his wife in the bath. In these paintings especially he thought of colour as it existed in itself or in its relation to other colours in the composition. In this he differed greatly from the Impressionists, who adhered strictly to what they saw. In an Impressionist painting a shadow may appear violet because the painter truly saw it in reality as violet, but Bonnard did not stick rigidly to the local colour of objects. He made the colour work within the painting. "A painting" according to Bonnard "is a little world that should be self-sufficient".¹⁰ "Colour" said Bonnard, "has a logic as severe as form. To retouch an accent makes it discordant with the neighbouring tone, they must then be reharmonized, but the second tone now seems to clash with its neighbour, they must be reharmonized and from one to the next, they all jostle each other".¹¹

In NUDE IN THE BATH (ill.No.15), painted in 1937, colour is distributed according to its own logic and in an entirely arbitrary manner. The painting is built around the relationship between two colours, blue and yellow. The nude in the bathtub acts as a transition between the two zones, the blue tiled floor beneath the tub and the yellow wall tiles above it on the left of the composition. The blue of the floor is carried through to the water

in the tub, where it is intermingled with a little yellow reflected from the tiles above it. The blue of the water is continued up one section of the tiles to form a vertical blue band which prevents the painting from being just divided into horizontal bands. To the right of the painting the yellow light from the tiles submerges the top portion of the figure and bath and is picked up on the blue tiles of the floor beneath. The colours are very close in tone, the contrast being one of warm and cold rather than light and dark.

From around 1930 onwards, Bonnard used colour with total freedom. The local colour of objects disappeared and he transposed reality into a colour range abounding in mauves, lilacs, oranges, pinks and violet-blues. In this work his colour became rich and sharper. He aimed to provide a surface on which each section reflected light and was fused with the other. He was constantly perfecting his colour. At times he would retouch and rework his compositions after several years. In his final paintings Bonnard was moving towards the dissolution of form, towards a form of abstraction, towards an emphasis on pure painting values at the expense of immediate reality.

Footnotes - Chapter I

- ¹ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, New York), Page 12.
- ² Charles Chasse, The Nabis and Their Period, (Lund Humphries, London, 1969), Page 13.
- ³ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 13.
- ⁴ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 21.
- ⁵ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 13.
- ⁶ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 13.
- ⁷ Antoine Terrasse, Bonnard Nudes, (Methuen & Co., Ltd., London), Page 8.
- ⁸ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 154.
- ⁹ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 150.
- ¹⁰ Antoine Terrasse, Bonnard Nudes, (Methuen & Co., Ltd., London), Page 7.
- ¹¹ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Abrams, New York), Page 40.

CHAPTER II

COMPOSITION AND PATTERN

In Chapter One I discussed the influence that the Nabis and Gauguin had on Bonnard in terms of his use of colour but he was also greatly influenced by their attitudes to composition and they were all influenced by Japanese art which was very fashionable in Paris in the eighteen seventies, especially Bonnard, who was known by his friends as the 'Nabi tres japonard' (the very ultra Japanese Nabi). What interested these painters in Japanese prints, besides the primacy of colour over light, was that of line over modelling and of the flat surface over depth. There was no modelling, no deep space and no aerial perspective.

Their paintings were now reduced to a series of flat, coloured shapes arranged on a two-dimensional surface. They saw their paintings as flat surfaces on which to decorate, as Bonnard confirmed in 1891 when he said "Painting must above all be decorative. Talent shows itself in the way in which the lines are distributed".¹

The Nabis were interested in decoration and branches of art other than easel painting. As Verhade said, "there are no paintings, only decorations".² The desire to reconcile painting with architecture and the applied arts and to conceive their paintings in terms of decorative surfaces clearly relates the Nabis to the artists who were taking part in the international art movement known as Art Nouveau.

Rather than easel painting, Bonnard at this stage, the eighties and nineties, made lithographs, posters, illustrations for reviews and also designs for furniture - he designed a desk for Thadée Natanson, one of the editors of La Revue Blanche to which he contributed illustrations and posters. Also, in 1895, he designed a stained-glass window for the American glassmaker, Louis Tiffany, and designed some theatre sets.

At this time also Bonnard executed a number of long, vertical decorative panels which were almost like tapestries. These decorative panels suggest that he owed something to the ideas of literary symbolism. Disgusted by the contemporary world, symbolist writers such as Huysmans and Gustave Kahn had called for the creation of an artificial world in which Art reigned supreme. One of the most satisfactory ways of achieving this was to cover the walls with decorative panels. Bonnard's facility for decoration was noted by Aurier in 1892 ('Les Peintres symbolistes', *Revue encyclopedique*, April 1892, in *Oeuvres posthumes*, 1893, p. 308) when he declared that Bonnard was "a delicious ornamentalist... capable of decking out all ugly things in our life with the ingenious and iridescent floral patterns of his fantasy."³ Bonnard designed some of these tall decorative panels as individual compositions and others were intended to be combined together to make up a folding screen like those from Japan. The Japanese influence is strongly evident in four such panels painted in 1891-92 (see ill. No. 2). There is neither depth nor receding planes, shadow nor modelling. The forms are delineated by a clearly drawn outline, the composition and colour elements being distributed in a purely decorative manner. The forms are not at first apparent, especially in the two middle panels. They are totally flat and

at first glance appear as a series of coloured shapes and patterns. The reason the forms in the centre panels are less distinguishable is probably due to the colour as much as the pattern. Although he has used complementary colours in all four panels, they only appear in their purest form in the outer panels, the right hand panel being composed of red and green and the one on the left being made up of yellow and violet. By contrast the two centre panels are composed of pale, muted pinks and greens which means that there is less of a contrast than in the two outer panels. All four are heavily patterned with the fabrics of the women's dresses in the first and third panels being composed of dots and checks respectively. The foliage in each panel is composed of dots, spinal shapes and semicircles. Each panel relates to the others to form a single unit. By placing the more strongly coloured panels on the outside Bonnard has managed to contain all four as a single unit. Also, the fact that the two figures on the outer panels are facing in at each other helps to create a sense of unity between the four panels. Bonnard's acceptance of Maurice Denis' definition of 1890, to which I have referred in the previous chapter, is evident in this work - "one should remember that a painting before being a warhorse or a nude woman or an anecdote is essentially a flat surface covered with colour assembled in a certain order". Another very Japanese aspect of these panels is the monogram on each one, which he also used in THE PARADE GROUND, which I have discussed in chapter one.

Japanese Art not only brought to his attention the use of flat colour and outline, it also stimulated his taste for observing the unimportant spectacles of everyday life. Andre Fermigier said in his book on Bonnard that, like the Japanese, Bonnard abolished any

hierarchy among his objects. Something as unimportant as a kitchen pot may well occupy the centre of a painting. Bonnard all his life was to construct his most finished works around a simple ornamental detail - the patterns in a dress or the stripes on a blouse, the scattered flowers in a wallpaper, a table-cloth's checks or the tiles in a bathroom.

In Bonnard's compositions no one is posed. They are, in a way, like snapshots, family photographs. The influence of photography could explain the accidental and unexpected character of some of his compositions. Bonnard often pushed the figure into the near foreground of his compositions, leaving the middleground more or less empty. He was fond of saying that a good painting must be constructed around a hole, an inert or unimportant element.

Bonnard's tendency to chop his scenes abruptly may also be due to photography as much as Japanese art. A figure may appear at the edge of the composition or maybe partly cut out. In some paintings, such as THE PARADE GROUND, the composition's whole foreground plane is taken up by a figure seen from the back. In fact, it is not so much the figure of the soldier but the rucksack on his back that Bonnard has placed in the most dominant position. He has chopped the scene very abruptly so that the figure to the extreme left of the composition is partly cut out.

In the 19th century the camera greatly influenced many painters. As I have already stated, Bonnard's abrupt cropping of his compositions as well as the apparent casualness in the arrangement of the objects in his paintings could to some extent be explained by the influence of photography. Monet, too, looked at photographs and, as a result, blurred distant and moving forms in his paintings. Even in the 17th century Vermeer was using a camera obscura, a forerunner to the

camera to help him compose his paintings, which explains the treatment of light on surfaces which resembles the overlapping sequins of light that appear in an out of focus photograph and are not normally visible to the naked eye. It also explains the disproportionate size of the man in relation to the girl in OFFICER AND LAUGHING GIRL.

Bonnard never allowed his figures to dominate or distract from the rest of the composition. He managed to integrate them so that all parts of the composition read with equal importance, not just as background for the figures. He achieved this in two ways. Firstly, by using light to dissolve and cut up the forms, which I have already discussed in the first chapter, and, secondly, by the unusual cropping of his compositions.

Between 1900 and 1910 Bonnard painted quite a number of street scenes, a subject very popular with the Impressionists, but Bonnard rarely depicted vast panoramic views of Paris painted from windows, as did Monet or Pissaro. He nearly always presented the subject matter in a horizontal fashion, usually taking close up views, sections of streets, street corners, and depicting individual figures rather than vast crowds, as in Monet's BOULEVARD DES CAPUCINES painted in 1873.

