Historians have long considered the impact of amateur photography, a social phenomenon sparked by the burgeoning photographic industry at the turn of the twentieth century. Although initially it was without artistic pretensions, photography was nevertheless inseparable from the work of many artists, particularly the Nabis painters Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, and Edouard Vuillard. Studies in this area have advanced significantly since 1977, when Erika Billeter included a few amateur prints taken by the Nabis in an exhibition of photographs and paintings in Zurich.

For example, the catalogue accompanying the major retrospective of Bonnard’s work mounted by the Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in 1984 included an essay by Jean Clair about how photographic optics were evident in the exhibited paintings. And Jean-François Chevrier wrote a notable article about Bonnard’s photographs. These had just been found in the home of the artist’s nephew Charles Terrasse, whose children donated them to the Musée d’Orsay in 1987. That same year, the museum staged the first exhibition devoted to this aspect of Bonnard’s activity, accompanied by a catalogue identifying all of his approximately two hundred photographic prints and linking them to his art. The Edouard Vuillard retrospective at the Grand Palais followed in 2004, displaying that artist’s snapshots in the same rooms as his paintings. The accompanying catalogue featured an essay by Elizabeth Easton on Vuillard’s vision as an amateur photographer and another, by Guy Cogeval, on the contribution of the artist’s photographic work to his painting. Finally, in 2006 Maurice Denis was the subject of a retrospective at the Musée d’Orsay. Although the artist’s personal photographs—some of which had just been donated to the museum by his granddaughter Claire Denis—were shown in a room some distance from his canvases, it was nevertheless clear that many of them were closely related to the paintings and sometimes showed similar, if not identical, motifs. I single out the photographs of the Nabis because, unlike those of most amateurs—with the exception of Jacques Henri Lartigue and a few others—they show a consistency of vision and an understanding of the possibilities of the snapshot, both undoubtedly acquired from their experience of painting, their familiarity with Japanese prints, and the impact of the cinematograph on all artists of their generation and those who followed.

In developing Kodak cameras, George Eastman was seeking to reach a rapidly growing number of amateur customers. Cheap, light, and easy to handle, the

Pierre Bonnard’s Amateur Photographs
A Poetic, Dancing World

François Heilbrun
Bonnard took most of his photographs while visiting the countryside. Specifically, he used his camera in his lithographs, and more generally, snapshots were because in Bonnard’s art, as in that of the other Nabis, the parallel between pencil and camera is all the more obvious “sketch” the motifs for paintings yet to be. This parallel is evident that he used photography as another way to produce one of his strongest images, showing Marthe in the bath (cat. 10); and in Vernon. Bonnard’s Paris photographs are confined to a few nudes of Marthe made in 1899 and 1900 in the apartment next to his studio at 65 rue de Douai (cats. 26, 28) and a few family scenes shot in the same dwelling. Apparently, Bonnard took no pictures in the street that inspired so many of his Nabis paintings and prints, but he did travel with his camera — to Venice, where he stayed with the painter Theodore Roussel and with Vuillard in 1899 (cat. 1), and to Spain, where he went in early 1901 with Vuillard and Prince Emmanuel Bibesco. Finally, in addition to all these images, mainly of family and friends, are two short series of photographs of models in the studio, the most remarkable of which date to around 1916 (cat. 14).

There is a marked subject-matter similarity between the paintings and photographs of Bonnard’s Nabis period, notably in relation to the time spent with the Terrasse family in Le Grand-Lemps, with children bathing (cat. 13), women hanging out the wash, picking fruit (cats. 5, 6), and having meals outdoors. Interestingly, however, none of these paintings is based on motifs from the snapshots. The same is true of the Paris subjects. While the painting La sieste (Siesta) (1900; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia) shows a nude Marthe lying on the bed in the rue de Douai apartment, Bonnard imbues her with considerably more sensuality than is apparent in the photographs, which are quite restrained. He transposed two of these, which are clearly recognizable in his lithographs for Paul Verlaine’s posthumously published book of erotic poems, Parallèlement, published by Ambroise Vollard in 1901 (cats. 27, 29); here again, the pink pencil outline lends the female body a kind of feverish sensuality that is in keeping with the poems.

