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Bonnard and the Folding Screen: Toward a Theory of Ornamentalism

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ABSTRACT | Bonnard's folding screens are generally understood as part of the phenomenon of *japonisme*, a widespread fascination with Japanese culture in Europe that emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century. When they begin to appear and then alter the representation of space in Bonnard's painting, however, *japonisme* no longer provides an adequate framework for understanding their role in his art. I endeavor to account for the continued life of the non-Western object in the Western context by highlighting the folding screen's capacity to disrupt and engender change even as it disappears from Bonnard's late paintings. After an overview of the artist's folding screens and their relation to *japonisme*, I trace their migration into Bonnard's paintings, where the limits of this Western construct become more apparent. I propose an alternate framework—ornamentalism—within which to interpret their integration into the compositional structure of the late paintings. Ornamentalism views the ornamental object as a subject whose power to act is tied to its own degradation under imperialist and colonialist practices. Through it, I consider how the evolution of the folding screen in Bonnard's art can help us think differently about the dynamics between Western artists and non-Western objects.

KEYWORDS | Pierre Bonnard, folding screens, *japonisme*, ornament

A recent conservation treatment of Pierre Bonnard's (1867–1947) *Woman and Dog at Table* (1908; see fig. 1) in the collection of the Barnes Foundation prompted me to study the objects represented in the painting more closely. The five summarily depicted panels visible behind Bonnard's companion, Marthe de Mélny (1869–1942), and her dog turned out to represent sections of two different folding screens that the artist had produced in the 1890s during his Nabi period.¹ The two panels on the left originally formed one screen but are now detached and known as two separate works, *Country Scene* (*Ensemble champêtre*) and *Child Making Mud Pies* (*L'Enfant au pâté de sable*) (ca. 1894; see fig. 2a, b); the three panels on the right are from a ca. 1899 screen depicting Parisian street scenes



Figure 1 | Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Woman and Dog at Table* or *Woman with Dog* (oil on cardboard mounted to a cradled panel, $18\frac{5}{8} \times 23\frac{7}{8}$ inches [47.3×60.6 centimeters], 1908; Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia).



(a)



(b)

Figure 2 | a, Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Country Scene (Ensemble champêtre)* (oil on brown twill lined with canvas, each panel $65\frac{3}{4} \times 20$ inches [167×50.8 centimeters], ca. 1894; Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Allan D. Emil; © Museum of Modern Art, licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.). b, Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Child Making Mud Pies (L'Enfant au pâte de sable)* (distemper on canvas, 66×20 inches [167.5×51 centimeters], ca. 1894; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; photograph Hervé Lewandowski, © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, N.Y.).

that is no longer extant.² Identifying these decorative panels within the painting opened a fruitful line of inquiry into Bonnard's work across different media and illuminated the way in which his explorations in one medium profoundly affected his work in others. The folding screen gains significance here as both an object and a model for compositional structure in his painting.

Bonnard's screens are generally understood as part of the phenomenon of *japonisme*, a vogue for Japanese art and material culture in Europe that emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1854, after two centuries of restricted commerce with Western countries, and under threat from a fleet of ships commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry (1794–1858), Japan signed a trade agreement with the United States. Trade agreements with other Western countries followed quickly, France and Japan signing one in 1858. Japanese goods—including screens, lacquerware, ceramics, woodblock prints, enamels, and metalwork—began to be exported to France in large quantities, inspiring a widespread fascination with Japanese culture. The term *japonisme* was subsequently coined in 1872 by the French art critic Philippe Burty (1830–90) to describe this phenomenon, encapsulating a European interpretation or fantasy of Japan and its people as artistic, decorative, and diminutive.³

The construct of *japonisme* is predicated on Western subjects taking inspiration from or appropriating objects from East Asia. Bonnard was captivated by the form and artistic potential of the Japanese screen and tried his hand at making his own examples. Within the framework of *japonisme*, those screens are understood as a case of influence, with Bonnard as the active party, drawing from Asian works to rethink his own artistic practice. Modern scholarship on *japonisme* might instead frame Bonnard's works as a form of appropriation, placing the artist within the broader power dynamics that forced Japan to open itself to Western countries.⁴ The lens of appropriation, unlike that of influence, focuses on the imperialist history behind the Japanese objects that Bonnard admired. This approach, however,

remains a critique of power as an end in itself. Like arguments based on the related concept of Orientalism—Edward Said's groundbreaking critique of the West's construction of an imaginary and often degenerate East—arguments based on appropriation reveal underlying attitudes of a European cultural and racial superiority that are largely countered by a return to an authentic, original, non-Western object. A focus on Orientalist appropriation does not, however, tend to address the continued, mutated life of these decontextualized objects in the West.

When Bonnard depicted his own screens in his paintings, as he did in *Woman and Dog at Table*, they became an interpretation of an Asian decorative format twice removed and, thus, began to exceed the historiographic remit of *japonisme*. Although they underscore his fascination with Japanese art, their inclusion transcends mere citation. The discourse of influence and appropriation, which assumes a subject-object hierarchy, can no longer be the only way to describe their role in Bonnard's art. While his appropriation of the East Asian folding screen is clearly part of an Orientalist position, his paintings that include his screens provide an opportunity to reframe the object as an agent in its own right. They allow us to reconsider the relationship between Western artists and non-Western art in a way that acknowledges imperialist or colonialist histories while also recognizing the generative potential within these imbalanced encounters.