He had a similar attitude to landscape. Open nature and broad horizons appealed less to Bonnard, the painter of the intimate and solitary, than the familiar world of gardens, and often his landscapes are confined to gardens or seen through an open window in his interior paintings. He generally placed figures in confined surroundings, such as a garden, rather than broader landscapes where they would become somewhat lost. He always tried to express landscape in such a way as to give the feeling of being close to it.

Around the beginning of the First World War a change took place in Bonnard's work. He felt the need to return to drawing and pay more attention to the construction of his compositions, which is evident in what he said at the time: 'I returned to school. I turned against all that had previously excited me, the colour which had attracted me. I had almost unconsciously sacrificed form to it, but it is absolutely true that forms exist and that it is not possible either to arbitrarily reduce or transpose it. Thus it is vital to study it and after drawing there comes composition which should constitute an equilibrium: a picture which is satisfactorily composed is half made."⁴

DINING ROOM IN THE COUNTRY, painted in 1913, is the first witness of his desire to build the painting around a precise and rigorous network of horizontals and diagonals and clearly drawn curves to be found in his work up until the Second World War. This painting is very geometrically constructed, the upper two-thirds of the picture being divided into vertical bands by the rectangular shape of the open door and window. The table which occupies most of the lower portion of the painting forms an arc shape which divides the composition horizontally, as does the lower part of the window frame. The composition is based on the contrast between the rigidly constructed interior and the more freely painted exterior. He has used the geometric framework of the door and window to dissect the picture space in a very definite way. These architectural elements are painted in broad, flat colour, which contrasts strongly with the sections of landscape seen through them in which the colour is more broken up. As Andre Fermigier says, he uses the motif of the window which recurs in THE OPEN WINDOW, painted in 1921, and WINDOW AT LE CANNET, painted in 1925, as a kind

of architectural scaffolding inserted between the atmospheric freedom of the landscape and the disorder of the domestic setting ensuring that the painting is balanced.

Bonnard did not paint with his canvas mounted on stretchers and did not like regular formats. He would pull a piece of canvas from his roll, tack it up on the wall and cut it out according to his pleasure, often marking out the picture's limits with horizontal coloured bands.

While Bonnard's paintings all seem very casual and freely composed there is, hidden under the free brushwork and vibrant colour, very strict composition. There is always a geometric form - the rungs of a chair, a wall, a window frame - to stabilise the picture and define a limited space. His work relied quite a lot on drawings. He drew constantly and many of his compositions originated in a pen or pencil sketch.

I see quite a resemblance to Vermeer in many of Bonnard's paintings. They are just as carefully worked out in terms of composition, although this is not always at first apparent in Bonnard's work as his brushwork is so free. However, when examined closely many of his paintings are built up around a strong geometric framework, be it architectural as in the many window paintings he did, or in terms of pattern. The checkered tablecloths and blouses, the bathroom tiles and the flower patterned wallpaper which feature in so many of his paintings are reminiscent of Vermeer's checkered floors and patterned drapes. The difference between these two painters is that the rigid structure of Vermeer's compositions is more immediately apparent whereas in Bonnard's it is not.

As I have already said, Bonnard liked to compose his paintings

in unusual and unexpected ways and he often used mirrors to vary the perspective. THE TUB (see ill. No.10), painted in 1915, is one such painting. He has used the mirror to enable him to paint the view from floor level. This painting depicts a reflected image of a woman bending over a bathtub. The mirror forms a frame which contains the reflected image. Since the glass is tilted and also seen from a diagonal view, the basin and tub are given extra importance and, in fact, dominate the composition. The placing of the figure in the left hand corner of the picture ensures that it does not take from the other elements in the composition. The curve of her body balances those of the tub and basin. Within the mirror's rectangle, to create a sense of depth, Bonnard has inscribed a triangle which is formed on one side by the bed and on the other by the towel rack and the model's profile. This painting may have been inspired by Degas, who in 1886 exhibited in Paris a series of pastels entitled a 'suite of nudes, of women bathing, washing, drying, rubbing down, combing their hair or having it combed'.

I have already mentioned in the previous chapter Bonnard's affinity to Matisse's work in terms of colour, but what is even more apparent is their similar attitudes to composition and pattern. Apart from the fact that both men were influenced by eastern art, which accounts for the strong decorative element in the work of both, they also had similar ideas about space. Both men often painted views looking down from above and neither stuck rigidly to the laws of perspective. They both tilted their table tops up towards us to show us objects in the same picture as though seen from different viewpoints. This could be due to the influence of Cezanne or even Picasso. In THE TABLE (see ill. No.12), painted in 1925, for

example, he established the sitter in direct and correct perspective to the spectator (as to the artist himself), but the objects on the table are set out as if they were seen from above. This means that the figure and the objects are rendered by the artist from two different and independent viewpoints.

Again in this painting, as in many of his paintings, Bonnard managed to combine a feeling of casualness within a strong composition. The table-top forms a big, bold diamond shape which occupies most of the picture space. The area of dark shadow around it forms a large 'L' shape which contains it and links it to the door behind the figure. The figure acts as a link between the darker background and the white table, her head becoming merged into the background and her body linked to the table, being similar in both tone and colour to it.

Although colour and light seemed to dominate Bonnard's later work, it did not eliminate his use of pattern, especially in the bathroom series executed between 1925 and 1937, where the wall and floor tiles replaced the checked tablecloths of his earlier paintings, the difference being that in these paintings each panel glows with luminous colour unlike his earlier works which were more muted and flatter. NUDE IN A BATHROOM (see ill. No.14), painted in 1932, is a good example of this combination of extensive use of pattern and vibrant colour. Although the colour is distributed in a very free manner, there is a strong sense of construction and geometry about the composition. The painting is divided horizontally by the line between the wall and the floor, the upper portion being divided into four vertical bands and the second of these, the mirror, is subdivided horizontally by the image reflected in it. The first and last of these bands are also subdivided both vertically and

horizontally by the tiles. In the lower section of the painting the floor, which is tilted up towards us like the table-tops of his other paintings, is composed of diamond patterns. The placing of the bath and table to the left of the picture at an angle prevents the composition from being solely divided into rectangles. The figure to the right of the composition, which is not at first noticeable, as she merges into the curtain, sets up a diagonal opposing that formed by the bath and table on the other side of the painting. This painting has a mosaic quality with the forms being broken down into a series of brightly coloured patterns.

Bonnard was primarily a colourist but he also had a very strict awareness of composition and all his paintings have an underlying structure, which is often camouflaged by free brushwork and bright colour.

Footnotes - Chapter II

¹André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York), Pages 13, 14.

²Denys Sutton, Bonnard, (Faber & Faber, Ltd., London), Page 2.

³Royal Academy of Arts Catalogue - Post Impressionism - London 1979-80, Page 49.

⁴Royal Academy of Arts Catalogue of Pierre Bonnard Winter Exhibition 1966, Page 21.

CHAPTER III

SUBJECT MATTER

Bonnard's paintings are a documentation of his life. While it is true that during his career he was from time to time engaged in decorative work as well as a number of religious commissions, in the main the subjects he chose for his paintings reflected his everyday experiences, the mundane, ordinary aspects of life that many painters chose to ignore - things and trivial events that most people encounter every day without really noticing.

The themes of Bonnard's paintings, his choice of subjects, show a number of influences. In the first two chapters I discussed the influence Japanese art had on Bonnard's attitude to colour and pattern, but eastern art also influenced his choice of subjects, the unimportant spectacles of everyday life. Like the Japanese, Bonnard abolished any hierarchy among his subjects and did not give his figures an importance over their surroundings. He managed to integrate his figures so that they became part of the total composition, not the most dominant feature in it. There is a tendency, when a figure is introduced into a painting, for the rest of the objects to become background, but Bonnard avoided this by, firstly, using light to partly dissolve his forms so that they merge into each other and, also, by the abrupt cropping of his compositions which often resulted in a figure being partly cut out of the picture. This abrupt cropping gives the impression of the

scene extending beyond the limits of the canvas. At first glance the figures are not always apparent. Often the focal point of the painting will be something else, such as the pattern on a tablecloth or a bowl of flowers or some other minor detail.

Early in his career Bonnard chose the streets of Paris as a subject for his paintings. He was not the first artist to paint the city, however, as Vermeer, Monet and Pissaro, to name but a few, had done so before him, yet he struck what was virtually a new note. He adapted an intimist approach to the street scene. He assumed the role of a spectator. As I have already mentioned in chapter two, when depicting city scenes Bonnard usually chose close up views rather than vast horizons and large crowds. Bonnard's street scenes always give the impression that he is a part of them, that he is amongst the crowd rather than viewing it from a distance as the Impressionists did. In LA PASSANTE (see ill.No.3), painted in 1894, the woman's head occupies most of the picture space and gives the feeling of being almost on top of the viewer. When looking at such a painting one has the feeling of actually being there on the busy street, bumping into people. I find this painting much more real than the crowds depicted by the Impressionist painters. In the Impressionist paintings, for example Monet's BOULEVARD DES CAPUCINES, which was painted from a balcony looking down at a vast crowd, the artist is detached, viewing the people from a distance, whereas Bonnard is part of the crowd. He is down amongst the people and has succeeded in documenting an experience which is familiar to us all - the feeling one gets when walking along a busy street. The fact that the forms are not clearly defined adds further authenticity to this painting for, when walking along a crowded street, one does not

distinguish the features of the passers-by. This painting was painted at the height of his intimist period and is very similar in mood to those secluded interiors that Bonnard as well as Vuillard were painting at this time. It is a more tonal painting than his earlier Nabi work, the forms being more dissolved and the colour somewhat muted. Bonnard's Paris is much more sombre in colour than that painted by the Impressionists. As a young man he had admitted his pleasure in looking at street scenes and noting down what he saw, but, unlike his friend Lautrec, he always depicted the more pleasant aspects of Parisian life.