In making the series of Marthe and himself naked in the garden at Montval, Bonnard undeniably was thinking of Vollard’s second commission for Longus’s Daphnis et Chloé (cats. 23, 24), a work completed in 1902 for which the artist also drew upon several photographs, notably the chaste images of a nude Marthe squatting and standing in the sun (cats. 19, 22). For the cover of a book by René Boylesve, Bonnard again used the motif from a snapshot of his nephew Charles Terrasse after a bath (Musée d’Orsay, PHO 1887-8-12). The artist, however, did not take photographs in order to interpret them using other techniques. Instead, he regarded them as research outcomes that would help him formulate the content of his paintings and drawings more precisely. Thus, the juxtaposition in one room of the photographs from the Musée d’Orsay and the books of sketches of Marthe dressing, as part of the 2006 Bonnard retrospective at the Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, revealed the painter’s quest to capture the private moments of his partner and favorite model in as much detail as possible, using both techniques.1 Notably, a few pencil studies and one photograph on the theme of Marthe in the tub — which would eventually inspire Bonnard to execute several monumental paintings — were also on display in the neighboring exhibition rooms.

In his paintings and photographs alike, Bonnard was gifted at transforming the everyday into something poetic and wondrous. Usually, he captured his subject at a distance, accentuating the effect of mystery, Marthe’s luminous silhouette, outlined against the dark vegetation of the garden in Montval (cats. 14–17), conjures up a heroine of the ancient Greek romanticist Longus. Bonnard infused even his most trivial family photographs with a sense of grace — the three Terrasse children dancing near their mother in Noisy-le-Grand (Musée d’Orsay, PHO 1897-31-1), for example, and a cat jumping at the nightgown of Andrée Terrasse while shadows playing at her feet reveal a cat and dog (Musée d’Orsay, PHO 1900-30-2). By comparison, photographs by Vuillard, who was a better photographer than Bonnard technically and also a fine interpreter of moments, show us a very different world, one more concerned with portraying aspects of modern life. Be that as it may, Bonnard and Vuillard were equally adept at capturing what Henri Cartier-Bresson called “the decisive moment.” (Incidentally, Cartier-Bresson greatly admired both artists, an admission he expressed in print or at least one notable occasion.)

In his paintings, Bonnard made no systematic attempt to exploit the formal innovations facilitated by his Kodak. I am thinking, for example, of the dynamic arrangement of the Terrasse children bathing (cat. 13),2 and of their silhouettes rising up in the foreground where an avenue turns a corner (Musée d’Orsay, PHO 1901-30-16). Subtle manifestations appear in his paintings from 1907, however, notably in a new stretched, distorted space of the kind he might see through the lens.3

Bonnard’s paintings from around 1907 and 1908 demonstrate a shift from the essentially graphic and decorative Nabi style to one that is more monumen
tally visual. Significantly, the artist changed cameras at the same time, turning to his Folding Pocket Kodak.
introduced by Eastman in 1897. Few images taken with the new camera are known, but the one of Marthe in the bathtub marks a turning point (cat. 10).  

Whereas in the Montval series of nudes, he shows Marthe as delicate and fragile, in this picture, shot from closer in and no doubt at floor level, she has a sculptural presence. In the photographs Bonnard took of a model around 1916 in his rue Tourlaque studio, as in the paintings he did of Marthe at the same time, he exhibited a new interest in vertical lines and geometric compositions, particularly in the remarkable image of the model taking off her blouse before a mirror (cat. 32).  

At this time, the tenets of Cubism were prompting him to question the supremacy of color over construction.

Bonnard lost interest in photography around 1916, when he was returning to color. Being primarily a painter, he did not experiment further with a technique that, had he pursued it other than as an amateur, would have become too exclusive. He was, however, among those painters who best grasped the expressive possibilities of photography, thereby showing that, even as an amateur, he recognized how originality of vision was more important than technical expertise.

