

art

Enticed by the small works of Pierre Bonnard



The drawings by French Post-impressionist Pierre Bonnard, presently on view at the University Museum of Art (12 to 5 afternoons except Mondays), are, in the modesty of their scale and sense of personality, a welcome change for the community. It is a pleasure to feel enticed by these small works rather than overwhelmed by huge paintings and sculpture.

Then too, there are the mixed pleasures of feeling in touch with modern art history, Bonnard being a figure of undeniable international stature. The sense of history is central in establishing the importance of the drawings, too, for without the reputation Bonnard established with his paintings, these little sketches might seem insignificant indeed. For they are not virtuoso performances, and are meant in most cases to be seen by no one but the artist. Bonnard drew for himself alone, to keep in touch with what he considered his original vision. Paradoxically, this process of "note-taking" yielded some remarkably attractive results, as a careful study of these small pieces will reveal.

Bonnard's early drawings are evidence of the work of a talent struggling to find its element, its way of translating the raw material of perception through a coherent artistic vision. More often than not, in the last decade of the 19th century and first decade of the 20th, Bonnard failed in that effort. His drawing is accomplished, but it never seems quite comfortable with itself. Often he will turn to other sources in interpreting what he sees; there is evidence of this in works such as "Daphnis and Chloe" of about 1902, which seems to owe much of the density and voluptuous plumpness of its central figure to Renoir, with whom the artist was acquainted. Similarly, a sinuous "Nude" of about the same time is reminiscent of Chagall. Sometimes he looks ahead to the concerns of his mature style, as in "Omnibus Horses" of 1895, in which he is clearly concerned with the framing edge of the drawing, apparently imitating not another artist in this case, but the indifferent cropping effect of the photograph.

About the time of WW I, Bonnard reportedly suffered a period of doubt about his painting and the direction in which his interest in color had been leading him. He felt the color had "seduced" him away from equally important elements of painting, and in order to deal with this problem, he sought to return to his original vision by concentrating on drawing. Though he drew intensively during these years, there is comparatively little in the show to give an idea of what specifically he was struggling with and what kinds of solutions he found to his difficulties. Considering that the exhibit is drawn from two private collections in England, the spottiness that allows such gaps in a representation of the artist's development is understandable, but the omission is unfortunate nonetheless.

The sense of maturity and self-possession that is detectable in these drawings fairly emanates from everything Bonnard did after

1925. The large group of drawings dating from that year show that the artist had acquired something that he could not lose again, something that consists of an artistic language, a kind of sign system that allowed him to simultaneously give factual information about phenomenal reality and remain aware of and give form to an idea, an organizing artistic intelligence within the work.

Over a decade before, Picasso and Braque had begun to move away from phenomenal reality toward what could only be termed a concentration on that organizing intelligence in their Cubist work. Matisse and the Fauves, though they paid more attention to the forms of their subject matter, felt free to play with color in what many felt at the time to be a capricious and equally distortive manner. Bonnard could not bring himself to take part in such radical movements. The sense of continuity that emerges from his drawing in this show must have been quite important to the artist himself. The change that came about in his art was more an outgrowth of the process of doing it than the result of certain conscious decisions and reliance on experimental technique.

There can be no doubt that the conservative attitude Bonnard adopted in his development as an artist was right for him. The rest of the drawings in this exhibit attest to the fruitfulness of the approach he adopted from the 1920s on. In the next two decades, the artist refined his visual shorthand into a remarkable tool. Sometimes, as in "Bay of Cannes (Estérel)," the result is highly explicit in its representation of a landscape or still-life. Sometimes the subject, especially in the seascape drawings which are sometimes hardly more than a horizon line and a few squiggles representing clouds, is reduced to almost nothing. These latter drawings are the more amazing because the artist evokes from his tangled scribbling an intensely real sense of what he sees.

The personality that comes through to the viewer in the whole series of drawings is that of an unheroic but persistent and unpretentious man who has had a subtle and lasting influence on the art of our century. These drawings reveal a little-known aspect of his genius.

The Museum of Art has added another attraction to its present program, which will run through July 1: an exhibit of photographs and related material celebrating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. Though of little artistic interest, the exhibit succeeds in giving some idea of the environment in which Copernicus lived and worked toward the end of the Middle Ages. For those who wish to take an intermission from the drawing show, it's an admirable diversion.

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