Édouard Vuillard: Painting Disease and Infirmity in Fin-de-Siècle Paris

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Édouard Vuillard:

Painting Disease and Infirmity in *Fin-de-Siècle* Paris

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INTRODUCTION

The Dusk of Nations: Édouard Vuillard at the Fin de Siècle

Édouard Vuillard lived in Paris and painted his most avant-garde compositions during the 1890s, a decade in which fears of the fin de siècle and its impending fin du globe culminated with unprecedented anxiety. Historians classify the turn of the twentieth century in France, the period from roughly 1871 to the beginning of World War I in 1914, as alternatively the Belle Époque and the fin de siècle. While scholars like Roger Shattuck describe the era as the “Banquet Years,” a golden age of material and social progress, other scholars use fin de siècle to characterize its moral decadence and degeneration. The term not only literally signifies the end of a century in French, but also conveys “the prevalent feeling…of imminent perdition and extinction” unique to Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. In his seminal text from 1892, Dégénérescence, Max Nordau explains the specific bearing of the phenomenon on Parisian society and the Third Republic:

Fin-de-siècle is French, for it is in France that the mental state so entitled was first realized. The word has flown from one hemisphere to the other, and found its way into all civilized languages…The fin-de-siècle state of mind is to-day everywhere to be met with; nevertheless, it is in many cases a mere imitation of a foreign fashion gaining vogue, and not an organic evolution. It is in the land of its birth that it appears in its most genuine form, and Paris is the right place in which to observe its manifold expressions.

Despite similar perceptions of decline and decadence in the late Victorian period in England and in the Gilded Age in America, the degeneracy of the fin de siècle was founded in Parisian

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3 Originally published in Germany in 1892 as Entartung, the text was translated into French in 1894 with the name Dégénéresence.
modernity. Furthermore, unlike the term *Belle Époque*, which was coined nostalgically after World War I, *fin de siècle* was a contemporary expression used frequently by both the literati and the popular press. Its negative connotation permeated famous Symbolist texts like Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *A Rebours* (1884), while at the same time informing daily newspapers like *Fin de siècle* (1890), a financial periodical that reported on current business scandals.4

Thus, Édouard Vuillard lived during what Max Nordau called a “Dusk of Nations,” an apocalyptic world in which Parisians felt “all suns and all stars [were] gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations [was] perishing.”5 From loose morals and bourgeois extravagance to decaying health and a corrupt government, this *esprit du siècle* touched both public and private lives and transcended disciplines. The major nineteenth-century theorists of degeneration – Bénédict Morel (1809-1873), Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), and Max Nordau (1849-1923) – were all educated as physicians before entering the field of social criticism, thus demonstrating the conflation of social and medical concerns during the period. Not only was the malaise of the *fin de siècle* studied through the lens of medicine and social critique, but the decadent spirit of the age was also inseparable from early modern art. In *Dégénérescence*, Nordau argued that the corruption of avant-garde aesthetics6 stemmed from the social and biological deterioration of the age. Modern artists were seen as hysterical figures with

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5 Nordau, *Degeneration*, 2. Nordau uses the metaphor of dusk to describe the *fin de siècle* and draws on morose imagery of a setting sun and eternal night: “Over the earth the shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in a mysterious dimness, in which all certainty is destroyed and any guess seems plausible. Forms lose their outlines, and are dissolved in floating mist. The day is over, the night draws on. The old anxiously watch its approach, fearing they will not live to see the end” (6). His image of forms disintegrating and losing clarity evokes a similar deterioration of form in modern art.
6 Individual chapters discuss Symbolism, Realism, and Mysticism, as well as specific degenerate figures like Henrik Ibsen and Richard Wagner. In the introduction, Nordau diagnoses the following art movements as hysterical: “impressionists,” “mosaists,” “papilloteurs,” “quiverers,” and colorists (27).
“visual derangements,” their application of the color red “dynamogenous” and their use of violet “enervating and inhibitive.” Nordau further explained:

In the civilized world there obviously prevails a twilight mood which finds expression, amongst other ways, in all sorts of odd aesthetic fashions. All these new tendencies, realism or naturalism, ‘decadentism,’ neo-mysticism, and their sub-varieties, are manifestations of degeneration and hysteria, and identical with the mental stigmata which the observations of clinicists have unquestionably established as belonging to these.