Bonnard adapted the same intimist approach to landscape as he did to street scenes and interiors. Up to 1910 his landscapes were rarely anything but Parisian. He painted countless garden scenes at Le Grand-Lemps and around and about the Paris suburbs. The enclosed, intimate world of the garden better suited his sensibilities at this time than did vast horizons. Bonnard spent most of his vacations as a child and a young man in the family home at Grand-Lemps, to which he was strongly attached, and it was there that he painted his first canvases. The Grand-Lemps garden was the outdoor setting most often recurring in the work done early in his career. THE TERRASSE FAMILY (see ill.No.5), painted in 1902-3, is one such painting. It represents the artist's family. In this painting Bonnard has concerned himself more with the garden than the landscape, the open country appearing only briefly to the right of the composition. At this time Bonnard was still somewhat apprehensive in his approach to landscape, and it was to be some time yet before he depicted it as more than a decorative background. In the rear at the left at the french window is the painter's mother. The figure on the bench with one

ankle resting on the other knee is the composer Claude Terrasse, who in 1890 married Bonnard's sister. Completing the scene are children, dogs and cats. The fat woman sitting at the table is wearing a hat, which shows that she is a visitor, and seated to the right of her is her husband. Except for the pair in the foreground who are talking everyone seems to be bored, especially the well-behaved child seated on the bench. The painting is light in tone, being bleached with sunshine, which gives it a sense of drowsiness. It is a typical lazy summer day where everyone is bored but too lazy to do anything about it. Even the cat on the right hand side of the painting at the man's foot is half asleep. Bonnard seems to have been at pains to compress the scene and accentuate its frontality. The composition's intentional awkwardness and the stiffness of the poses give the picture the appearance of a family photograph. In the previous chapter I suggested that the casual and spontaneous appearance of his figures was due to the influence of photography as if the people were caught unaware in mid-action, but equally the stiff, awkward poses such as this one bear a resemblance to a family snapshot. It is as if they were all posing specially for the camera.

Children and animals featured in many of Bonnard's paintings. Portraits of children especially are frequent in his early work, when he used to observe those of his sister and his friends playing. The reason children are less frequent in his later work is that most of his friends' children had grown up and he did not have any of his own. Bonnard's depictions of children look quite innocent unlike many of Picasso's paintings, where they are depicted as monsters. Domestic animals also frequent many of Bonnard's

paintings, both in interiors and garden scenes, where there is often either a cat or dog.

Bonnard often depicted tables in the garden as well as in interiors. One of his favourite subjects was that of tea or lunch in the garden. Although this theme clearly has Impressionist origins, Bonnard's treatment of it was quite different. These paintings are much more intimate and casual than the picnics depicted by the Impressionists, which were generally quite lavish. Bonnard usually took a close-up view, which gave a sense of intimacy and seclusion, and he never had a taste for fine objects. Luxury intimidated him, and the objects laid out on his tables were always very modest and ordinary. THE CHERRY TART (see ill. No.8), painted in 1908, is one of these paintings. The scene has an entirely ordinary appearance - the woman is in a dressing-gown, the crockery is quite everyday and the tart is still in the pan in which it was baked. He has compressed the scene by taking a close-up view and blocking off the horizon. The landscape is almost completely hidden by the foliage in the garden. As in THE TERRASSE FAMILY The scene is bathed in sunlight. The figure of the boy on the extreme left of the composition is not at first apparent. The forms seem almost to merge into each other. Again, as in most of his paintings, no one is posed and the painting has the appearance of a snapshot taken unawares. The casual way the objects are placed on the table and the presence of the dog add to the feeling of naturalness. However, despite the air of casualness the composition has been carefully worked out and is well balanced. The landscape seen through the foliage encloses the table's perspective, which divides the picture space into three triangles. The top of the table divides the space horizontally. The tree trunk

to the right of the composition forms a strong vertical band which is balanced to the left by the wine bottle and the deck chair, jutting out from the left hand side of the table, forms another small triangle.

Until 1910 Bonnard mainly painted in Northern France, but in that year he discovered the Mediterranean. However, unlike Matisse, the change in light did not have a very noticeable effect on his work, not immediately anyway. The landscapes he did at this time in Saint-Tropez were still confined to gardens and his colour, although it brightened to an extent, did not explode into full brilliance until the latter part of his life.

In 1912 Bonnard bought a house, Ma Roulotte, at Vernonnet. It was around this time that he felt the need to return to drawing and construction and to place more emphasis on composition. Architectural elements began to appear in his work at this time and he painted a number of rigidly constructed interiors, such as DINING ROOM IN THE COUNTRY and later THE DINING ROOM, where the architectural elements such as the window and door frames were inserted to form a barrier between the freely painted landscape of the exterior and the casual disorder of the interior. These architectural elements remained in Bonnard's work until the beginning of the Second World War. From that time onwards Bonnard composed his landscapes with greater freedom. They were no longer glimpsed at through windows or confined to gardens. He eliminated the foreground and architectural elements. The opposition between the luminous brilliance of the natural scene and the withdrawn and sheltered intimacy of the interior had gone. These later paintings, many done at Le Cannet where he bought a villa in 1925, glow with vibrant colour.

Bonnard eventually settled permanently at Le Cannet, where he lived until his death in 1947. "It is" wrote his nephew Antoine Terrasse, "a little house with pink walls, all white on the inside. The garden, where bushes and flowers grow at will, slants down to the street. At a distance one can see the red roofs of Le Cannet, the mountains, the sea. The studio, on the second floor, is small. In it there are a stool, a chair, a narrow divan, one or two little tables, tubes of colour and bottles of turpentine, the brushes, and rags. The light comes in through a glass bay and plays on the white walls where the canvases are tacked. 'I dislike elaborate installations when I am to paint...' said Bonnard 'they intimidate me'".¹

He used to do a lot of walking and would return from his walks in the countryside with his pockets stuffed with sketches, which he remembered when the time came to paint. He never painted anything he had not seen although he did not paint on the spot. An insight into Bonnard's working methods has been provided by an eye witness. Felix Fénéon² described how Bonnard would pin a canvas, lightly tinged with ochre, to the wall of the dining room. He would glance at a sketch done in oil, pencil or ink, in the early stages, which contained notes of the dominant colours of the compositions. After about eight days he would stop working from the sketch. He would step back from time to time to judge the effects of the juxtaposed tones and occasionally he would place a dab of colour on the canvas with his finger and then another dab next to the first. This process would continue until completion of the picture, which might take a week.

The themes of Bonnard's paintings, as I have already mentioned, showed an influence of Impressionism, but also there is a resemblance

to the 17th century Dutch painters and to Chardin, who in their paintings of towns, interiors and still life depicted their everyday surroundings without idealizing them. In the previous chapter I discussed Bonnard's affinity with the paintings of Vermeer in terms of composition and pattern, but they are also linked by their choice of subjects. Vermeer, too, painted many interiors and domestic scenes, such as THE YOUNG WOMAN READING A LETTER and THE KITCHEN MAID.

The painting of still life was very popular among 17th century Dutch artists. Bonnard, too, chose it as the subject for some of his paintings. However, his approach differed greatly from that of Kalf or De Heem, who depicted very rich banquet tables. Bonnard's still life often appears as a part of a larger composition, often as part of a depiction of a meal or a table, such as in THE CHERRY TART or THE TABLE, which I have already discussed. The objects are arranged haphazardly and give the impression of being there by chance, and not deliberately laid out as in many Dutch still life paintings, or in those of Cezanne, where the objects look rigidly fixed and somewhat contrived in their arrangement. Bonnard's still life looks as if he has isolated a section or corner of a room or table or cupboard, as in THE RED CUPBOARD (see ill.No.13), painted in 1925. This large still life represents the cupboard in the dining room at Le Cannet. The painting depicts three shelves of an open cupboard. The contents of the cupboard are quite ordinary - apples, grapes, some glasses and a plate, which in no way resemble the lavish, gluttonous still lifes of De Heem. The food in Bonnard's paintings is never very rich. It is nearly always vegetarian, comprising for the most part of cake and fruit, and

in this painting he seemed less concerned with the objects than the colour, which he has used quite freely. The painting is composed of a mixture of reds and violets which are very warm and rich.