NOTES

The title Pierre Bonnard, photographe, adopted by Philippe Nèagu, Antoine Terrasse, and myself for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition of photographic proofs, paintings, and engravings at the Musée d’Orsay in 1987 (François Heilbrun and Philippe Nèagu, Bonnard photographes [Paris: RMN and Philippe Vidal, 1987]), was a title chosen out of convenience; it does not properly reflect reality, as Michel Frizot rightly noted (Frizot, ‘Pierre Bonnard: L’œuvre d’art, l’œuvre de la photographie,’ in Bonnard, Peintre photographe [Zurich: KunstHaus; Bern: Benteli, 1992], p. 148). The title, however, that as a painter used to the art of composition, Bonnard was able to make chance do his bidding. For a Bonnard image taken in close-up, see ibid., p. 285.


4. Ibid., cat. nos. 72, 73, 100, 101, ill. pls. 36, 37, 38, 42. St. Bernard’s Pocket Kodak was even smaller than Vuillard’s, as can be seen in an anonymous portrait reproduced in Heilbrun and Nèagu, Bonnard photographes, p. 148.

5. The 1¼ x 2½-inch format of Bonnard’s negatives and contact prints provides clear evidence that he used a Pocket Kodak. Front (“Pierre Filière”), p. 262/1, was the first to provide a clear technical explanation of the use of the Pocket Kodak: in framing, the photographer had to “keep glancing back and forth, maintaining a link between the scene he was after and the uncertain gauge of the ‘newfield.’” In front’s view, the images were formed, to some extent, independently of the photographer I believe, however, that as a painter used to the art of composition, Bonnard was able to make chance do his bidding. For a Bonnard image taken in close-up, see ibid., p. 285.

6. These photographs were anonymously donated to the Musée d’Orsay; published in François Heilbrun, Mises en composition d’un homme de François Cachin (Paris: Galimard and RMN, 2002). The attribution of snapshots to Bonnard, Vuillard, and perhaps Bibesco still poses problems.

7. Heilbrun and Nèagu, Bonnard photographes, no. 4.


11. Heilbrun and Nèagu, Bonnard photographes, nos. 2 and 4.


14. For the model in the rue Tourlaque studio, see ibid., nos. 219–22.

cat. 4. Pierre Bonnard, Afternoon in the Garden, 1891. Oil and pen and black ink over pencil on canvas, 14 x 17 3/4 in. (35.5 x 45.1 cm). Private collection.


Pierre Bonnard, Young Girl and Child (study for a lithograph), 1892. Pencil, 7 1/4 x 4 1/2 in (20 x 10.6 cm). Private collection.

Pierre Bonnard, Narrow Street in Paris, ca. 1897. Oil on cardboard, 14 3/4 x 7 1/2 in (37.1 x 19.6 cm). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Pierre Bonnard, The Cab Horse, ca. 1895. Oil on wood, 11 x 15 in (29.7 x 40.7 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection.


Pierre Bonnard

below: cat. 9. Pierre Bonnard, Young Girl and Child (study for a lithograph), 1892. Pencil, 7 1/4 x 4 1/2 in (20 x 10.6 cm). Private collection.

right: cat. 10. Pierre Bonnard, Narrow Street in Paris, ca. 1897. Oil on cardboard, 14 3/4 x 7 1/2 in (37.1 x 19.6 cm). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

cat. 12. Pierre Bonnard, Little girl wearing a crown of leaves, ca. 1902. Modern print from original negative. Negative: 1 5/8 x 2 1/4 in. (3.8 x 5.5 cm). Musée d’Orsay. Gift of M. Antoine Terrasse, 1992


cat. 17. Pierre Bonnard, Marthe in Montval, seated, her left hand on her right breast, 1900–1901. Sepia-toned gelatin silver print, 1 4 x 1 4 in. (3.8 x 5.1 cm). Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Gift of M. Antoine Terrasse, 1992.
cat. 18. Pierre Bonnard, Nude in Black Stockings, ca. 1900. Oil on canvas, 27 1/4 x 20 1/4 in. (69.8 x 51.4 cm). Private collection, on deposit at SheffIELD Galleries and Museums.