As Nordau demonstrates, the belief in fin-de-siècle social decline integrated the discourses of medicine and art in its theorization, and ultimate diagnosis, of degeneration.

The Morbid Intimiste

Édouard Vuillard’s early foray into the Parisian avant-garde played out in this morbid zeitgeist and drew on the period’s preoccupation with disease and health. Born in 1868 in the rural Burgundy town of Cuiseaux, Vuillard grew up in Paris in a petit-bourgeois family that owned a dressmaking business during the 1880s and 1890s. Although the artist had little exposure to the arts in his early life, he quickly entered modern aesthetic circles after his enrollment at the prestigious Lycée Condorcet in 1884. There, he met fellow schoolmates and future colleagues, Maurice Denis, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, Ker Xavier-Roussel, and Thadée Natanson. Through what Vuillard called a series of “chance associations,” the artist began to take drawing classes at the École des Gobelins and enrolled in the art school, Académie Julian, before ultimately being accepted into the École des Beaux-Arts in 1887. Although a charcoal drawing of his was accepted at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1889, Vuillard did not follow the

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7 Nordau, Degeneration, 28-29.
8 Ibid., 43.
10 Ibid., 5.
conservative teaching of the French Academy for long. With artists Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, and Paul Sérusier, Vuillard explored a new Symbolist aesthetic that directly challenged the accepted Naturalism of the period. This small group of art students, inspired by the Synthetist work of Paul Gauguin and his followers in Brittany, sought to convey inner sensations rather than objective reality. By 1889, they had formed the secret brotherhood of the Nabi, a name inspired by the Hebrew word for “prophet,” which embodied their desire to usher in a new era of aesthetics.

Using secret languages and codes, Vuillard and the Nabis banded together in their anti-naturalist style and disdain for the pedagogy of the Academy. As peintres-décorateurs, they embraced a flat and decorative style and used unconventional supports like cardboard, which expanded traditional conceptions of art as strictly easel painting with canvas. “Le décoratif” became a positive pictorial quality, which combined with simplified forms, strong contour lines, and dense patterning, allowed for the Nabis to better express the subjective. Yet despite the group’s shared practice of la déformation subjective, a term further examined in Chapter Three, there was no true, unified group aesthetic. As Paul Sérusier explained in 1890, the Nabis had an “undefinable character” in which each artist formulated his own abstract style.\textsuperscript{11} In the late 1880s, Vuillard’s carnets intimes reveal the artist’s anxiety in adhering to Nabis values while fleshing out his own methodology. Writing in his journal in 1890, Vuillard noted:

\begin{quote}
Why do I still worry what my style will be? It will not be – it is. And what is meant by style, what does one understand by it? Denis, for example is a mystic. The impression of his work leads to this convenient word; but the word does nothing, it’s only a coarse sign…Is he [Denis] aware of the opinion of others when he’s working? No, because, if so, he would reproduce such and such an exterior aspect of one of his works that he
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 8. Sérusier explained the appellation “Nabi” in 1890: “I dream of a future brotherhood, purified, composed only of artists, dedicated lovers of beauty and good, putting into their work and way of conducting themselves, the undefinable character that I would translate as ‘Nabi.’”
knows gives this impression. What a detestable obsession to classify things artificially in obscure categories of which we have only false ideas.\textsuperscript{12}

As is evident from this self-questioning, Vuillard was not only troubled by the task of reconciling his artistic vision with that of the Nabis, but also in retaining an authenticity in his own work. Unlike Denis, the “spokesperson” of the group, Vuillard remained markedly reserved in sharing his aesthetic theory with the public. It is only since the publication of his private journals in 1980, that scholars have begun to understand the artist’s simultaneous adherence and reluctance toward the Nabi aesthetic.\textsuperscript{13} For example, while Vuillard embraced the dense patterning and two-dimensional perspective of the group, he retained his own interest in the observation of the objective world. He anchored his scenes in the bourgeois apartment, conjuring a familiar domestic world, instead of evoking an immaterial and mythical reality like Denis. With fellow Nabi Pierre Bonnard, Vuillard practiced an \textit{intimiste} style in which the domestic realm and its quotidian way of life were depicted with great intimacy.\textsuperscript{14}