After providing an overview of Bonnard's folding screens in relation to *japonisme*, I trace their migration into his paintings, examining the ways in which the format of the folding screen affected his approach to representing space. I propose an alternate framework—ornamentalism, as formulated by the critical theorist Anne Anlin Cheng—to account for the screens' capacity to disrupt and engender change in Bonnard's art. Rooted in but extending beyond the critical stance of Orientalism, ornamentalism views the ornamental object as a subject that has been compromised by histories of colonialism and imperialism. Yet the decontextualization and violence it has endured become the source of its power to act. Taking

the screen in Bonnard's body of work as a case study, this essay considers the persistent life of the non-Western object in the Western context in the aftermath of initial encounter.

Bonnard's Folding Screens

Japanese and Chinese folding screens functioned in their countries of origin as well as in Europe as a form of furniture and decoration, dividing large interior rooms into smaller, more intimate spaces, and providing privacy and protection from drafts. They were a standard form of ornament in fashionable European households since at least the seventeenth century, when they began to be imported from China and Japan in increasingly large quantities. Lacquer examples were sometimes cut down and used to ornament other pieces of furniture or inserted into wall paneling framed by gilded rococo boiseries. Following coerced trade with Japan in the latter half of the nineteenth century, folding screens again became a staple of tasteful, artistically inclined Parisian households, as illustrated in numerous paintings such as Édouard Manet's (1832–83) portrait of Émile Zola (1868; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir's (1841–1919) portrait of Madame Charpentier and her children (1878; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

Photographs of the artists Paul Ranson's (1864–1909) and Jozsef Rippl-Rónai's (1861–1927) studios attest to the ubiquity of screens in Nabi spaces, too.⁵ The Nabi were a self-identified group of late nineteenth-century avant-garde artists who sought to integrate modern art into daily living through the decorative arts and decorative painting. Reflecting on his work as part of the Nabis, Bonnard wrote the art critic Claude Roger-Marx (1888–1977) in 1923: "Our generation always sought to link art with life. At that time, I personally envisaged a popular art that was of everyday application: engravings, fans, furniture, screens, etc."⁶ The Nabis were inspired by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), who made ceramics, decorated interiors, carved wood, and executed both prints and paintings, as well as by Japanese art. Bonnard, whose friends nicknamed him *Le*

Nabi très japonard (the very Japanesque Nabi), was particularly indebted to the designs, images, and objects from Japan available on the Parisian commercial market in the late nineteenth century. Of the Nabis, he was the most engaged with Japanese screens, seeing them as a kind of foldable mural painting. Since the individual panels of a screen could be hinged toward or away from each other, the compositions on them had to be flexible to account for such shifts in space. Bonnard responded to that challenge in at least seven screens that he made between ca. 1889 and 1902.

Bonnard created his first folding screens in 1889 shortly after the Nabis had formed as a group: *Stork and Four Frogs* (ca. 1889; Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) and *Duck, Heron, and Pheasant* (1889; private collection).⁷ Both these three-paneled screens, which once formed a pair, feature stylized animals and plants set against a brilliant red background. Although their subjects were related to the fables of the French author Jean de la Fontaine (1621–95), Bonnard stayed close to Asian prototypes with these works. He emulated the calligraphic brushwork and the bird-and-flower motifs found in Chinese and Japanese art. He also evoked cinnabar lacquer with his use of red-dyed canvas and even signed these works with his initials configured in the shape of a rectangle to recall a Chinese seal. Furthermore, he followed the standard Chinese and Japanese practice of designing screens in pairs, though his use of an odd number of panels was not consistent with these models. His first screens thus show him appropriating, translating, and deviating from Asian ornamental models.

Bonnard produced *Stork and Four Frogs* and *Duck, Heron, and Pheasant* before the École des beaux-arts's landmark 1890 exhibition of about seven hundred *ukiyo-e* (Japanese woodblock prints) and illustrated books. This milestone event cemented the central role that *ukiyo-e* played in the dissemination and influence of Japanese art in France.⁸ These relatively inexpensive objects flooded the Parisian market at this time. They could be purchased at department stores, boutiques specializing in Asian wares, and avant-garde art galleries, and many

artists, including Bonnard, avidly collected them. Bonnard took numerous formal innovations from these prints: the layering of patterns, arabesque lines, flattened perspective, and the use of asymmetry and empty space, among others.⁹ He used these compositional strategies in his work across media. Indeed, his folding screens exemplify a dialogue between Japanese prints and *japoniste* decorative objects.

The first instance in which Bonnard sought to incorporate motifs and techniques from *ukiyo-e* in a screen project was, however, something of a failed appropriation. *Women in the Garden* (1891; Musée d'Orsay) began as a multi-panel screen featuring four women enmeshed in vegetation. Bonnard used strong contours and patterned clothing to stylize and flatten their bodies. As do the subjects of *ukiyo-e* prints of beautiful women (*bijin-ga*), Bonnard's women dissolve into decorative fabric. The foliage, branches, and grass behind them layer pattern onto pattern. In one panel, *Seated Woman with a Cat*, arched leaves recall a Japanese fish-scale design.

