French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945
The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Pierre Bonnard, French, 1868–1941</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td><em>The White Cupboard</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object Date</td>
<td>1931–1932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternate and Variant Titles</td>
<td><em>L’armoire blanche</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions (Unframed)</td>
<td>49 3/8 x 36 3/4 in. (125.4 x 93.4 cm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Signed lower right: Bonnard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright</td>
<td>Art © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Citation**

**Chicago:**


**MLA:**


Pierre Bonnard was a mature artist in the fifth decade of his career when he painted *The White Cupboard*. A sizable picture measuring more than four feet tall by three feet wide, it appears, at first glance, to record a simple domestic scene: a woman arranging dishware in a dining room cabinet. The setting is Le Bosquet (French for “The Grove”), Bonnard’s hilltop property in the village of Le Cannet. Located near Cannes in southern France, Le Cannet was much quieter than its flashy neighbor in the early twentieth century. Fewer than seven thousand people inhabited Le Cannet when Bonnard purchased a house there in 1926, compared to more than forty-two thousand living in Cannes.1 An early twentieth-century postcard offers a general view of Le Cannet, with its historic Church of Sainte-Catherine in the left foreground and private dwellings scattered among the highlands (Fig. 1).2 Like many of the homes seen here, Bonnard’s villa overlooked the Estel mountains, which he painted on several occasions.3 Although Le Bosquet was not the artist’s sole residence—he also owned real estate in Vernonnet and maintained both a studio and an apartment in Paris—he spent the majority of his time in Le Cannet from the late
1920s onward, as evidenced by his creative output. By one scholar’s tally, Bonnard produced 217 oil paintings and fifty-nine gouaches of his beloved Le Bosquet.⁴

The female figure in the Nelson-Atkins work is Bonnard’s wife and model, Marthe de Méligny (née Maria Boursin, 1869–1942).⁵ Born near Bourges in central France to a working-class family, she moved to Paris in the late 1880s with her mother and two older sisters and sought employment in the artificial flower trade. It is often reported that Marthe met Bonnard while peddling flowers on the Boulevard Haussmann,⁶ but the precise circumstances of both their first encounter and Marthe’s job are unknown; like many fleuristes, Marthe may have been a factory worker producing artificial blooms for the millinery industry.⁷ In any case, Marthe and Bonnard crossed paths around 1893, when she began appearing in the artist’s paintings and journal entries, but—contrary to popular belief—they did not form a lifelong attachment straightaway.⁸ As Lucy Whelan revealed, Marthe married another man sometime before 1899. Little is known of their union, but it seems to have fizzled by 1905–1907, when Marthe resurfaced in Bonnard’s pictures and diaries. For the next three and a half decades, she was his near-constant companion. They wed belatedly in 1925, perhaps after the death or divorce of Marthe’s first husband.⁹

Bonnard’s colleague Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940) undertook a bust-length portrait of Marthe in the late 1890s (Fig. 2). Fashionably dressed in Belle Époque attire, she gazes inscrutably at the viewer—a rare instance of direct address for a woman who usually averts her eyes or turns her back squarely on the beholder in Bonnard’s representations, including The White Cupboard. Bonnard’s tendency to hide his wife’s facial features probably reflects both their fraught relationship¹⁰ and Marthe’s elusive personality, which may have stemmed in part from health issues.¹¹ As Marthe grew older, she reportedly rebuffed the company of all but Bonnard. In a January 1932 letter to Maurice Denis (1870–1943), Bonnard described his wife as “a complete misanthrope” and expressed regret that his travel and social activities were increasingly circumscribed by her desire to avoid human contact.¹² Nevertheless, Bonnard remained devoted to Marthe and was devastated by her death in 1942.¹³ He portrayed her more frequently and in a greater variety of media than any other acquaintance.¹⁴
One might assume, given the personal subject and setting of the Kansas City work, that Bonnard executed it *sur le motif*, but this working method did not appeal to him. In an oft-quoted statement, Bonnard explained that “the presence of the object, the motif, is very cramping for the painter at the moment of painting” and could cause him “to lose the initial idea.”\(^{15}\) It was better, in his opinion, to make daily sketches of interesting objects or arrangements and then use those drawings as source material for paintings, often weeks or months after the fact. Bonnard also preferred to record these drawings in journals, rather than traditional sketchbooks, with the result that each one bears a precise date—a boon for art historians, since Bonnard rarely dated his paintings after 1900.\(^{16}\) *The White Cupboard*, which is signed but undated, has traditionally been assigned a date of 1931 or 1933. French art critic George Besson, who knew Bonnard well, dated the picture to 1933 in his monograph on the painter, probably because it was first exhibited in that year, and many scholars have followed his lead.\(^ {17}\)