This absorption in the domestic details of life allowed Vuillard to perceptively infuse his paintings with the markers of contagion and disease pervasive at the end of the nineteenth century. The \textit{fin-de-siècle} climate, with its melding of the aesthetic and medical, serves as the backdrop for this examination of Édouard Vuillard’s domestic paintings from 1890 to 1895. From the evocation of invisible microbes in the home to the depiction of a hysteric’s subtle stigmata, I argue that Vuillard drew on the dark imagery of the \textit{Dusk of Nations} in his domestic

\textsuperscript{12} Quoted in ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 2. Thirty-seven of the artist’s \textit{carnets intimes} are currently located at the Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France. The use of the French term \textit{carnet} signifies the presence of both drawings and text in the notebooks, as they were neither purely journals nor sketchbooks.
\textsuperscript{14} Although the term \textit{intimisme} was first used during the 1890s to describe the work of Vuillard and Bonnard, its intimate depiction of domesticity may be used to describe earlier work by artists like Johannes Vermeer and Jean Chardin. “Intimisme.” \textit{Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online}. Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T041420.
paintings. Although art historians conventionally dissociate the Nabi brotherhood from these morbid themes, I demonstrate that, like the Symbolists, the Nabi were interested in the prevailing *esprit du siècle*. In fact, despite art scholarship’s tendency to separate the aesthetic practice of the Nabis from that of the Symbolists, the Nabis were Symbolists. The appellation “Nabi” was solely a private name used among the tight-knit artists of the brotherhood. When the group exhibited publicly, the work of artists like Vuillard, Denis, and Bonnard was clearly labeled, “Symbolist.”\(^\text{15}\) Thus, my study of Vuillard’s paintings within the context of the *Dusk of Nations* restores the artist within his Symbolist setting and demonstrates his concerns for the darker Symbolist themes of disease, contagion, and hysteria. Whether the depiction of an infirm woman in bed or a bourgeois apartment seeming to fester with bacterial life, my re-historicization of Vuillard’s paintings demonstrate the fluid interchange between medicine and the arts that was unique to the *fin de siècle*.

Unlike the artist’s large decorative panels from the early 1890s, the more morbid paintings considered in this thesis are remarkably small, painted on modest supports like cardboard, and not commissioned by wealthy patrons. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Vuillard was a young student-artist just building his network of clients, including the industrialist Paul Boutherouë Desmarais and the Nathanson brothers who owned the avant-garde journal *La Revue Blanche*. While the artist painted large decorative projects for these patrons’ private homes, such as the six Desmarais panels in 1892, he also painted dozens of intimate compositions that were without specific patronage. These extremely small-scale paintings, some as little as twenty-four by twenty-two centimeters, depict the artist’s family members within the private space of their Paris apartment. The ownership and location of these paintings during the 1890s remain elusive, yet it is clear that Vuillard was more liberal in his choice of subject matter