Before showing *Women in the Garden* at the 1891 Salon des indépendants, however, Bonnard dismantled it and displayed it as four separate *panneaux décoratifs* (decorative panels). He had tried to import a compositional structure from a genre of *ukiyo-e* that did not work well with the very different needs of the screen format. The full-length, centralized figure in patterned cloth against an equally graphic background could be successful as a series of separate sheets of paper. However, a flexible, folding image required a sensitive use of empty space to account for the different permutations of panels folded toward or away from one another.

A similar fate awaited Bonnard's next attempt at a folding screen. Originally forming a four-panel screen that he kept in his studio, *Country Scene* and *Child Making Mud Pies* (fig. 2) are depictions of French country life based on the artist's seasonal stays at his family's home in the Grand-Lemps. The three panels now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, are filled with lush, green vegetation and rabbits and chickens tucked into the rural landscape. By contrast, the fourth panel, now in the Musée

d'Orsay, presents a pale and spare scene of Bonnard's nephew playing in a bare stretch of sand in front of the family home. The checkered pattern of his outfit balances his curved form, which is echoed in the rounded, manicured tree growing out of the rectilinear pot above him. With this contrasting fourth panel, Bonnard was, perhaps, trying to utilize the strategies of asymmetry and empty space that he would have studied in Japanese prints.

Sketches in Bonnard's notebooks and preliminary studies show various early ideas for this project. One work in gouache depicts a continuous scene of dense foliage and rabbits across all four panels. Another sketch shows Bonnard developing the format of three interconnected panels and a fourth, compositionally distinct panel; in it, a tree and undergrowth extend through three panels and the spare fourth panel shows simply a small house at the top.¹⁰ The final composition that Bonnard painted, *Child Making Mud Pies*, was eventually detached from the other three panels with which it had been joined. Apparently this object, too, would not cohere with other panels as a screen.¹¹

A more successful dialogue between prints and screens involved a group of works that depict Parisian street scenes: *Nannies' Promenade*, *Frieze of Carriages* (see fig. 3), a four-panel screen from ca. 1899, untitled by the artist, and a portfolio of twelve prints entitled *Some Aspects of Parisian Life* (1897). These works, all of which use similar formal language inspired by *ukiyo-e*, feature the quotidian motifs of women, children, dogs, and carriages moving briskly through the streets and sidewalks of Paris. *Nannies' Promenade* was the earliest of them. Bonnard painted the first version of the screen in 1894; a few years later, he decided to adapt the composition as a lithographic screen available to the public in an edition of 110 sets.¹² The compositional strategies he explored in this screen likely helped him develop *Some Aspects of Parisian Life* since several of the prints in this portfolio are closely related to *Nannies' Promenade*.

Nannies' Promenade depicts a continuous composition across four panels. Bonnard deliberately left large areas bare to represent, as



he put it, “the Place de la Concorde when there is dust and it resembles a mini-Sahara.”¹³ His skillful use of empty space demonstrates his complete assimilation of Japanese design principles and the folding-screen format. At the same time, his comment indicates that, while working on this Asian-inspired object, a Parisian plaza became in his mind an African desert. Indeed, France was aggressively expanding its colonial presence in Africa at this time. French colonization of Algeria had begun in 1830; and, in 1895, shortly after Bonnard finished the painted version of *Nannies’ Promenade*, French West Africa—a federation of eight colonial territories that spanned the Sahara—was formed. On Bonnard’s screen, this vast colonial landscape becomes a “mini-Sahara,” a diminutive feature in an Asian decorative format. This transmutation reveals the larger colonialist and imperialist mentality that conflated Africa and

Figure 3 | Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Nannies’ Promenade, Frieze of Carriages* (lithograph in five colors on paper mounted as a screen, each panel 59 × 18⁷/₈ inches [150 × 48 centimeters], 1897; Musée d’Orsay, Paris; photograph Michèle Bellot, © RMN–Grand Palais/Art Resource).

Asia as non-Western territories, a mentality that underpinned European artists’ appropriation and aestheticization of non-Western objects, geographies, and traditions. The conflation is evidence, from the perspective of French art, of the relationship between ornament and non-Western cultures, a point to which I will return.

After completing the lithographic version of *Nannies’ Promenade*, Bonnard produced a four-panel screen depicting distinct street scenes, akin to the separate sheets of *Some Aspects of Parisian Life*.¹⁴ Several sketches in his



notebooks show how he played with alternating dense and spare compositions across his panels to respond to the challenge of a folding image.¹⁵ Mastering the use of empty space in *Nannies' Promenade*, and learning from his experience with *Women in the Garden*, he was able to create separate but related scenes that worked harmoniously as a composition regardless of whether the panels were folded in or out.