Like Monet and Degas, Bonnard painted a series of the same subject. The female nude was a subject he painted continuously throughout his career. Bonnard's nudes never look as if they were posed by a professional model. They appear natural and casual. He used to underplay the figure's articulations which he considered graceless and bathed their forms in light. They are always seen in terms of intimacy, usually in bedrooms, dressing-rooms or bathrooms. It was his wife, Marthe, who acted as model for most of these paintings. Her real name was Marie Boursin, but she called herself Marthe de M^eligny and claimed to be Italian. Bonnard was very attached to her and never got over her death. André Fermigier said in his book on Bonnard that she was rather fragile in health and that her constant need for vacations and a change of air, the chief remedy for all ills at the time, explains the couples' frequent trips and the fact that Bonnard finally settled in the South of France. Her preoccupation with hygiene provided Bonnard with a subject which occurs again and again in his later work, the bathtub series.

The theme of the nude in the bath was not original, and Bonnard in his early paintings of this subject appears to have been influenced by Degas, who, in 1886, exhibited a series of pastels entitled "Suite of nudes, of women bathing, washing, drying, rubbing down, combing their hair or having it combed". Degas was interested in the anatomy and movement of his figures and this applies to some of Bonnard's early studies of the nude. NU ACCROUPI

DANS UN TUB, painted in 1912, is very similar to THE TUB by Degas of 1886. It is the same awkward pose of a woman bent down in a small round tub seen from the back, looking down from above. The abrupt cropping of the composition is similar in both paintings. Bonnard's later nudes differ greatly from those of Degas, however. In the 1930's the old fashioned tubs that were represented by Degas were replaced by baths which allowed a person to stretch out in them. Bonnard became so little concerned with movement and more interested in the variations of colour and light that he depicted this static pose again and again. It is here that the likeness to Monet can be seen. The figure floating in water brings to mind the waterlilies that Monet painted in his later years. As Monet found continuous variations in his water garden, so did Bonnard in his bathroom series. Monet lived at Giverny near Vernon and Bonnard used often visit him. Andre Fermigier suggests that the white impasto which occurred in Bonnard's work in the 1920's and the arabesques formed by his colours recall passages of Monet's paintings of water lilies of 1907 or his irises of 1911. Monet painted the same scene time and time again at different times of the day. Bonnard also painted a series of the one subject - his bathroom series - not at different times of the day, but with endless variations in colour. Like Monet, he often represented the composition on one plane. Bonnard represented the woman in the bath giving the impression that she was floating on the surface like a waterlily.

Bonnard disliked painting before the model and usually worked from memory. "The presence of the object, the subject itself," said Bonnard, "is an embarrassment to the painter at the moment when he is painting. The point of departure for a painting being

an idea, if the object itself is there at the moment when he is working, there is always the danger that the artist will allow himself to be taken in by the specifics of the immediate view of it and in so doing lose the initial idea".³

In his choice of subjects Bonnard had an affinity with a number of other painters. As I have already said, he was not the first painter to have chosen everyday life as the theme for his paintings, but his treatment of it was quite unlike anything that had gone before. Although influenced by a number of sources, Bonnard was essentially an individual.

Footnotes - Chapter III

¹ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Harry N. Abrams. Inc. Publishers, New York), Page 154.

² Denys Sutton, Bonnard, (Faber & Faber, Ltd., London), Page 24.

³ André Fermigier, Bonnard, (Harry N. Abrams. Inc. Publishers, New York), Page 154.

CONCLUSION

Although influenced by and associated with a number of different artists or groups of artists throughout his life, Bonnard was essentially an individualist. As he said himself he belonged 'to no school' and, although he was a member of the Nabis and was influenced by many of their ideas, he adapted them to suit himself. In any case, as Denys Sutton said, the way of painting evolved by the Nabis did not entail allegiance to any one set of artistic precepts. Although the practitioners possessed certain elements in common, such as the desire to use pure colour in a flat decorative way and to elongate and curve the line, their preoccupations were more intellectual and religious than technical.

While working with the Nabis, Bonnard was also interested in Japanese art and used their attitudes to composition and space in his own work. His choice of subjects clearly has its origins in 17th century Dutch art as well as Impressionist painting but Bonnard's treatment of it is very personal. He was influenced too by Degas and, while he took his theme of the nude of the bath for his own series of paintings, the way in which he approached it was very different from Degas' work. The treatment of light and atmosphere, especially in his later work, shows the influence of Impressionism, particularly Monet. However, Bonnard's attitude to colour differed greatly from that of the Impressionists who used colour in a very objective way, unlike Bonnard's colour which was