However, Jean and Henry Dauberville dated the work to 1931 in their catalogue raisonné of Bonnard’s oeuvre,\(^ {18}\) and the painting’s stretcher, which conservation staff believe to be original, bears the cursive inscription “Placard Cannet 31” (Cupboard Cannet 31).\(^ {19}\)

Fortunately, Bonnard’s daybooks shed some light on the matter. Two drawings from November 17 and 19, 1931, depict the dining room cupboard at Le Bosquet open wide to reveal empty interior shelves. In the first sketch, there is no indication of lighting conditions, nor any attempt to create an illusion of depth. In the second sketch, reproduced here (Fig. 3), Bonnard darkened the right side of the cupboard, suggesting deep shadows from an overhead light source, as we see in *The White Cupboard*. Six weeks later, Bonnard ushered in the New Year with a full-page drawing on January 1–2, 1932 (Fig. 4). It portrays the lower part of the dining room cabinet (where the doors are solid wood rather than mullioned), a basket filled with edibles, and a piece of fruit resting on a flat surface. The disposition of these various elements closely resembles the bottom half of the Nelson-Atkins picture; indeed, Bonnard’s drawing might be considered a partial compositional sketch. The lone piece of produce in the center foreground is a particularly idiosyncratic detail common to both works. Other drawings to which Bonnard may have turned when painting *The White Cupboard* include a January 4, 1932, sketch of a brimming basket and a December 16–17, 1932, sketch of a woman organizing items in the dining room cupboard, with her back to the viewer.\(^ {20}\) Taken together, these daybook entries suggest that Bonnard began developing *The White Cupboard* in late 1931, refined his ideas in early 1932, and possibly continued working on the painting toward the end of that year. For this reason, the Kansas City work can be dated to 1931–1932.

Like the sketches on which *The White Cupboard* is based, the painting shows a narrow slice of the dining room at Le Bosquet. A large space, it was originally two smaller rooms, but Bonnard removed the partition between them when he purchased the home.\(^ {21}\) He also painted the walls Naples yellow, the same color as Marthe’s bedroom, and installed casement windows with an optimal view of the garden.\(^ {22}\) The windows are not visible in the Nelson-Atkins picture, but the earthy yellow pigment is evident in the upper left and right margins of the canvas, above the fireplace and on the wall perpendicular to the cabinet. Marthe wears a sweater of the same hue, such that she becomes part of the decorative schema. Bonnard’s warm palette of yellows and reds is typical of his southern landscapes and interior scenes, whereas his paintings of northern France are often characterized by cooler tones.\(^ {23}\) A watercolor and gouache drawing by Bonnard at the British Museum offers a broader view of the same dining area at Le

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**Fig. 3.** Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketches from November 18–19, 1931, annotated with weather and property observations: “beau froid” (nice cold) and “beau nuageux” (nice cloudy), in *Agenda 1931*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**Fig. 4.** Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch from January 1–2, 1932, annotated with weather and property observations: “beau froid” (nice cold) and “beau froid jardinier” (nice cold gardener), in *Agenda 1932*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
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Bosquet, helping to better orient the viewer, and Marthe, within the room (Fig. 5).24

