

SKARSTEDT

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**The Sun**

ARTS+

# A New Exhibition Shows Why Édouard Vuillard Is Among the Great Post-Impressionist Painters

The Skarstedt Gallery show features nineteen canvases by an artist who imbued everyday settings with fine literary qualities.



'The Table' by Édouard Vuillard, 1893. Skarstedt

Edward Munch's "The Scream" (1893) – you know it, I know it, we all know it. The painting of a skeletal androgyne held in thrall to a blood red sky has accrued a cultural ubiquity that would have stupified its maker. As an emblem of metaphysical dread, it's hard to beat, but there have been more unsettling paintings. Take, for example, Édouard Vuillard's "Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist" (1893).

Long a staple of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, the smallish canvas is a case study in compositional and psychological compression. There's little distinction made between the edges of the canvas and the environs in which the title figures are wedged. The heft of the black dress worn by Madame Vuillard is in direct contradistinction to her ghostly pallor. Sister Marie is shunted to the side of the canvas in a state of trepidation. The surrounding wallpaper threatens to engulf her.

Vuillard (1868-1940) insisted that "I don't make portraits, I paint people in their homes." What the MOMA picture might say about the artist's homelife is a good question, and attempting to posit a self-styled *synthétiste* as a proto-Expressionist is a stretch. Still, there is an unease to Vuillard's panegyrics to bourgeois life, a sense that small moments can be fraught with unsaid tensions. Intimacy of this sort isn't defined by domesticity so much as haunted by it.

The Skarstedt Gallery is offering New Yorkers a splendid opportunity to mull Vuillard's "tense family dynamics." Borrowing from public and private collections, the venue is playing host to nineteen canvases dating from 1890-1905. Depth rather than range is the curatorial prerogative. Rather than give us the whole of the man, "[Édouard Vuillard: Early Interiors](#)" focuses on what is, arguably, the finest period of Vuillard's work. There's not a bum picture in

the lot and as such the exhibition is an unmissable event.

Vuillard was born in Cuiseaux, a municipality in Eastern France. His father was a navy man who became a tax collector; mom was a seamstress almost three decades younger than her husband. The family moved to Paris when Edouard was 9-years old. Plans to pursue a military life were scuttled when a passing interest in art became something more. After studying with Jean-Léon Gérôme and William-Adolphe Bouguereau, high academics both, Vuillard started hanging with a crowd that was infatuated with mystical portent and influenced by the paintings of Paul Gauguin.



'The Flowered Dress' by Édouard Vuillard, 1891. Skarstedt/ Museum of Art of São Paulo

“The Flowered Dress” (1891) is a typical work. The scene is cloistered; the composition, bluntly parceled. Two women seated toward the left are concentrating on a task at hand — knowing that Mme. Vuillard was a dressmaker underscores their duties. Just right of the composition’s mid-point is a standing woman, facing away from her comrades, wearing the title raiment. Contrasting the tone, the dress is agitated in patterning. The overall coloration of the image is keyed to a patchwork of muffled greens.

The model is presumably there for a fitting but the posture suggests that she’s performing an act of penance, look at how intensely she holds on to a nearby chair. A crisp light falls on the neck; the shadow over the face is indistinct and heavy. The reflection we see of this woman in an adjacent mirror isn’t quite in sync with her location. All the while, Vuillard’s brush moves with a dutiful economy, applying unapologetic dabs of oil to a flattened array of shapes. His abbreviations of form carry plenty of weight.

These are remarkable paintings, tersely choreographed and furtive in their enigmas. “Grandmother at the Sink” (circa 1890) pushes at the limits of Pointillism. “The Lady of Fashion” (circa 1891-92) utilizes geometry and silhouetting to jaw-dropping effect.

Elsewhere, Vuillard suffuses everyday moments — a young woman at rest, say, or ladies at lunch — with a gravitas that we might associate with literature. It’s worth noting that Vuillard was offered a chance to illustrate Marcel Proust’s “Swann In Love” and turned down the commission. Why he did so is unknown, but it makes a kind of sense. Who needs 1,000 pages of verbiage when you’ve got a scrap of canvas to accomplish the same thing?