

MASTERPIECE 'The Palm' (1926) by Pierre Bonnard

A Muse Embedded in Mystery



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The work can be seen as a fantasy wedding portrait—but does the artist's other inamorata make an appearance as well?

By Sidney Lawrence

Among the artists who transformed painting in the 20th century, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso come to mind first, but their contemporary, the French artist Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), was also something of a radical. Neither a free-form colorist like Matisse nor a wizard of formal invention like Picasso, Bonnard made quieter waves in

1890s Paris, as part of a short-lived but influential group of Paul Gauguin followers (the “Nabis”) and later, with Edward Vuillard, as a painter of intimate interiors.

After World War I, Bonnard found his own path as an artist. Dividing his time among studios in Paris, Giverny and the French Riviera, he drenched himself in the French Impressionist ethos of a moment captured as color and light. Landscapes, environments and models were his conduits for intense coloristic explorations imbued with strong emotional undertones. The results can be fascinatingly difficult to pin down: obscure, straightforward, happy, somber, modern and old-fashioned all at once—and often veer into weirdness. The more you look at a Bonnard, the more you want to look.

Bonnard’s subtle mastery is writ large in “The Palm” (1926), a 4-by-5-foot composition in the Phillips Collection in Washington, where it has just gone back on view in the museum’s newly renovated original 1897 building.

The work invites us into the excitement of a Mediterranean environment. Sun-warmed palm fronds shade a lady in her garden, forming a cool-toned proscenium foreground. Beyond, in a blast of light, red-tiled roofs cascade down a hill amid vines and olive trees to a stucco high-rise floating above a tawny urban expanse. In the far distance, flickering blues and silvers delineate a sunlit coastline.

This virtuoso landscape—that’s Cannes down there—packs a tremendous psychological punch. The largest palm frond is graceful but menacing—scary even; a giant, twisting form with no visible anchor. The garden below, though pretty, teems with bubble-gum plant forms bordering on icky science fiction. At the center of all this, deep in fuzzy shade, is the lavender female figure that seems arbitrarily positioned, looking straight at us, holding an apple. Here Bonnard’s magic kicks in.

This stocky child-woman is neither wholly defined nor emotionally engaged. Her faintly classical features suggest a sort of 1920s Arcadia. She might be Pomona, the orchard goddess of ancient Rome. Or Eve in the garden of Eden, offering the apple of temptation. Or just an apple-munching lady outside with her black cat, that strange blob of a creature, paw up, in the dark green shade of the lower left. Such unresolved subtexts make “The Palm” a recurring enigma, a cinematic *mise-en-scène* dissolving into a dream.

Not a *plein-air* painter, Bonnard mostly worked from remembered impressions—a Proustian approach, some scholars have suggested—using his own sketches and other visual reminders like postcards and eye-catching photos from the newspaper. Bonnard labored long and hard on each work, sometimes returning to a painting years later to continue a particular artistic journey.

Through it all, there was Marthe Boursin, the artist’s lifelong companion, primary model and muse. Bonnard’s depictions of her over the years evolved from a comely,

athletically posed nude in the bath or boudoir to a nicely dressed young woman lost in thought in a cozy interior, to a mature, round woman peering from the side of a windowed room, posed on a terrace, interacting with a house pet or, in a famously strange late series, soaking in a tub in a radioactively colored bathroom.

“The Palm” came at a momentous time for the couple. After 33 years together, they got married in late summer 1925. Which makes it possible to see “The Palm” as a fantasy wedding portrait, with Marthe’s apple a bouquet, the arched garden a church apse, and the frenzied view beyond a symbol, perhaps, of complicated love. Increasingly reclusive and illness-obsessed, Marthe may have been high-maintenance, but in Bonnard’s vision, in this painting, she exists in an ideal, beautiful world.

There’s a twist to the story, however. Around 1920, Bonnard had hired and begun painting an attractive young blond model named Renée Monchaty, falling in love with and promising to marry her. But he ultimately reneged, driving Renée to suicide.

Who, then, is the woman in “The Palm”? Does the dead Renée make a cameo appearance here? If you look closely at the Marthe figure, she has (from the viewer’s vantage point) two left eyes, one atop another, almost a double image, as if one human had been merged with another. A subliminal Renée or mere artistic effect? Maybe a bit of both. The pervasively experimental, distorting extremes of Bonnard’s painting style leave us wondering.

Two years after Bonnard finished “The Palm,” the work was bought by the American collector-connoisseur Duncan Phillips, an ardent fan who later singled it out as “one of the artist’s most important canvases.”

Matisse praised Bonnard as “the strongest of us all,” and more recently, painters as diverse as Chaim Soutine, Mark Rothko, Balthus, Howard Hodgkin and Eric Fischl have expressed admiration for the artist. Bonnard’s densely chromatic, psychologically compelling works are standouts in 20th-century art, but few of his paintings can approach the enduring, unfolding magnetism of “The Palm.”

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