Fig. 5. Pierre Bonnard, The Dining Room, Le Bosquet, ca. 1940, watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper, 18 3/8 x 19 5/16 in. (46.6 x 49 cm), British Museum, London, 1981,0221.1. © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Although Bonnard often represented Marthe as aloof or withdrawn, critics failed to notice her detachment in The White Cupboard when the painting debuted at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune’s 1933 retrospective on the artist. Most reviewers interpreted Bonnard’s paintings as evocations of contented domesticity. Armand Dayot described the many dining room and washroom scenes in the exhibition as images of private life, “simple and everyday, but invariably happy.” Art historian Waldemar George went further. He construed Bonnard’s female figures not as representations of specific people but as emblems of French bourgeois womanhood:

_The women whom Bonnard paints exude that nurturing calm and douceur de vivre [sweetness of life] so characteristic of French culture. The work and play of these young housewives consist of arranging flowers or decorating the table. Bonnard’s smiling heroines are the guardian angels of the households which they imbue with their real presence. Their homes are made in their image._32

George’s nationalistic reading is hard to reconcile with The White Cupboard, which he illustrated in his article. Marthe is the inverse of a “smiling heroine,” and the dining room at Le Bosquet is suffused with the artist’s spirit as much as his wife’s. It was Bonnard, after all, who oversaw the room’s renovation and selected its palette. Nevertheless, Dayot and George’s notion of Bonnard as someone who painted joyful scenes of daily life persisted for decades in the scholarship on the artist—Claude Roger-Marx famously dubbed Bonnard the “painter of happiness” in 1956—but it is only recently that this idea has been debunked.

Today, Le Bosquet is recognized as a historic monument by the French government. Still in the hands of Bonnard’s descendants, who have scrupulously restored the home to its original state,35 it stands as testament to an artist who produced some of his most inventive and psychologically complex paintings of domestic life there, including The White Cupboard.

Brigid M. Boyle
November 2022

Notes

1. For census data, see Claude Motte and Marie-Christine Vouloir, “Le Cannet” and “Cannes,” _Des villages de Cassini aux communes d’aujourd’hui_, Laboratoire de démographie historique, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, École des
http://cassini.ehess.fr/fr/html/fiche.php?
select_resultat=6809 and
http://cassini.ehess.fr/fr/html/fiche.php?
select_resultat=6809. Le Cannet had 6,244 residents in 1926, whereas Cannes boasted 42,427.


3. See, for example, Pierre Bonnard, Landscape at Le Cannet, 1928, oil on canvas, 50 3/8 x 109 1/2 in. (128 x 278.2 cm), Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX, AP 2018.01, https://kimbellart.org/collection/ap-201801.


5. The timing of and motivation for Marthe’s name change are unclear. Tradition has it that Marthe introduced herself to Bonnard as “Marthe de Méligny” when they first met, but Lucy Whelan casts doubt on this long-held assumption; see Lucy Whelan, “New Light on Pierre Bonnard’s Wife and Model Marthe,” Burlington Magazine 162, no. 1406 (May 2020): 417–18. According to Marthe’s great-niece Pierrette Vernon, Marthe’s adopted surname probably derives from a village in the Cher department called Méligny, close to where Marthe grew up. See Sarah Whitchfield, “Fragments of an Identical World,” in Sarah Whitchfield and John Elderfield, Bonnard, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 30n41. Due to this complex history, scholars refer to Bonnard’s wife simply as “Marthe” in the literature on him; I have followed their lead.


8. Whitfield’s statement that “at the age of twenty-six, Bonnard decided to make his life with Marthe” is typical of the scholarship on the artist. See Whitfield, “Fragments of an Identical World,” 15.