in these un-commissioned works. Whereas the Desmarais panels depict bourgeois women relaxing idyllically in a public park or gardening in an outside courtyard, Vuillard’s smaller oil-on-cardboard compositions depict private scenes of family drama in an experimental aesthetic. From sleeping to sewing, it is in these personal domestic scenes that I argue Vuillard imbued the malaise of the \textit{fin de siècle}. As an \textit{intimiste}, Vuillard did not overtly refer to the \textit{esprit du siècle} in his oeuvre, as did Symbolist Edvard Munch in the 1893 painting \textit{The Scream}, but instead imbedded the macabre in familiar bourgeois visions of daily life. Through an analysis of \textit{fin-de-siècle} disease in Vuillard’s paintings from the 1890s, this thesis offers a new understanding of the uncanny reverberations in the artist’s deceivingly warm domestic scenes.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine Édouard Vuillard’s series of sickbed paintings from 1891 to 1894 by considering the artist’s personal encounter with disease in his family apartment. Vuillard painted and sketched more than twenty scenes of women sleeping or resting in bed, which prior to this thesis, have never been formally examined together. An analysis of Vuillard’s personal journal and sketchbook reveal his family’s struggles with illness during the 1890s and the artist’s subsequent interest in the bed as a site of convalescence. With a similar compositional arrangement to contemporary post-mortem photography, these \textit{intimiste} paintings suggest that Vuillard actively drew on morbid imagery from the \textit{fin de siècle} to construct his portraits of infirmity. His repeated depiction of bedridden women suggest the artist’s preoccupation with illness and underlying interest in medicine, which may have inspired his portrayal of contagion and hysteria discussed in the second and third chapters.

In Chapter Two, I consider Vuillard’s claustrophobic treatment of interior space in relation to the \textit{grande peur} of contagion at the end of the nineteenth century. From his flattening of three-dimensional space to his \textit{horror vacui} decoration of wallpaper, Vuillard conjures the
oppressive experience of interior space during a period when the urban apartment harbored the pathogens of disease. Vuillard subverts the idyllic vision of the bourgeois home as a safe haven, and instills its very walls with fin-de-siècle intimations of pollution and infection. The dense patterning of floral wallpaper overwhelms the small compositions and evokes a “microbial” aesthetic similar to contemporary illustrations of germs and bacteria. Because turn-of-the-century hygiene theory claimed wallpaper to be hazardous to health, Vuillard’s very décoration stood as a marker of contagion.

Finally, in the third chapter I examine Vuillard’s déformation of the female form in relation to the stigmata of hysterical patients at Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot’s Hôpital de la Salpêtrière in Paris. In contextualizing Vuillard within the medicalized visual culture of the fin de siècle, I argue that Vuillard’s pathologization of the female form follows contemporary practices of diagnosing the feminine “other.” Charcot’s photographic publications, such as Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière (1888), provided Vuillard with the visual vocabulary to depict hysteria’s pathology. The artist drew further on the Nabis’ theory of déformation subjective and the avant-garde theater’s use of marionettes, to construct the hysteric’s rigid and unnatural body positions in his paintings.

By examining Vuillard’s intimiste compositions within the medical milieu of the late nineteenth century, I hope to expand upon the conventional understanding of Vuillard as a painter of idyllic yet mysterious genre scenes. While the artist is historically grouped with the Nabi painters of idyllic bourgeois scenes, Vuillard also drew on the underlying spirit of the Dusk of Nations. The following chapter introduces Vuillard’s relationship to disease through his series of sickbed paintings from the 1890s.
CHAPTER ONE

Encounters with Disease and Infirmity in the Vuillard Apartment

In a span of four years, from 1891 to 1895, Édouard Vuillard painted and sketched more than twenty intimiste scenes of women sleeping or resting in bed. Tucked under layers of eiderdown quilts, the slumbering women are enveloped by bed linens that leave only a glimpse of their pale faces visible. Although the representation of women in bed was not a new pictorial theme at the end of the nineteenth century, Vuillard’s private portraits diverge from their erotic precedents. These portraits of bedridden women convey the developing spirit of morbidity during the fin de siècle, as well as Vuillard’s participation in the contemporary discourse of medicine and illness.

In the oil-on-canvas painting from 1891, Sleep (Figure 1), measuring thirty-three by sixty-four centimeters, a woman with dark brown hair rests on her right side with her eyes closed. A white pillowcase and sheet frame her small oval face while an olive green bedspread covers her upper body and a dark-brown duvet cloaks her lower body. Vuillard depicts the two blankets with large, flat, and unmodulated planes of green and brown tones, abstracting the woman’s body so that only a slight outline of her right shoulder and hip is discernable. Vuillard’s simplification of the scene’s three-dimensional forms, such as the off-white pillowcase and light-green curtains, suggests the artist’s experimentation with Cloisonnism, a Synthetist style that the Nabi group embraced during the 1880s and 1890s. Drawing on the cloisonné enameling technique of Gothic jewelry and stained glass, Vuillard rejects the illusionistic effect of traditional painting and instead stresses the flat, outlined planes of color. The Cloisonnist lines of the blankets in Sleep create the sense that Vuillard’s female is wholly engulfed by her bed linens.
While the title of the painting signals a temporary nap, the viewer wonders if the woman’s inert form is actually in an eternal slumber and her bedspread is, ultimately, her shroud.