Bonnard's last extant screen project was the *Screen with Rabbits* (see fig. 4). In this six-panel work, the artist both returned to his earlier reliance on Asian screen models and continued the migration of motifs between his prints and his decorative objects. The irregular contours of the silvery gray area and the deep blue-black section at the top of this folding screen evoke the compositions of gold- or silver-leaf screens of the Edo period (see fig. 5). In such Japanese works, the metallic ground represents land, while the inky dark sections

Figure 4 | Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Screen with Rabbits* (oil on paper mounted on canvas, each panel $63\frac{3}{8} \times 17\frac{3}{4}$ inches [161×45 centimeters], ca. 1902; Musée départemental Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye; photograph © A. Denverz).

depict water. In *Screen with Rabbits*, Bonnard has made the blue-black area an airy, dream-like space of fantasy rather than a body of water. Cloud-like shapes containing landscape vignettes punctuate the top of three panels. These motifs may, for their part, recall the borders of seventeenth-century Chinese lacquer screens marked by cartouche-like forms containing decorative objects and emblems.¹⁶ The cavorting couples at the top of the other three panels, by contrast, are closely related to Bonnard's illustrations for Paul Verlaine's (1844–96) book of poetry *Parallèlement* (1900) and his Greek pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe* (1902).



Bonnard's Folding Screens in His Paintings

In their dialogue with *ukiyo-e* and references to Asian prototypes, Bonnard's screens fall within the influence/appropriation discourse of modern scholarship on *japonisme*. When those screens began to appear in his paintings in the early years of the twentieth century, however, a different dynamic came into play, one that was clearly tied to yet exceeded the parameters of *japonisme*. By 1900, the Nabis had disbanded, though they all remained friends. Bonnard took this time to travel, by 1908 visiting Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, England, and the French colonies of Tunisia and Algeria. By including his own screens in the paintings that he produced in this post-Nabi period, he provided both a reference to and an indication of his departure from his Nabi interest in decorative arts and Japanese art.

In some works, like *The Letter* (1906; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and *The Luncheon Table* (1908; Baltimore Museum of Art), the screen panels glimpsed in the background provide patterning and color. In the latter work, panels from Bonnard's untitled Parisian street-scenes screen add clever compositional rhyming. A painted dog walking pertly toward the left on the rightmost panel finds a charming counterpart in a "real" dog lying under the table.

Other works use screens in a more compositionally ambitious way. *Interior with Screen*

Figure 5 | Kano school (Japanese), *Screen of the Portuguese: The Arrival of the Portuguese in Japan* (six-panel screen, gouache and gold leaf on paper, 3.8 × 1.7 meters, seventeenth century; Musée Guimet–Musée national des arts asiatiques, Paris; photograph © RMN-Grand Palais (MNAAG, Paris)/Daniel Arnaudet).

(see fig. 6), for instance, features *Child Making Mud Pies* (fig. 2b) still intact as part of a screen, though *Country Scene* (fig. 2a) is only partially legible behind it. Situated on the bottom right, *Child Making Mud Pies* balances the vertical rectangle of the window on the upper left, contrasting the fictive outdoor scene on the screen with a real outdoor space glimpsed through the window. *Child Making Mud Pies* is a painting within a painting that connects across the composition with the other pictures hanging on the wall. Flush with the picture plane, the shadow cast by the chair on the lower left of this screen further flattens the composition. At the same time, the panels of *Country Scene* unfolded behind it echo the folding in and out of the walls in the rest of the room, as if the whole interior were structured as a screen.

Bonnard would explore these ideas further in *Woman and Dog at Table* (fig. 1), where the folding screen becomes the central site of artistic experimentation. Here, panels from *Country Scene* and *Child Making Mud Pies* are juxtaposed with panels from the untitled ca. 1899 screen. These