11. Marthe suffered from respiratory problems, possibly due to the long hours she worked as a fleuriste. The adhesive pastes and gases used to make artificial flowers were known to cause health issues. See Whelan, “New Light,” 413, 417; Octave Uzanne, Parisiennes de ce temps: En leurs divers milieux, états et conditions (Paris: Mercure de France, 1910), 159–60; and Mary Van Kleeck, Artificial Flower Makers (New York: Survey Associates, 1913), 153.


19. For more on the stretcher, see Scott Heffley, “Painting Report of Examination,” June 5, 2015, NAMA conservation file. The French term “cannet” can also refer to a cabinet or swing gate with open grillwork.

20. In the latter, the woman is slightly hunched, and her head is turned away from the cabinet, whereas in The White Cupboard Marthe stands erect and faces the shelves. Nevertheless, the drawing is compositionally similar to the Nelson-Atkins work. See Pierre Bonnard, entries for January 4 and December 16–17, 1932, Agenda 1932, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. I am grateful to Danielle Hampton Cullen, project assistant, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, for identifying these and other sketches.


24. Had Bonnard widened his viewing angle still further, one would have seen a framed lithograph of Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s (1841–1919) Pinning the Hat hanging kitty-corner from the cupboard, evidence of the two artists’ longstanding friendship. The Renoir print is visible in period photographs of the dining room, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson’s Bonnard at Home, Le Cannet, 1944, gelatin silver print, 7 1/16 x 10 9/16 in. (17.9 x 26.9 cm), Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris, reproduced in Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro, Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection, exh. cat. (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 149.
25. I thank Pegeen Blank, volunteer, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, for her assistance with this tally.


30. See Pierre Bonnard, *Place Pigalle at Night*, ca. 1905–1908, oil on panel, 22 5/8 x 26 15/16 in. (57.5 x 68.4 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, 1955.23.1, https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/9808.

31. For two examples of Marthe posed in this manner, see Pierre Bonnard, *The Yellow Shawl*, ca. 1925, oil on canvas, 50 1/4 x 37 3/4 in. (127.6 x 95.9 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, 2006.140.1, https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/112769; and Pierre Bonnard, *Coin de salle à manger au Cannet*, ca. 1932, oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 35 7/16 in. (81 x 90 cm), Musée d’Orsay, Paris, RF 1977 64, https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/coin-de-salle-manger-au-cannet-69573.


35. After Bonnard’s death, a lengthy legal battle ensued between his heirs and those of Marthe (see note 10), and Le Bosquet fell into a state of disrepair. It was not until 1968 that Jean-Jacques Terrasse, the artist’s great-nephew, purchased the property at auction and set about restoring it. See Terrasse, *Bonnard at Le Cannet*, 27–31.

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**Technical Entry**

Technical entry forthcoming.

**Documentation**

**Citation**

**Chicago:**


**MLA:**

Provenance

Purchased from the artist by Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, possibly stock no. 25375, Paris, possibly by June 15, 1933 [1];


NOTES:

[1] Bonnard was under contract with Galerie Bernheim-Jeune from 1904 to 1940. Galerie Bernheim-Jeune may have purchased the painting as early as June 15, 1933, when an exhibition featuring it opened at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune. See Exposition Pierre Bonnard, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, 1933), 4.

A set of six-digit numbers on the verso, “25375,” is similar to Galerie Bernheim-Jeune stock numbers.

Another painting in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins also has a Bernheim-Jeune stock number; Vincent van Gogh 37-1 was stock number “26801” and was owned by Galerie Bernheim-Jeune by December 1935. Since the Bonnard stock number 25375 precedes 26801, it was probably in the inventory of Galerie Bernheim-Jeune before 1935.

[2] Charles Pomaret was minister of labor in France from 1938 to 1940, and his wife, Marie-Paule Fontenelle-Pomaret, was the director of the art periodical La Renaissance and an avid art collector.


Preparatory Works

Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch (sketch of a cupboard), page of Bonnard’s Agenda 1931, dated November 17, 1931, pencil on paper, 5 1/8 x 3 1/8 in. (13 x 8 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, RESERVE 4-EF-500 (B,5), p. 178.

Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch (sketch of a cupboard), page of Bonnard’s Agenda 1931, dated November 19, 1931, pencil on paper, 5 1/8 x 3 1/8 in. (13 x 8 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, RESERVE 4-EF-500 (B,5), p. 179.

Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch (sketch of a cupboard and basket of fruit), pages of Bonnard’s Agenda 1931, dated December 12–13, 1931, pencil on paper, 5 1/8 x 3 1/8 in. (13 x 8 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, RESERVE 4-EF-500 (B,5), p. 191.

Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch (sketch of a cupboard, basket of fruit, tablecloth, and fruit), pages of Bonnard’s Agenda 1932, dated January 1–2, 1932, pencil on paper, 5 1/8 x 3 1/8 in. (13 x 8 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, RESERVE 4-EF-500 (B,6), p. 13.

Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch (sketch of a basket of fruit), page of Bonnard’s Agenda 1932, dated January 4, 1932, pencil on paper, 5 1/8 x 3 1/8 in. (13 x 8 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, RESERVE 4-EF-500 (B,6), p. 14.

Pierre Bonnard, untitled sketch (sketch of a cupboard and woman, probably Marthe), pages of Bonnard’s Agenda 1932, dated December 16–17, 1932, pencil on paper, 5 1/8 x 3 1/8 in. (13 x 8 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, RESERVE 4-EF-500 (B,6), p. 189.

Related Works

Pierre Bonnard, *Corner of the Dining Room at Le Cannet*, 1932, oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 35 1/2 in. (81 x 90 cm), Centre Pompidou, Paris, RF 1977 64.

Pierre Bonnard, *Marthe in the Dining Room*, 1933, oil on canvas, 43 1/4 x 23 1/4 in. (111 x 59 cm), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, France.


Pierre Bonnard, *The Dining Room*, ca. 1940–1947, oil on canvas, 33 1/8 x 39 3/8 in. (84.1 x 100 cm), Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 2006.46.

**Exhibitions**


*Bonnard*, Musée des Ponchettes, Nice, August–September 1955, no. 37, as *L'armoire blanche.*

*Douze jeunes peintres autour de Bonnard*, Palais de la Méditerranée, Nice, February 5–March 14, 1965, no. 9, as *La Femme à l'armoire.*

*Bonnard*, Galerie Krugier, Geneva, June 1969, no. 24, as *L'armoire blanche.*


**References**


*Exposition Pierre Bonnard*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, 1933), (repro.).


“Seven Paintings by Pierre Bonnard,” *Coronet* 3, no. 4 (February 1, 1938): 23, (repro.), as *The Cupboard.*


*Bonnard*, exh. cat. (Nice: Musée des Ponchettes, 1955), 31, as *L’armoire blanche.*


*Douze jeunes peintres autour de Bonnard*, exh. cat. (New York: Wildenstein, 1965), unpaginated, as *La Femme à l’armoire.*


Michel Terrasse, Bonnard at Le Cannet (Paris: Herscher, 1987), 124, as Le placard ou l’armoire blanche.


Rebecca Dimling Cochran and Bobbie Leigh, “100 Top Collectors who have made a difference,” Art and Antiques (March 2006): 90.


Alice Thorson, “A final countdown—A rare showing of Impressionist paintings from the private collection of Henry and Marion Bloch is one of the inaugural exhibitions at the 165,000-square-foot glass-and-steel structure,” Kansas City Star (June 29, 2006): B1.


Eric Adler and Joyce Smith, “H&R Bloch co-founder, philanthropist Bloch dies,” *Cass County Democrat*

*Missourian* 140, no. 29 (April 26, 2019): 1A


Eric Adler, “Sold for $3.25 million, Bloch’s home in Mission Hills may be torn down,” *Kansas City Star* 141, no. 90 (December 16, 2020): 2A.