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‘Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors’ and ‘Matisse: The Pursuit of Harmony’ Review: Feasts of French Painting

The artists’ achievements in color and composition are on brilliant display in exhibitions at two New York galleries.

BY KAREN WILKIN | April 13, 2026



Vuillard’s ‘Thadée Natanson at his Desk’ (c. 1899). Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York.

Lately, New York museum-goers have been choosing among Gainsborough at the Frick, Raphael at the Metropolitan Museum, Duchamp at the Museum of Modern Art, and for the determined, the Biennial at the Whitney and the packed opening installation at the New Museum. But two of the most exciting, ambitious shows, “Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors” and “Matisse: The Pursuit of

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Harmony,” are in commercial galleries—Skarstedt, in Chelsea, and Acquavella, on the Upper East Side, respectively—stellar exhibitions that any museum would be ecstatic to host. (Scholarly catalogs are promised for both.)

“Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors” assembles 19 small, intense paintings made between about 1890 and 1905, from private and public collections. This sort of thing is usually intended to contextualize and enhance works that are for sale, but it’s a terrific, serious show, focusing on the crucial period when Vuillard (1868-1940) was associated with the vanguard group known as the Nabis. While he shared his Nabi colleagues’ enthusiasm for declaratively flat, dense paint application, Vuillard rejected their interest in symbolism and exotic subject matter, preferring to focus on his immediate surroundings, his family and friends, and the places they inhabited.

The selection celebrates unexpected color, inventive patterns, and lush paint, disciplined by subtle geometry, but it also documents the Paris art world of the time. “Thadée Natanson at His Desk” (c. 1899), a golden interior with an aggressively stroked block of brownish paint standing for furniture and asserting the flatness of the surface, is a loose portrait of the publisher of the cutting-edge art and literature magazine *La Revue Blanche*. The cultural impresario and his wife, Misia (seen together in another complex, spatially ambiguous image), are supposed to have inspired the *Verdurins* in Marcel Proust’s “In Search of Lost Time.”

The art critic, writer, anarchist and editor of Natanson’s magazine bends over his papers to cut a sharp diagonal across a grid of bookshelves in the pale, shimmering “At the *Revue Blanche* (Portrait of Félix Fénéon)” (c. 1896-1901). The progressive art dealer Jos Hessel and his wife entertain guests in a rather crowded, patchy image.

The cultural references are a bonus. Ultimately, the paintings capture us as *paintings*, becoming stranger and more compelling with time. We notice touches of ocher and pale turquoise that animate the unnamable off-whites and grays in Fénéon’s portrait; an even more astonishing orchestration of near-whites is the real subject of “Woman by an Open Door” (1893). The big divisions of wall and window in “The Newspaper” (1896-98) depend upon logically improbable shifts from warm to cool color essential to the painting’s structure; an inexplicable triangle of cadmium red creates space in concert with a triangular patch of sunlight on an armchair. And there’s the bizarre pose of the sinuous girl, melting into a woman behind her, in “The Drawer” (c. 1892). “Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors” is an illuminating feast of intimacy, subtle color, and seductive paint, with a subtext of art-world history.

“Matisse: The Pursuit of Harmony” is a stunning gathering of more than 40 paintings, drawings and sculptures from 1900 to 1946. Drawn from major museums and private collections, they span much of the artist’s working life. (Born in 1869, he died in 1954.) The selection includes textbook works such as the bronze reliefs “The Back I-IV” (1908-44) and the five heads of Jeannette, made between 1910 and 1913, here installed, unusually, in a circle so that we see all sides, from different views, in unexpected relationships. We encounter familiar, powerful paintings throughout—among others, the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s remarkable portrait of Yvonne Landsberg with its aggressively scratched-out arcs; the Phillips Collection’s celebrated interior of Matisse’s Quai Saint Michel studio with its view of the Seine; and the enchanting still life of a cyclamen plant reproduced on the wall of the Museum of Modern Art’s “The Red Studio.”

We recognize old friends, particularly among the odalisques and still lifes made after Matisse moved to the south of France in 1917. But there are also rarely seen works from all periods, including the

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tall, standing “Fatma” (1912) in her embroidered robe, painted during Matisse’s transformative sojourn in Morocco, and the ravishing “La Table Noire (The Black Table)” (1919), its seated model in a green hat, executed with some of the most seductive brushwork in the history of modernism. And much, much more.

As we expect, glorious, unpredictable color dominates. The presence of sculptures underscores the dialogue between two and three dimensions that informs works in all media—the profiles provoked by sculpture that reverberate in the paintings and vice versa. We are reminded that Matisse always affirmed the artifice of painting, presenting us with undisguised models surrounded by studio props, often in garments that repeat from painting to painting. Over and over again, he seduces us with color, engages us with delectable subject matter, and then stuns us with his overwhelming pictorial intelligence and inventiveness. Matisse said he dreamed of an art that exerted “a soothing, calming influence on the mind,” but we leave Acquavella exhilarated.



Vuillard’s ‘At the Revue Blanche (Portrait of Félix Fénéon)’ (c. 1896-1901). Guggenheim Museum, New York.