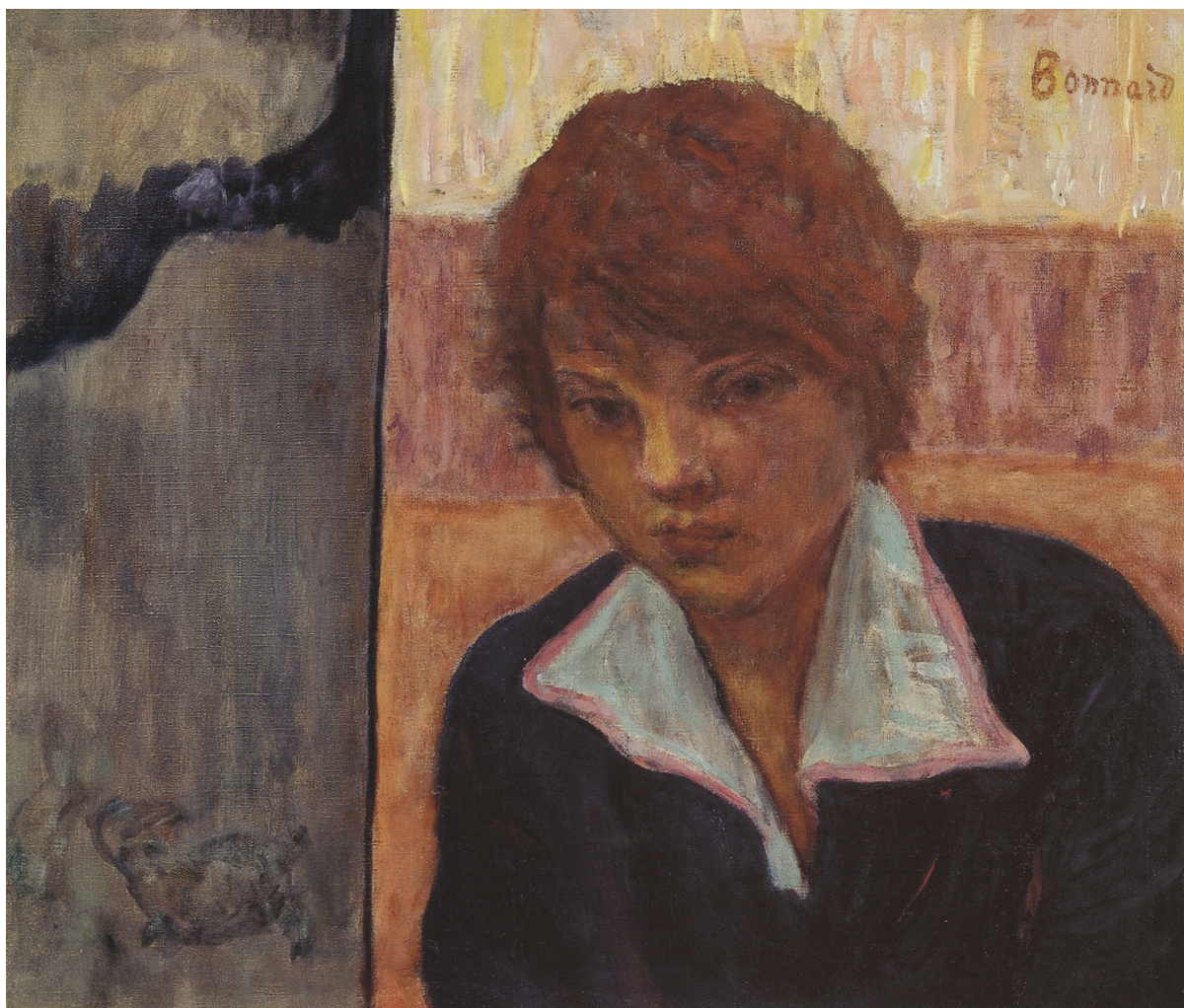


Figure 6 | Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Interior with Screen* (oil on paper mounted on canvas, 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches [48 × 62.9 centimeters], ca. 1906; private collection).

two screens—one depicting the French countryside and the other urban Paris—seem to become a pair in *Woman and Dog at Table*, following the Chinese and Japanese convention of designing screens as sets. Bonnard uses the screen format to organize the composition into vertical sections, adding rectilinear structure to the otherwise rounded and fluid forms of the picture. Furthermore, he paints the panels so that they interfere with the scene in the foreground. This is evident in the blue-and-white form above the dog, which looks like a hat on the animal's head rather than a depiction of Bonnard's nephew playing in the sand, as well as in the figure with a parcel who enters from the right and looks like she is about to crash into Marthe's head. The folding screens—which threaten to take over the

picture—fuse indoor and outdoor as well as real and fictive spaces.¹⁷ They index Bonnard's *ja-ponisme*, while their assertive presence disturbs the hierarchy of influence—the Western artist is no longer simply taking from the non-Western object.

This dynamic becomes more acute in Bonnard's later works, including *The Green Collar—Young Woman with Screen* (see fig. 7), which features part of a panel from *Screen with Rabbits* (fig. 4).¹⁸ The silvery gray and blue-black panel here serves as a visual counterpart to the woman in her dark shirt with its icy green collar. The rabbit on the screen may allude to the woman's youthful fecundity. But the function of the panel in the painting goes beyond color contrast and symbolism. Stretching from the top of the canvas to the bottom, the screen takes up almost as much space as does the woman to its right; it is akin to another figure in the composition, a companion or double of the short-haired gamine. The screen itself



becomes another body with the capacity to act. To understand the screen's insistent, disruptive aesthetic presence, one must consider this composition as more than an expression of the influence of Japanese art on Bonnard.

Ornamentalism and the Agency of the Folding Screen

The truncated yet prominently placed screen panel in *The Green Collar* recalls an earlier use of Asian screens in French art—namely, in Rococo furniture. The famed cabinetmaker Bernard II van Risenburgh (ca. 1696–ca. 1767), for example, took imported Japanese lacquer screens and cabinets, cut them down, and mounted them in gilt bronze cartouches on his

Figure 7 | Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *The Green Collar—Young Woman with Screen* (oil on canvas, 17³/₄ × 20 in. [45 × 51 centimeters], ca. 1920; private collection).

commodes. These Asian decorative fragments were then surrounded by panels of French imitation lacquer known as *vernis Martin*.¹⁹ The mutilated Japanese original, encrusted with a European version, formed the heart of this French luxury object. From the perspective of the history of taste and style of French decorative arts, this use of lacquer was a tribute to the beauty and craftsmanship of Japanese art. It also demonstrates, however, the imperialist mind-set that allowed such decontextualization and violence to be done to objects from cultures

deemed exotic. Another way of reading these commodes that acknowledges both admiration and destruction is to consider the lacquer objects themselves as possessing agency. They have altered French decorative arts through their aesthetic effect. Their beauty, which inspired a less expensive European imitation, now invites the viewer to witness their own transformation and degradation.