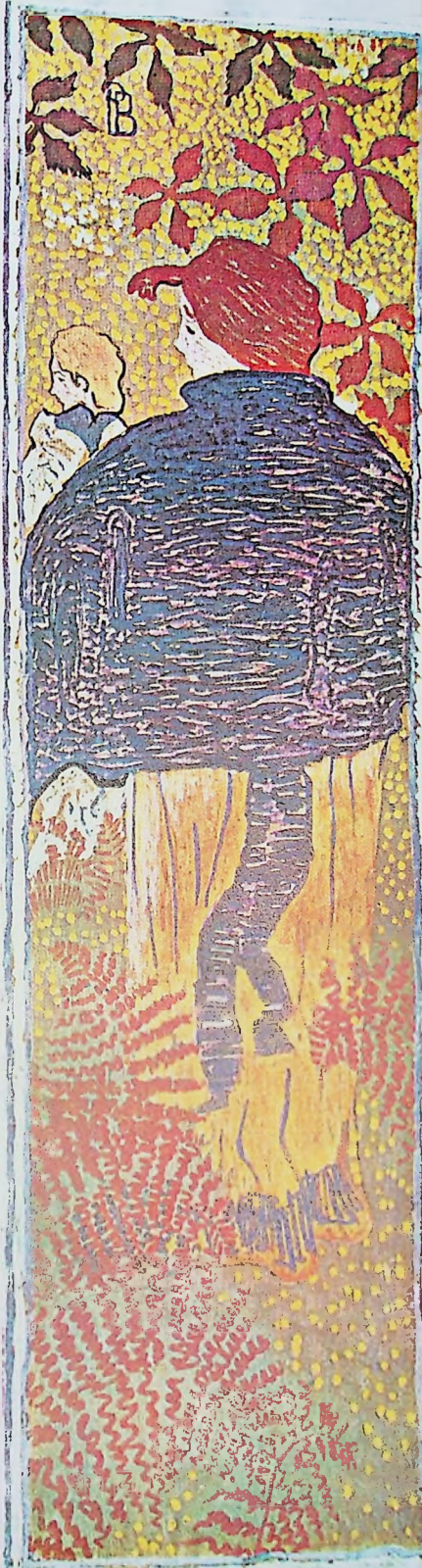
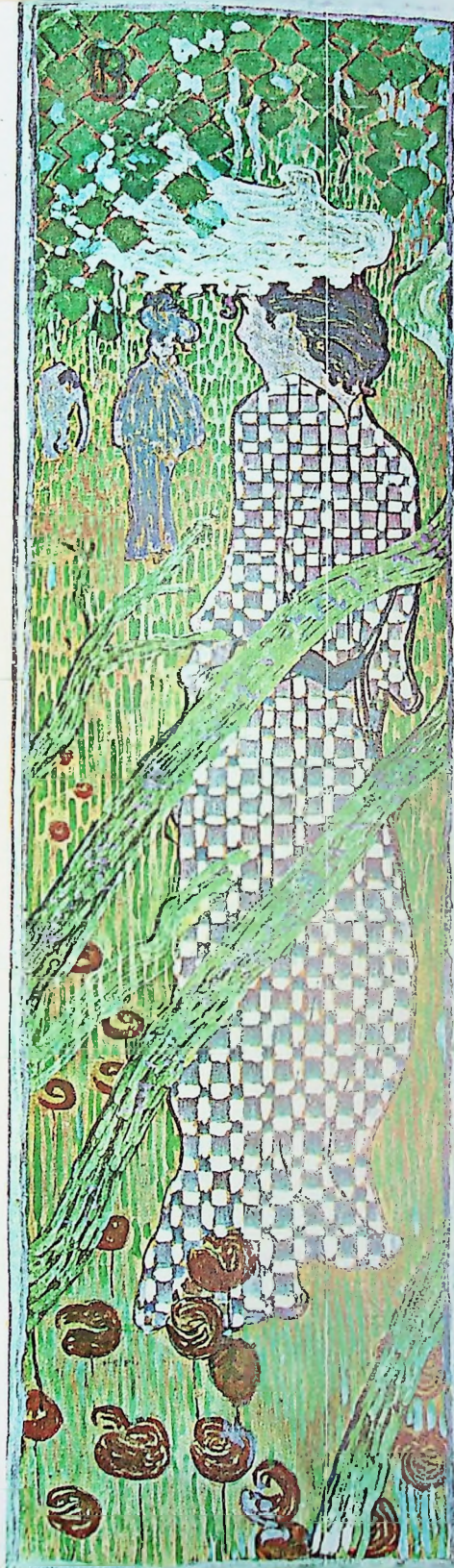
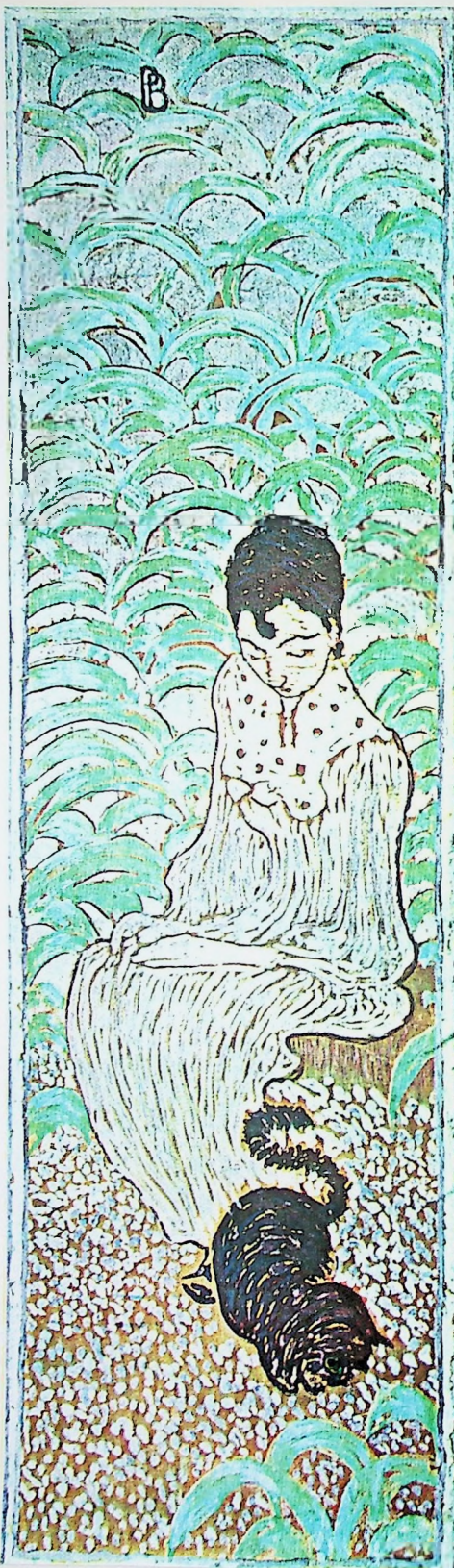
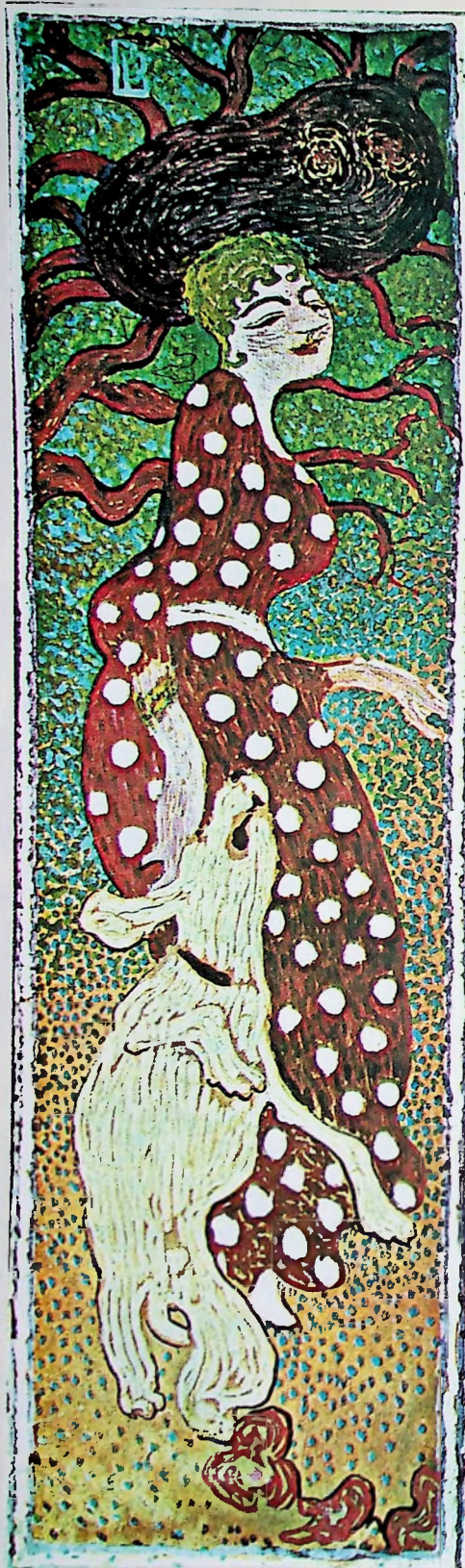
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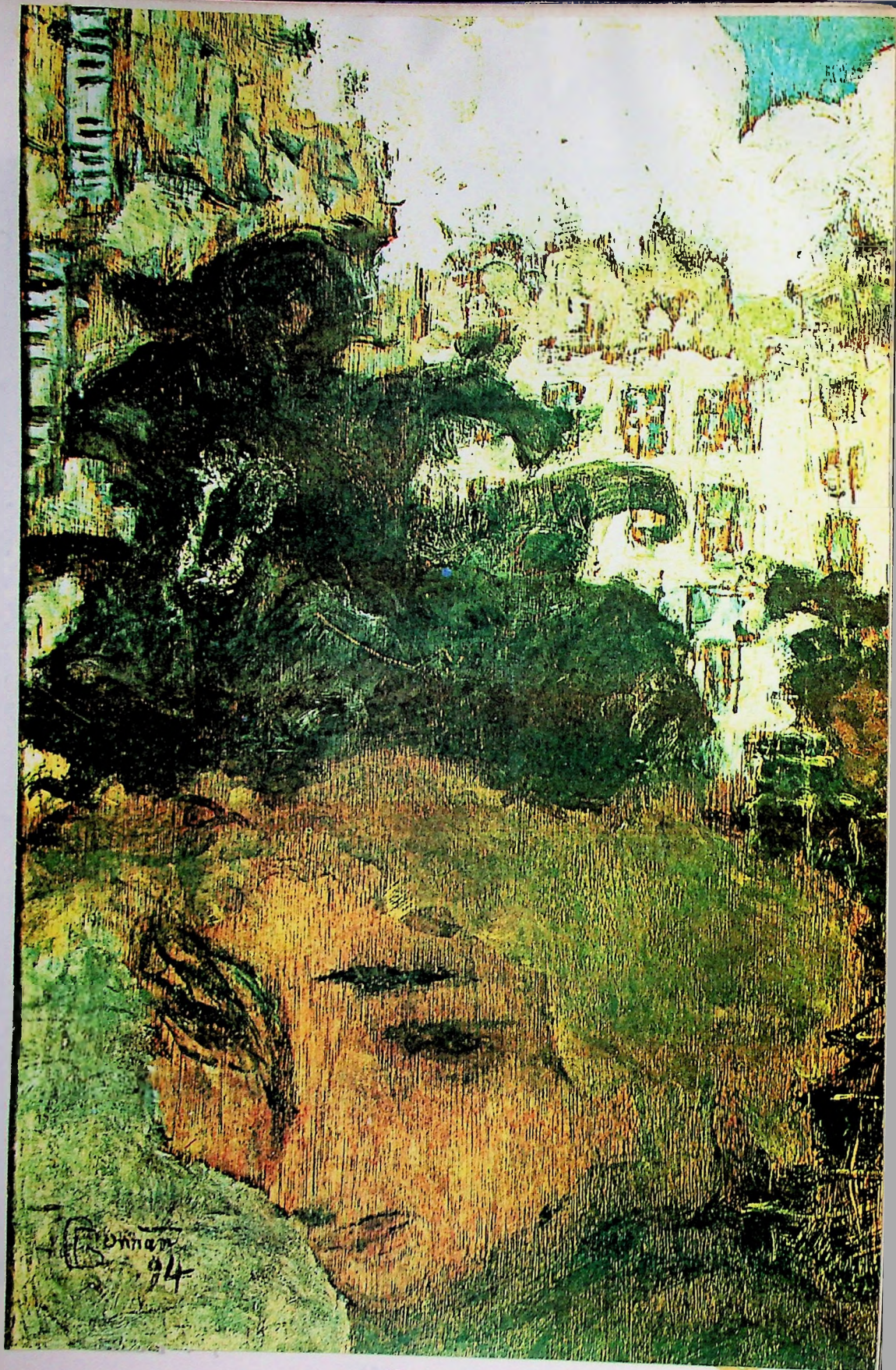
It could not be said of Bonnard, as it was of Monet, that he was 'only an eye'. He was not simply a follower of Impressionism but adapted some of their ideas and incorporated them in his own work.