The oil-on-canvas painting, *Sleep*, is one of dozens of sleeping portraits Vuillard created during the 1890s which depart from the conventional canon of boudoir images. As a student at the prestigious Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Édouard Vuillard was formally trained as an artist and would have been familiar with the history of the recumbent woman in art from his many trips to the Musée du Louvre and the surrounding Parisian galleries during the 1880s. Markedly different from the reclining women of Giorgione or Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, however, is Vuillard’s unquestionably platonic treatment of his female subjects. Vuillard does not invoke the carnal connotations of the bed as does Titian in his *Venus of Urbino* from 1538 (Figure 2) or François Boucher in his *L’Odalisque* from 1745 (Figure 3), but rather conjures the bed as a pathological site at the turn of the century. His female subjects are neither nude nor erotic, for they do not lounge suggestively in front of a presumed male spectator. Whether the withdrawn recumbent position in *Madame Vuillard Asleep* (Figure 4), the closed eyes in *Madame V. Sleeping* (Figure 5), or the prostrate posture in *Women in Bed* (Figure 6), all of Vuillard’s female subjects are covered conservatively by their blankets and appear to be deeply asleep, oblivious to any spectator entering their private rooms.

Vuillard’s interest in the bed as a place of recuperation is further evident in the artist’s many sketches of the bedroom and its sleeping inhabitant in his sketchbook from the early 1890s. Pen-and-ink drawings like Figures 7, 8, and 9 depict multiple views of the bedroom in Vuillard’s apartment on the rue Saint-Honoré. Despite their loose brushwork and often-incomplete compositions, the sketches reveal the artist’s recurrent treatment of the bed and its trappings: rumpled sheets, wooden bedframes, and bedside tables. Vuillard’s sketches also reveal his great
interest in observing and representing the sleeping female. The pen-and-ink sketches in Figure 10 and 11 depict closely-cropped views of sleeping faces, their eyes closed and expressions relaxed, and Figure 12 shows several vignettes of slumbering women in bed in the upper half of the composition. Although a bed may have many connotations, whether as a site for sexual engagement or a mothering place for the birth of a child, Vuillard’s pen-and-ink drawings suggest his fixation with the bed as a place for rest and recovery because his figures sleep and do not engage the viewer.

Thus Vuillard departs from the rich tradition of the erotic nude in Western art, and alludes to the bed’s central role in convalescence at the turn of the twentieth century. In this chapter, I will analyze Vuillard’s iconography of the invalid woman and examine how illness was not only a preoccupation in fin-de-siècle France, but also deeply influential in Vuillard’s personal relationships. In studying Vuillard’s disquieting paintings of ill women in bed, I will explore the ways in which the fin-de-siècle fixation with disease and degeneration inspired the spirit of malaise in Vuillard’s œuvre. Specifically, I will examine Vuillard’s personal exposure to illness within his shared family home, the contemporary practice of post-mortem photography, the “fashionable” diagnosis of women as infirm, and the pervasive discourse of pathology and contagion at the turn of the century. Through this study of late-nineteenth-century conceptions of degeneration and morbidity, I hope to elaborate on the traditional understanding of Vuillard as a painter of bourgeois genre scenes and to propose how Vuillard, in fact, actively participated in and responded to contemporary discussions about disease and health.