This curious situation in which the ornamental object asserts its agency through its own disembodiment is at the core of Anne Anlin Cheng's theory of ornamentalism. In her book *Ornamentalism*, Cheng is principally concerned with how Asiatic race making—and particularly Asian femininity (or *yellow womanhood* as she calls it)—is conceived in terms of ornament. *Ornamentalism* describes how, in the Western context, the Asian subject is conceptualized as an aesthetic object, but, rather than ending with a critique of objectification, it takes seriously the potential of the object's life as ornament. In other words, the theory of ornamentalism explores the continued life of the Asian subject after objectification, using the concept of ornament to consider the objectified subject's capacity for agency.²⁰

The way in which ornamentalism upends the subject/object binary can help us see, within the dynamic between Western artists and non-Western art, the instances in which the latter resisted its own destruction and persisted in its compromised state to a new life of its own. Indeed, Cheng's conception of yellow womanhood as "a condition of denigration and violence that peculiarly and insistently speaks through the language of aesthetic privilege" encapsulates the racial logic that underpins this dynamic.²¹ The term *ornament* hovers over the very concept of non-Western art, which lumps together art from vastly different continents, countries, and cultures into a single entity defined in terms of negation. As we have seen with *Nannies' Promenade*, the Eurocentric perspective often links non-Western cultures under the rubric of *ornament*. Thus, even though France's extractive colonialist practices in North and West Africa were of

a different order politically and economically from its imperialist trade maneuvers in East Asia, the logic of ornamentalism underlies the European use of the artistic goods imported through these various imbalanced power networks. Art objects from Asia, Africa, Oceania, the Middle East, and elsewhere that enter the European context are, like Cheng's yellow woman, "an insistently aesthetic presence that is prized and despoiled."²²

Ornament has long been associated with the conceptual categories of the feminine and the Western notion of the Orient. It is not surprising, then, that the racial logic of Asian femininity would illuminate this process of aesthetic agency through disembodiment and degradation. Ornamentalism offers generative potential beyond constructs like *japonisme* that are limited to the Western fascination with the other. It proposes a more capacious way of seeing and understanding the non-Western object as it migrates and reverberates in the West and through Western art. It holds a space in which the animate and inanimate, artists and art objects, can meet and mediate their relationship through aesthetic form.

Within the ornamentalist framework, not only can we hold in balance the appreciation and defacement of Asian lacquer in rococo furniture, but we can also begin to see what escapes the attention of the *japoniste* viewpoint in Bonnard's art. Extending from the dialectic of influence/appropriation, in which the non-Western object is something to be used, ornamentalism considers the afterlife of the albeit compromised object, placing it in a more multifaceted and organic relationship with Western art. Thus, the folding screen is not just a source of inspiration; it has its own life within Bonnard's artistic practice. Through ornamentalism, we can begin to chart the growing agency of the folding screen across the artist's work. In his late paintings—unlike in van Risenburgh's commodes—the screen as a physical object, even in the form of the artist's own versions, has disappeared. In its absence, decorporealization, however, reveals its capacity to act.

Seeing the Folding Screen in Bonnard's Late Works

Bonnard's late canvases are usually celebrated for their dazzling, luminescent color, bold manipulation of perspective, and unusual cropping of figures. Many feature a mirror or a window as a central spatial and symbolic device that at once fuses interior and exterior, creates tension between surface and depth, provides a compositional scaffolding for the artist's fluid chromatic explorations, and references the canvas itself as a shimmering, flat plane. Although the mirror and the window are usually singled out as paradigmatic objects in Bonnard's late works,²³

the ornamentalist perspective reveals how the folding screen is also—if not more deeply—embedded in his painting.

One of Bonnard's first major paintings to indicate his new, post-Nabi direction is *Dining Room in the Country* (see fig. 8). It depicts an interior in the artist's newly acquired house in Vernonnet, a town northwest of Paris on the banks of the Seine, just past Giverny. The door and the window of the dining room are flung open, giving way to the garden and the Seine valley beyond. Marthe leans on the window ledge from outside, gazing idly into the room, while two cats occupy the chairs indoors. Regarded as an ambitious decorative statement masterfully



Bonnard and the Folding Screen

Figure 8 | Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947), *Dining Room in the Country* (oil on canvas, 64¾ × 81 inches [164.5 × 205.7 centimeters], 1913; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, John R. Van Derlip Fund; photograph Minneapolis Institute of Art).

constructed from the contrast of warm and cool colors, the composition is, in effect, modeled on the format of the folding screen.

Like a four-panel screen, the painting is organized into vertical rectangular zones, each of which contains a distinct composition: the orange strip of wall with its still life, the light-colored plane of the door, the view onto the garden through the doorway, and the open window framing Marthe with the cat below. Space folds in and out through the diagonal planes of the door and shutters. Moreover, the way in which the figures and animals are tucked into the vertical sections echoes the compositions of Bonnard's own folding screens. For example, barely perceptible through the door frame is a girl in the garden who leans forward as she walks toward the left picking flowers. Her posture recalls the woman with a parcel walking briskly toward the left on one of the Parisian street-scene panels. Bonnard had, as we have seen, used this folding screen in *Woman and Dog at Table* to explore fusing indoor and outdoor space. He further develops this approach in *Dining Room in the Country* through his use of the open window motif.