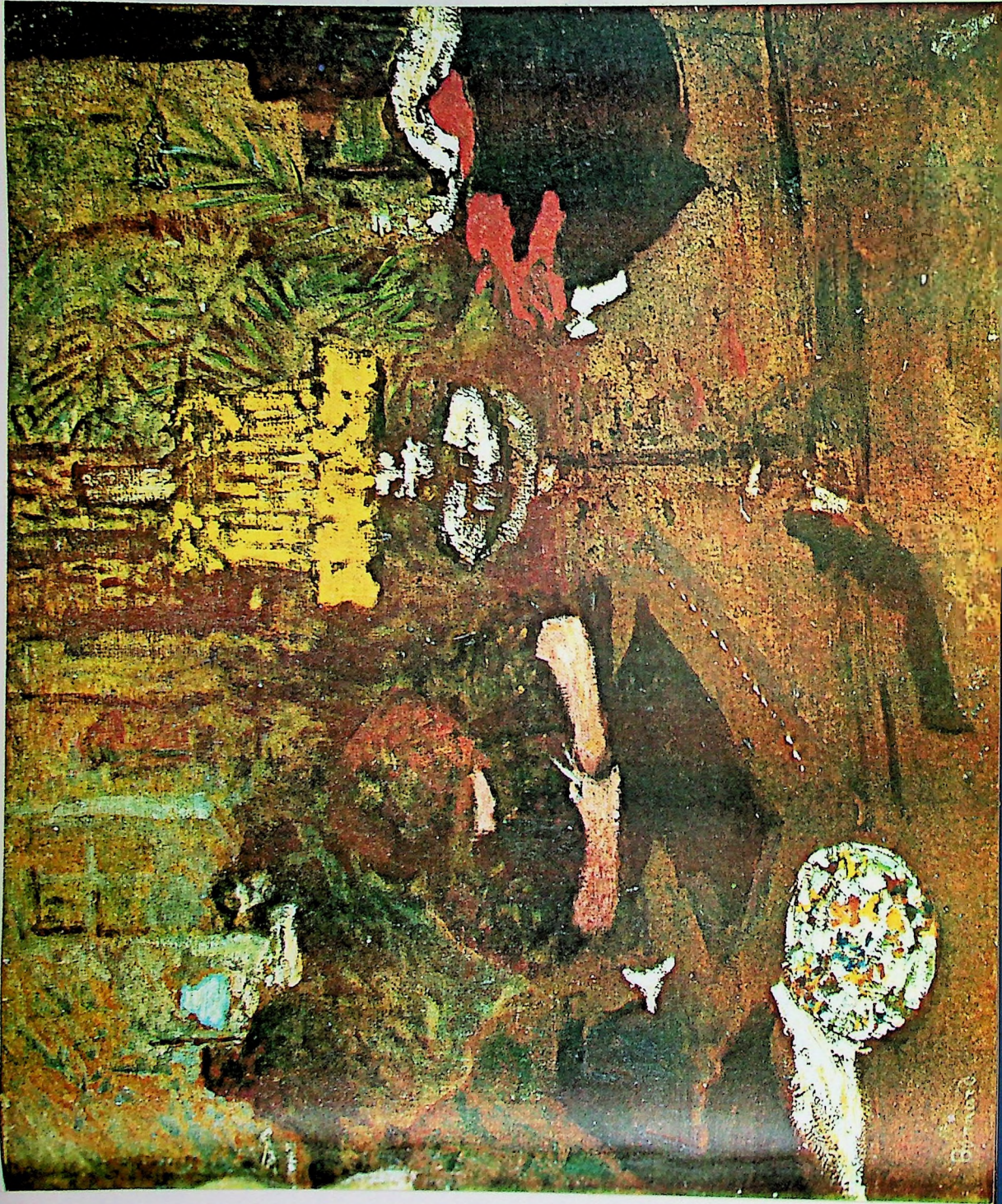
Bonnard was not only aware of the art that had gone before him but was also influenced by some of his contemporaries. He knew Monet and used to visit him. His work had much in common with that of Matisse and they admired and respected each other's work. It was Picasso and Cubism that induced his urge to return to drawing and construction at the beginning of the First World War and it was also Cubism, or more probably Cezanne, that affected his attitude towards space and perspective.

Although he was aware of and influenced by other art and artists, Bonnard was not a follower or member of any group or school. He adapted ideas taken from other art to produce highly individual work. Towards the end of his life he was moving towards a form of abstraction, placing a greater emphasis on pure painting values at the expense of immediate reality and because of this could be termed one of the forerunners of abstract painting. The subject for Bonnard acted as a vehicle for his use of colour and pattern. His works are paintings rather than pictures.