As scholars of Vuillard frequently observe, Vuillard lived his entire life in a deeply “saturated feminine world,” a mundus muliebris, that translated fluidly yet mysteriously onto
canvas. After his father’s untimely death in 1884 and his older brother Alexandre’s enrollment in the army, Vuillard lived solely with his female family members: his mother, Marie Justine Alexandrine Michaud (referred to as Madame Vuillard in the artist’s oeuvre), his sister, Désirée Justinienne Pulchérie Marie Vuillard (referred to as Marie Roussel after marrying Vuillard’s best friend and fellow painter, Ker Xavier Roussel, in 1893), his grandmother, Marie Françoise Michaud (referred to as Grand-mère Michaud), and his great aunt, Marie Amélie Caroline Loquet (referred to as Tante Saurel). Vuillard shared the family apartment with his mother until her death in 1928, never marrying or moving out of their home, which doubled as a corset-making studio and consequently provided Vuillard even more feminine inspiration through its many itinerant seamstress workers. In this way, Vuillard’s pictorial themes revolve around the domestic activities of his feminine environs and reflect his famous dictum, “I don’t paint portraits, I paint people in their homes.” Vuillard’s artistic ethos was an “affaire de famille,” in which his female models - whether sewing, sweeping, or reading - closely mirrored Vuillard’s own family life. As Françoise Alexandre asserts in her doctoral dissertation on Vuillard’s private journals and correspondence, “If images for Vuillard could be evoked by words, the images would be image-mères.” Thus, Vuillard’s paintings become an autobiographical account, his portrayals of domestic life not only acting as “images-mères,” but also as “images-soeurs” and “images-grand-mères.” Vuillard notes this preference for female subjects in a journal entry from

3 Gloria Groom illustrates a map with the locations and chronology of Vuillard’s Parisian apartments from 1890-1910 (Figure 13), during which Vuillard lived in six different apartments all on the right bank of the Seine. Gloria Lynn Groom, Édouard Vuillard: Painter-Decorator : Patrons and Projects, 1892-1912 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), viv.
4 Cogeval, Vuillard, 256.
5 Alexandre, “Édouard Vuillard,” 219. Original citation in French: “Si les images pour Vuillard peuvent être évoquées par les mots, les images sont donc aussi ‘images-mères.’”
1893 in which he describes his deliberate aversion to male themes: “Je n’introduis jamais de
personnages hommes, je constate…Je ne puis penser qu’à des objets féminins, cela est gênant et
prouve que je ne suis pas indifférent au sujet.”

Because Vuillard’s personal and artistic milieus overlapped significantly within the
confines of his family apartment, his representations of women in bed are largely based on his
own family’s encounter with illness. Although not all of the paintings’ titles explicitly identify
their female subjects, such as Woman in Bed (Figure 14) or The Red Eiderdown (Figure 15),
Vuillard often confirms their names in his personal journal. For example, the oil-on-cardboard
painting from 1892, Sleeping Woman (Figure 16), depicts a tightly-cropped anonymous face
resting with her eyes closed, which Vuillard later identified in his private journal as his sister,
Marie. Vuillard also painted nearly a dozen representations of women in bed that not only
indicate which family member is represented, but also her state of affliction. By analyzing
Vuillard’s paintings of women in bed, I hope to illuminate Vuillard’s personal exposure to
disease and the way in which it may have influenced his artistic practice and choice of subject
matter.

While Vuillard’s family did not, by any account, suffer from more death or illness than a
typical late-nineteenth-century family, Vuillard was especially familiar with injury and sickness
by the mid 1890s. His father, Joseph François Honoré Vuillard, a high-ranking military officer,
was severely injured during the capture of Dialmath, Senegal in 1855, one of the most deadly
West African campaigns for France. The Inspector General of Health Services described

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6 Ibid., 228-29.
7 Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval, Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance : Critical Catalogue of
Paintings and Pastels (Milano; Paris: Skira ; Wildenstein Institute, 2003), 146.
Monsieur Vuillard’s extensive leg injuries, for which he was inducted into the National Order of the Legion of Honor, in a report from 1855:

M. Vuillard qui a été atteint à l’affaire de Dialmath d’un coup de feu qui a déterminé une double fracture du tibia et du péroné du côté gauche, se trouve dans un état d’infirmité qui rendra bien difficile sa rentrée au service. Les os ont subi une déformation dont le résultat est l’affaiblissement du membre et un léger raccourcissemment. Le tendon d’Achille rétracté rend la marche prolongée douloureuse.9