Even in works that feature a mirror, the folding-screen format infiltrates the composition. *The Toilette* (1914/21; Musée d'Orsay) shows Marthe nude from the back, standing in front of a full-length looking glass. To her left is a glimpse of a pitcher on a table that is set against a backdrop of floral wallpaper. The space from the mirror to the papered wall is compressed and truncated, like a screen being folded up. The full-length glass is also, of course, analogous in shape to a folding-screen panel. Moreover, the almost disjointed sections of the composition—nude and still life—can be compared to the discrete panels of a screen featuring separate yet related scenes. This work is usually understood as evidence of Bonnard moving away from his *intimiste* Nabi period and exploring classical subjects like the nude along with a new, lighter, pearlescent palette featuring pinks and yellows. Nevertheless, the folding screen—physically absent but

nevertheless evoked—bridges his early Nabi and his late works.

In 1926, Bonnard bought another home in Le Cannet in the south of France. His paintings of the interiors in that house—*The French Window with Dog* (1927; private collection), *Breakfast, Radiator* (ca. 1930; private collection), and *White Interior* (1932; Musée de Grenoble), to name but a few—all feature a folding in and out of space achieved through half-open doors and French windows. Interspersed with vertical sections of warm yellow walls, the compositions resemble a screen slowly being pulled open, revealing snippets of landscapes, figures, animals, and still lifes. In *White Interior*, we see flowers in a jug atop the mantel on one end and a view of palm trees, rooftops, and the sea beyond the balcony on the other. Marthe, stretching across the two “middle panels,” is painted in the same warm colors as the floor. She blends into the ground as she reaches for a cat, helping create a sense of empty space in the center of the painting, where spare planes of white describe the door, wall, mantle, and radiator. This compositional strategy, which Bonnard successfully incorporated in *Nannies' Promenade*, thus also shaped his painting.

As a folding image, the screen animated and affected Bonnard's painting because of and not despite its literal absence. By altering the conception and representation of space in his pictures, it effectively inserted an Asian decorative model into the heart of modern French painting. Ornamentalism allows us to reconsider this “prized and despoiled” object and, perhaps, work to decolonize the discourse of influence. Taking the next step beyond the critique of Orientalist appropriation, it points to the generative potential of the non-Western object as it circulates, admired yet degraded, disembodied yet congealed, in Western art.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Anya Shutova, conservator of paintings at the Barnes Foundation, whose invitation to look at this Bonnard in the lab with her sparked the research for this essay.

1. On the Nabi artists, see below.
2. See n. 14 below.
3. For recent publications that address the Western fantasy of Japan, see Grace E. Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
4. See, e.g., Elizabeth Mix, “Japonisme and Cultural Appropriation,” in *The Orient Expressed: Japan’s Influence on Western Art, 1854–1918*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (Seattle: University of Washington Press/ Mississippi Museum of Art, 2011), 127–57.
5. See Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perucchi-Petri, eds., *Nabis, 1888–1900*, exhibition catalog (Munich: Prestel, 1993), 12–13. For the history of the folding screen in the West, see Silke Schuck, ed., *Wände, Schirme, Paravents: Das Bild als Objekt*, exhibition catalog (Munich: Hirmer, 2016); Sylvette Gaudichon Botella, ed., *Une Histoire de paravent*, exhibition catalog (Paris: Somogy, 2005); Charles Hemming with Mark Aldbrook, *The Folding Screen* (London: Lund Humphries, 1999); and Michael Komanecky and Virginia Fabbri Butera, *The Folding Image: Screens by Western Artists of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, exhibition catalog (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 1984).
6. Pierre Bonnard to Claude Roger-Marx, 7 January 1923, quoted in Nicholas Watkins, “The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic,” in *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930*, ed. Gloria Groom (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago/Yale University Press, 2001), 1–28, 6. “Notre génération a toujours cherché les rapports de l’art avec la vie. À cette époque, j’avais personnellement l’idée d’une production populaire et d’application usuelle: gravures, meubles, éventails, paravents, etc.” Antoine Terrasse, *Pierre Bonnard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 23.
7. For images and discussions of these screens, see, respectively, Elsa Smithgall, ed., *Bonnard to Vuillard: The Intimate Poetry of Everyday Life*, exhibition catalog (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2019), 94–97; and Groom, ed., *Beyond the Easel*, 58–60.
8. See Tsukasa Kōdera, Tatsuya Saito, Megumi Soda, and Geneviève Aitken, eds., “Exposition de la gravure japonaise à l’École des beaux-arts à Paris,

1890, organized by S. Bing—Preparations, Contents, Lenders and Reviews of the Legendary Exhibition,” special issue, *Journal of Japonisme*, vol. 2, no. 1 (January 2017). Elizabeth Emery argues against the largely masculinist image of *japonisme*, which she sees as rooted in this exhibition, and the subsequent privileging of connoisseurship of *ukiyo-e* over other forms of Japanese art, such as decorative objects. See Elizabeth Emery, *Reframing Japonisme: Women and the Asian Art Market in Nineteenth-Century France, 1853–1914* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