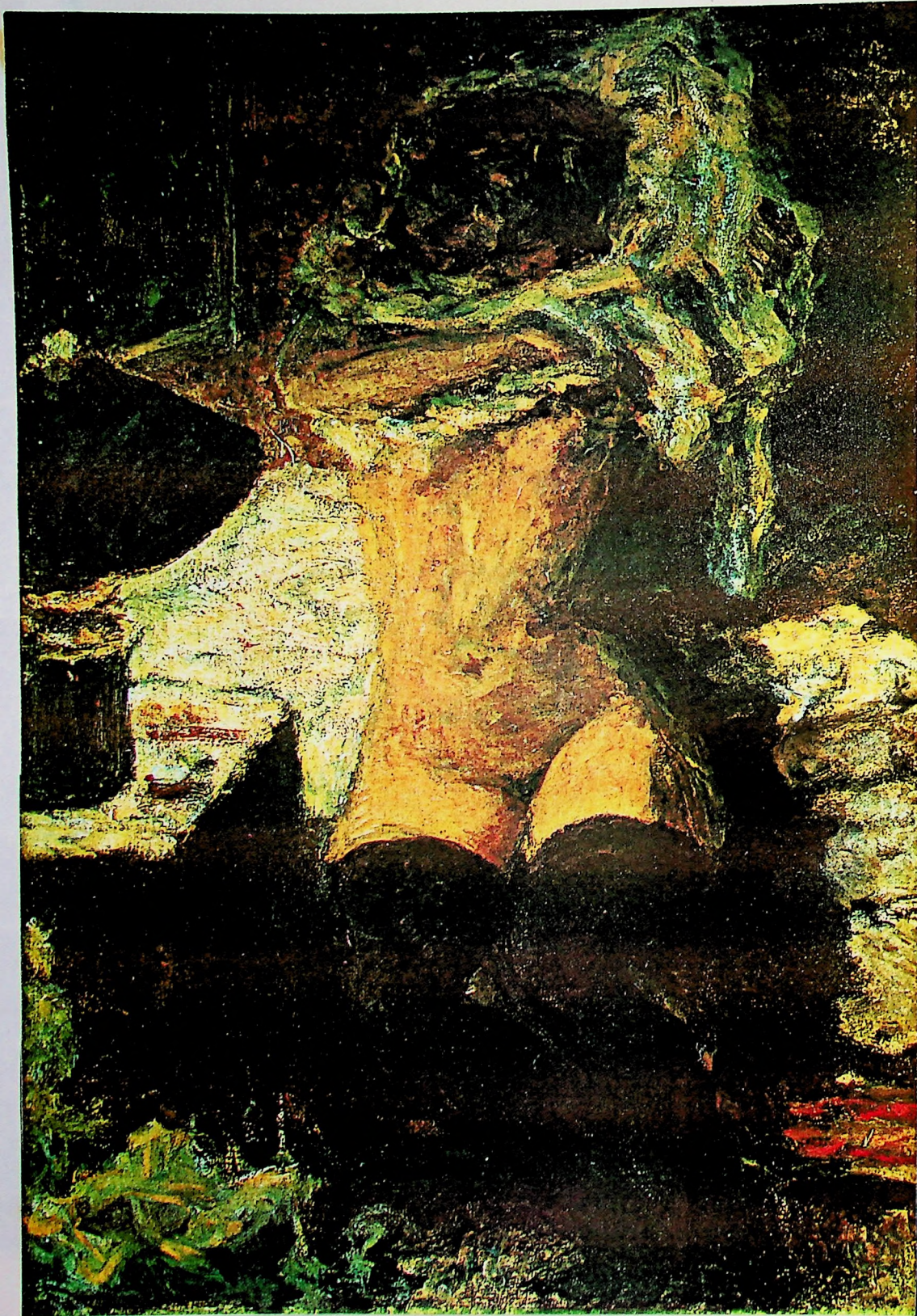


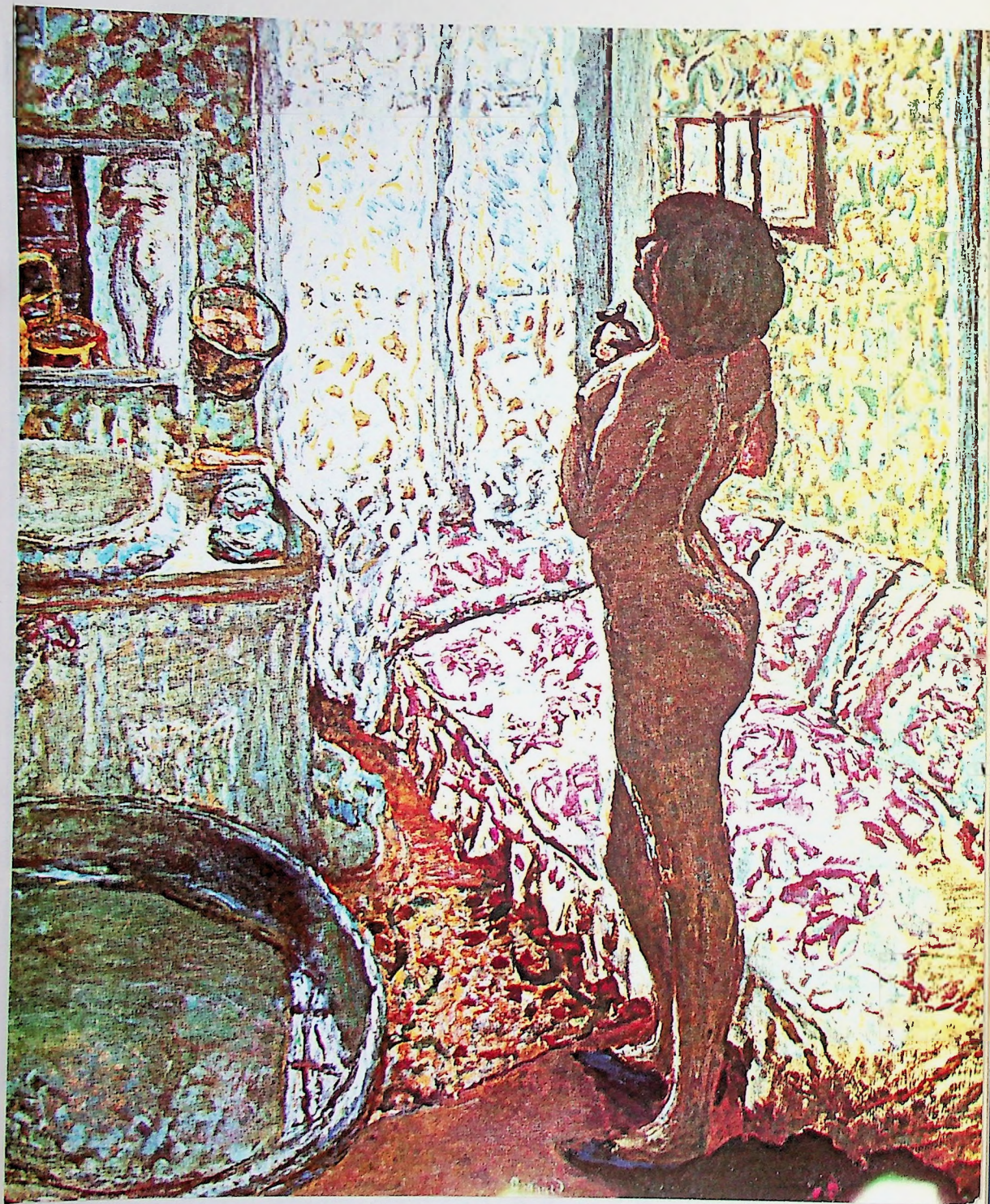


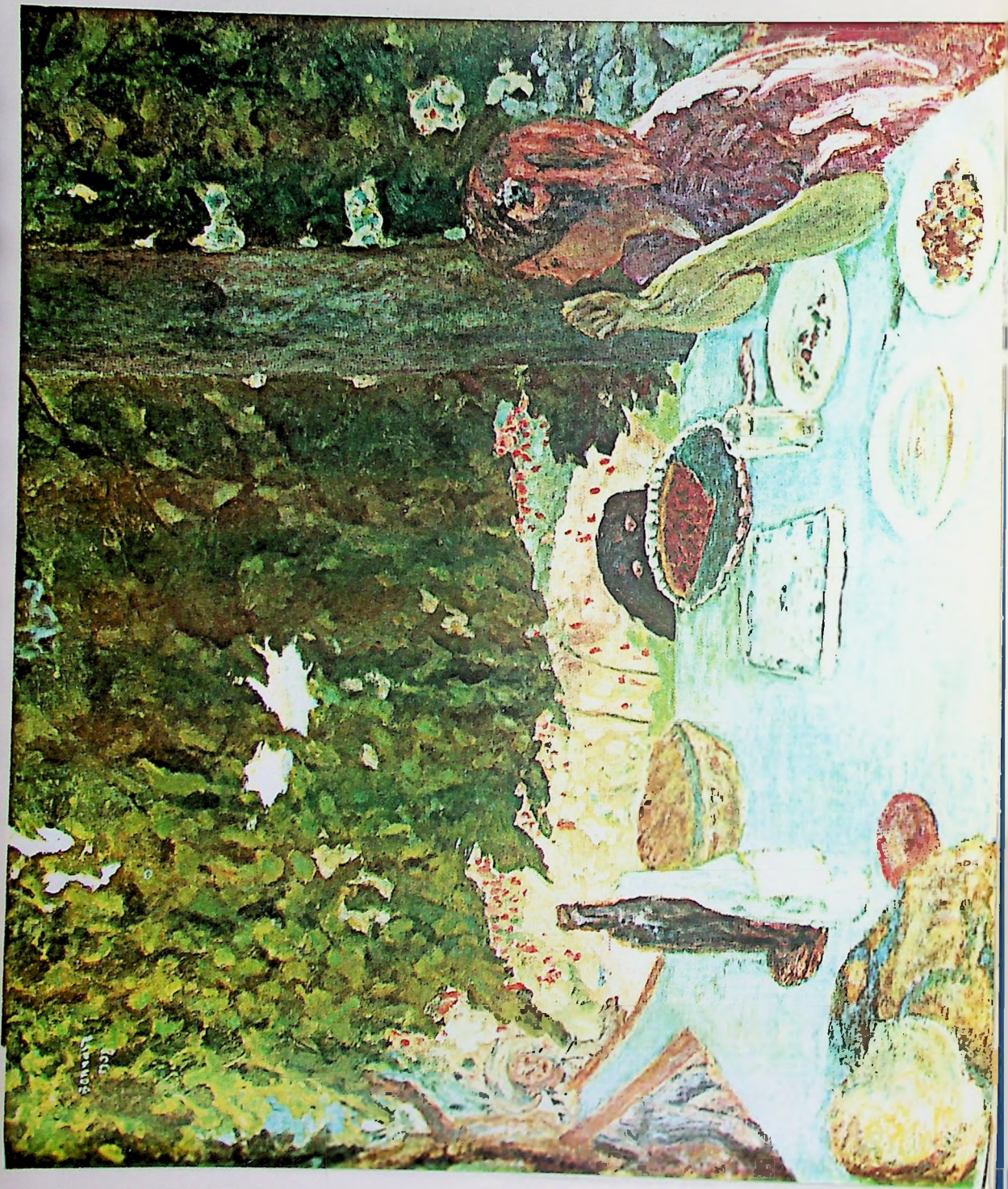


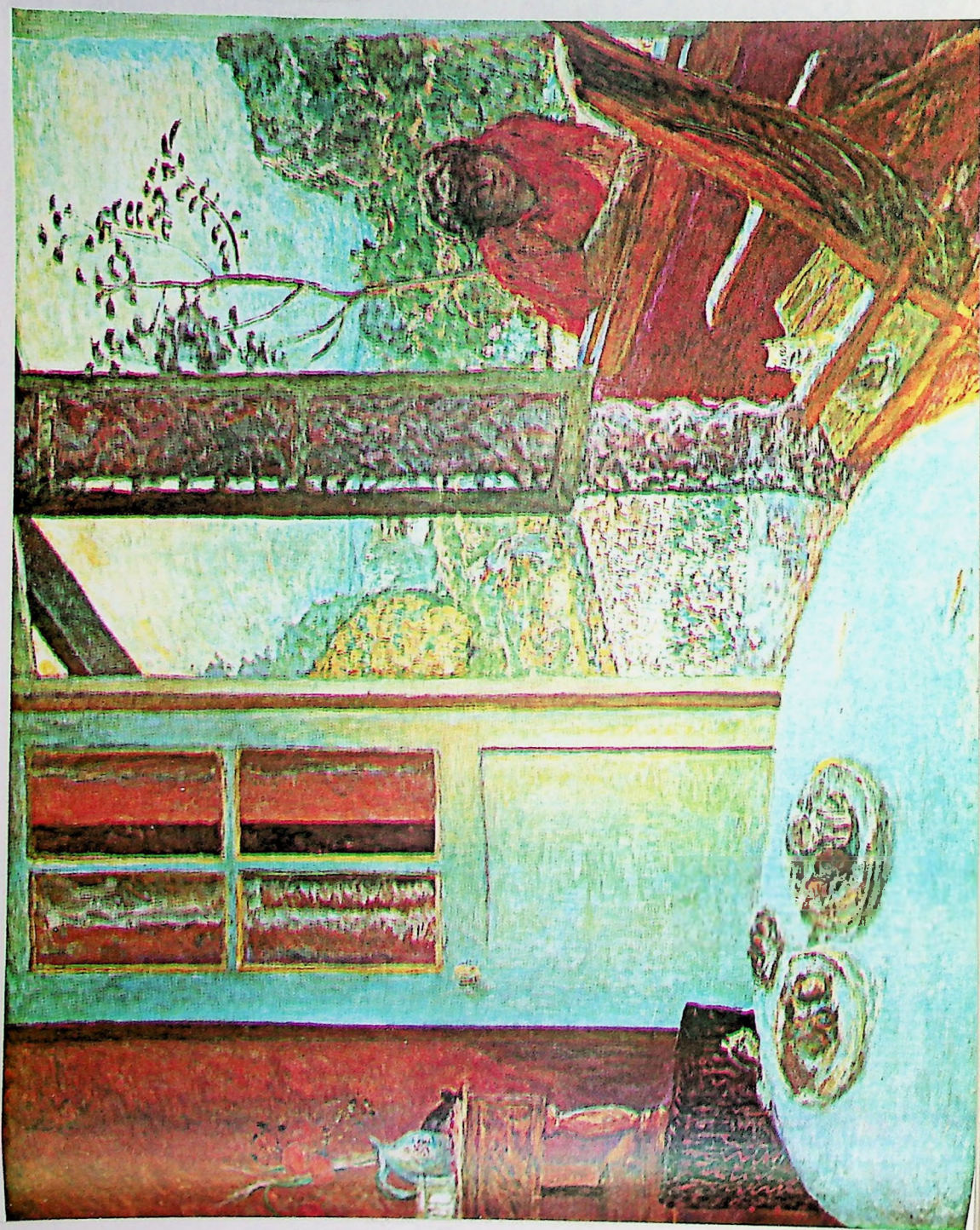