9. Ursula Perucchi-Petri has published extensively on *japonisme* and the Nabis and particularly the influence of *ukiyo-e*. See, e.g., Ursula Perucchi-Petri, *Die Nabis und Japan: Das Frühwerk von Bonnard, Vuillard und Denis*, Studien zur Kunst des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts 37 (Munich: Prestel, 1976), and “Pierre Bonnard, le Nabi très japonard,” in *Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia* (exhibition catalog), ed. Guy Cogeval and Isabelle Cahn (New York: DelMonico/Prestel, 2015), 69–79. See also David Gliem, “Revisiting Bonnard’s Japonisme,” *Open Inquiry Archive*, vol. 1, no. 7 (2012), <https://openinquiry-archive.net/2012/07/20/revisiting-bonnards-japonisme>. Gliem relates Asian philosophies and religion, particularly Zen Buddhism, to Bonnard’s screens.

10. See Frèches-Thory and Perucchi-Petri, eds., *Nabis*, 365–66.

11. The panel was detached after the artist’s death. See *L’Enfant au pâté de sable*, <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/node/22654>. Claire Frèches-Thory had in 1993 suggested that the artist himself detached the panel. See Frèches-Thory and Perucchi-Petri, eds., *Nabis*, 366; and Claire Frèches-Thory and Antoine Terrasse, *The Nabis: Bonnard, Vuillard, and Their Circle* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 165. This claim was repeated in Nicholas Watkins, *Bonnard* (London: Phaidon, 1994), 52.

12. The majority of these sets were damaged or destroyed after the publisher’s office was flooded. See Frèches-Thory and Perucchi-Petri, eds., *Nabis*, 369; and Smithgall, ed., *Bonnard to Vuillard*, 125.

13. “. . . la place de la Concorde, quand il y a de la poussière et qu’elle ressemble à un petit Sahara.” Pierre Bonnard to Élisabeth Bonnard, née Mertzsdoff, 1894, translated in Groom, ed., *Beyond the Easel*, 71. In *The Terrasse Family in the Garden* (1896; Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, NG49/80) from around the same time, Bonnard created another screen similarly using empty space as a central compositional strategy but depicting a country rather than an urban setting.

14. These panels were last displayed intact in 1948 in the exhibition *Pierre Bonnard* at the Museum of

Modern Art, New York, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/322?installation_image_index=2. They were subsequently dismantled, and not all have been traced. One panel, entitled *The Promenade*, was cut down and last sold by Briest, Paris, on 26 November 1993 as lot 21.

15. See Album Bonnard, no. 3, fols. 6, 14–15, 18–19, 26, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 49922.

16. See, e.g., six-panel Chinese screen (c.a. 1675; wood, lacquer, and metal; Erddig Hall, Wrexham, Wales, NT 1147113.1).

17. See also *Woman in an Interior* (1908; private collection), in which a panel from *Women in the Garden* hangs on the wall. The woman in the panel, entitled *Woman in a Polka Dot Dress*, seems to be walking toward and interacting with the “real” woman sitting at a mantel, while a sculpture of a female figure reflected in the mirror above the mantel looks on.

18. *Screen with Rabbits* also appears in the background of *Blonde Nude* (1913; private collection) as part of a triangulation of real and fictive women interacting. A model posing for Bonnard is being spied on by a portrait of a woman behind her on the left while behind her on the right a reclining nude in a screen panel is looking out toward the viewer.

19. For examples of this type of commode by Bernard II van Risenburgh, see Musée du Louvre, Paris, OA 11193; Victoria and Albert Museum,

London, 1105–1882; and J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 65.DA.4. See also commode attributed to Joseph Baumhauer (d. 1772) (J. Paul Getty Museum, 55.DA.2). This technique exemplified the taste for chinoiserie that took hold in eighteenth-century France. For an analysis of another example of this destructive and reconstructive approach to Asian decorative objects, see Kristel Smentek, *Rococo Exotic: French Mounted Porcelains and the Allure of the East*, exhibition catalog (New York: The Frick Collection, 2007).

20. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

21. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, xi.

22. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 1.

23. Steven A. Nash, “Tradition Revised: Some Sources in Late Bonnard,” in *Bonnard: The Late Paintings*, ed. Sasha M. Newman (Washington, D.C.: Phillips Collection/Dallas Museum of Art/Thames & Hudson, 1984), 21–24; Jean Clair, “‘The Adventures of the Optic Nerve,’” in *ibid.*, 37–40; Watkins, *Bonnard*, 109–13, 171–72; Georges Roque, “Surface, Its Colour and Its ‘Laws,’” in *Bonnard: The Work of Art: Suspended Time*, ed. Suzanne Pagé (Paris: Paris-Musées, 2006), 73–83, 77; *Pierre Bonnard*, ed. Ulf Küster (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2012), 121–55. The 29 January–13 May 2012 exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler curated by Ulf Küster devoted one section to the mirror and one to the window.

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