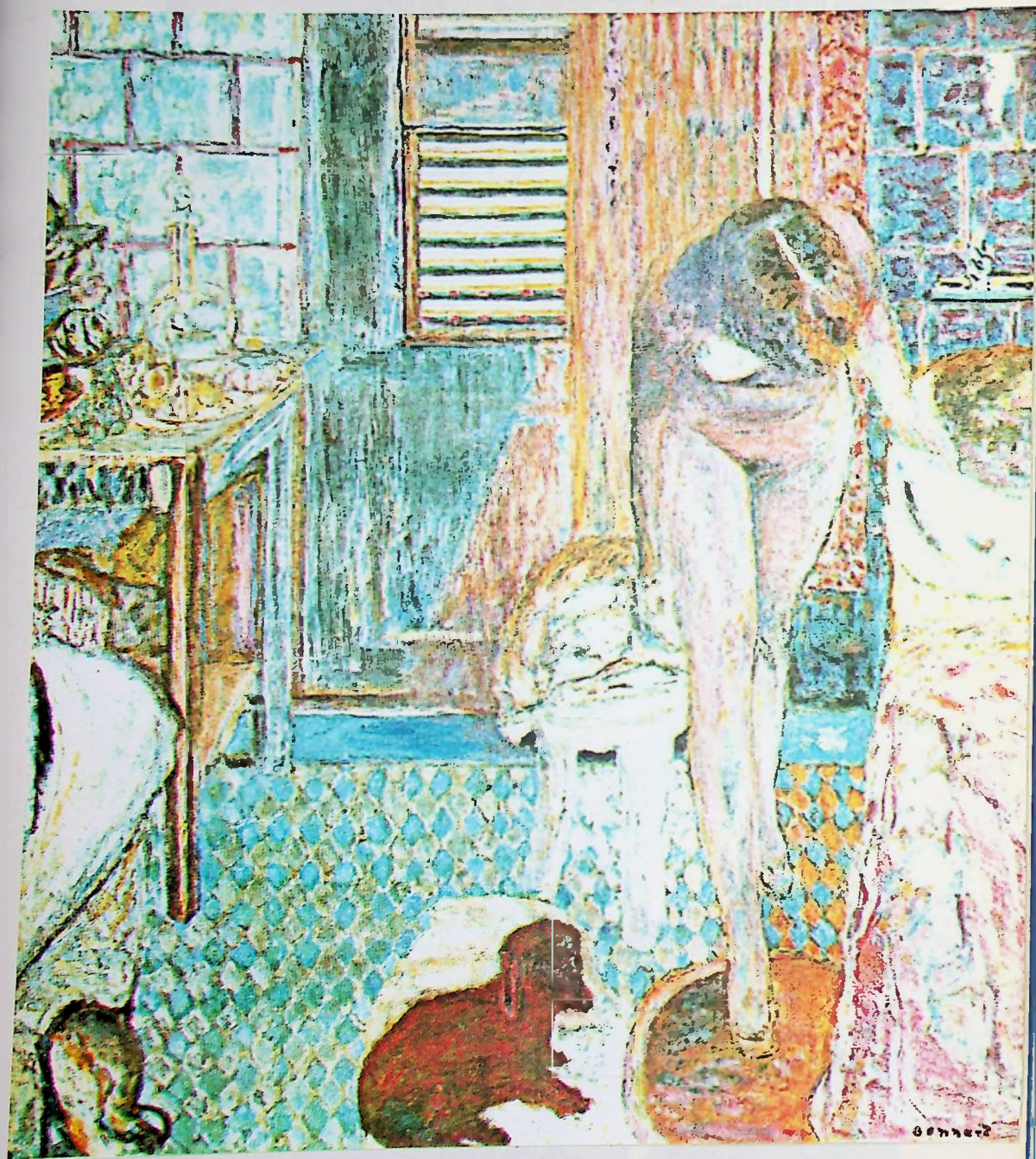


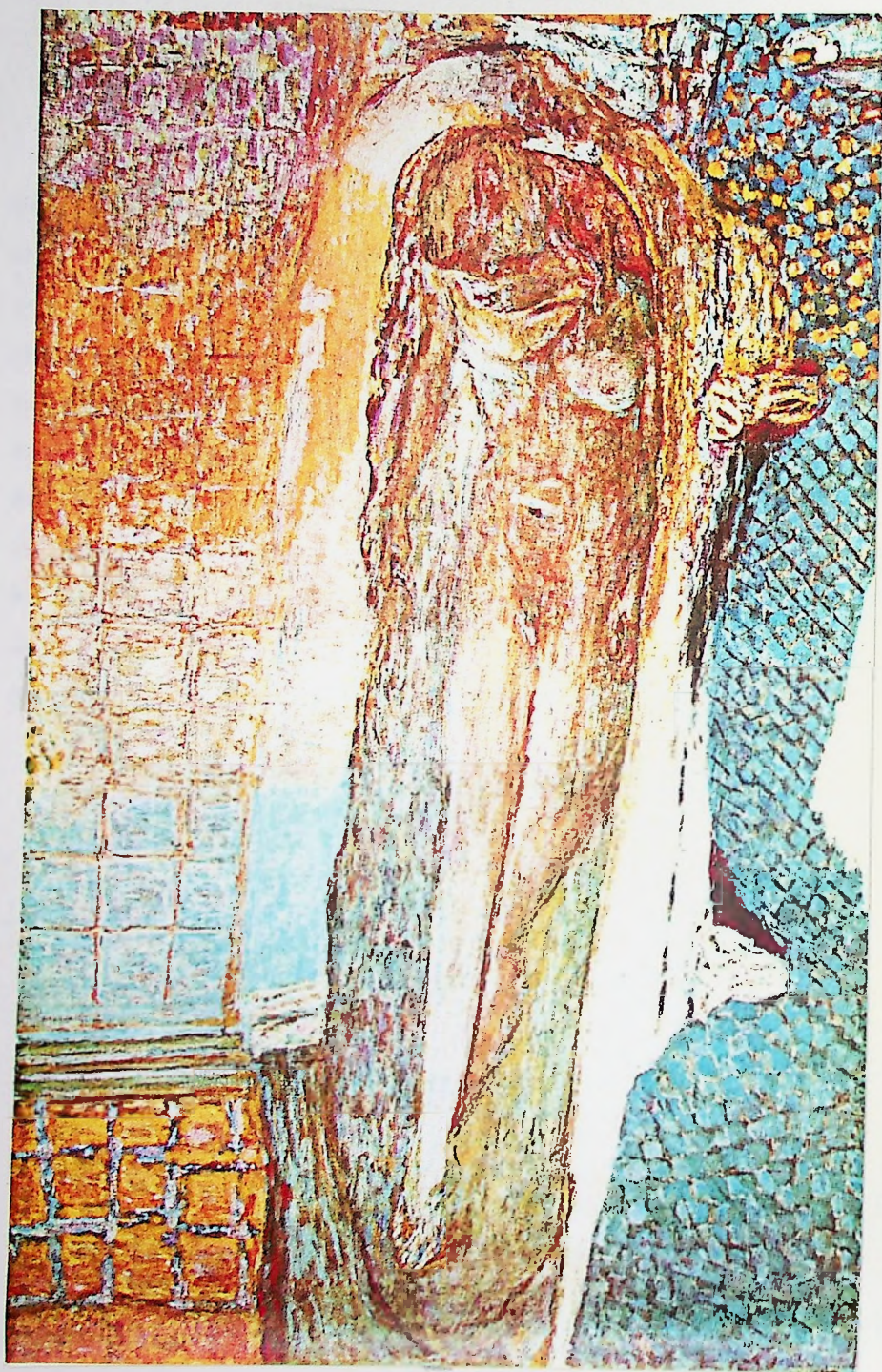












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