Retiring from the military, Vuillard’s father spent the rest of his life working as a tax collector and recuperating from his injuries until his death in 1884 at the age of seventy-two. Vuillard not only witnessed the severe infirmities of his father, but also those of his grandmother who lived with Vuillard and died in their apartment in January 1893.10 The artist frequently depicted his beloved Grand-mère Michaud during the years leading up to her death, and in the months following her passing, creating a series of lithograph portraits of her that he infused with an air of mourning (Figure 17). During her illness, however, Vuillard often illustrated Grand-mère Michaud either resting in or beside her bed. In the 1892 oil-on-canvas painting, Ailing woman seated by her bed (Figure 18), Grand-mère Michaud is depicted from the rear at a three-quarter angle, an iron-framed bed at her left side. While Vuillard creates a strong profile view of the right side of her face, he effaces her features so that the viewer is given only an impression of an elderly woman gazing dejectedly downward. In the same way, Vuillard focuses more on the ailing body position of Grand-mère than her facial expression in the two versions of Convalescence from 1893 (Figures 19, 20). In both the pastel-on-paper and the pastel-on-cardboard versions, Grand-mère Michaud sits to the right of the composition in a three-quarter position with her shoulders and head hunched over. She clutches at a towel draped over her left arm, but does not seem to acknowledge Marie Roussel’s skeletal figure entering the scene in the

9 Ibid.
10 Cogeval, Vuillard, 56.
back left corner of the composition. Like Grand-mère Michaud, Marie’s features are sketched hastily, leaving her facial expression obscure. In the pastel-on-cardboard version (Figure 20), Marie’s unnaturally angled face and body are so obscured by dark pastel tones that her figure takes on the eerie silhouette of a specter, floating ominously behind the hunched figure of Grand-mère Michaud. While neither Marie nor her grandmother are depicted in bed nor with visible medical symptoms, the emphasis on Marie’s gaunt form and Grand-mère Michaud’s hunched posture evoke the presence of illness and infirmity implicit in the painting’s title, *Convalescence*.

Although Vuillard does not always explicitly refer to his family’s maladies in the titles of his paintings, he imbues many of his boudoir scenes with the sense of malaise and stagnation that accompanies disease. For example, in the pastel-on-paper *Woman sitting by a sickbed* from 1893 (Figure 21), the occupant of the bed is cropped out of the composition so that only the attending figure sitting at the foot of the bed is visible. Concealed by shadow except for a sliver of light across her left cheek, the seated figure sits at the left of the composition and gazes not at the ill patient, but outside the pictorial space at the viewer. An adjacent room bathed in golden light is seen on the other side of a yellow curtain at the right of the composition, creating a stark contrast between the gloom of the bedroom and the warmth of the adjoining room. Although Vuillard does not overtly explain who the unseen occupant of the sickbed is (though most likely Grand-mère Michaud because of the date, 1893), the viewer is aware of the oppressive atmosphere of disease in the dark room. In the same way, the young female figure in the 1891 painting, *The Bed* (Figure 22), is an unidentifiable model with uncharacteristically dark-toned skin for Vuillard’s typical oeuvre. Nevertheless, the stark off-white and gray bed sheets recall those of a sterile, antiseptic hospital room, and the abstract, brown cross that hovers over the woman’s head portends an ominous end to her repose. Whether the subtle reference to malady as Madame
Vuillard nurses her aunt in the painting *Madame Vuillard at Tante Saurel’s Bedside* (Figure 23), or the graphic representation of misery in *Women asleep with her legs drawn up* (Figure 24), Vuillard’s series of paintings from the early 1890s evokes the illness that touched all families at the end of the nineteenth century. Because Vuillard was fully assimilated into his domestic domain and drew inspiration from his family members’ daily lives, the experience of suffering transferred fluidly into his representations of household life.

Vuillard’s most significant exposure to illness, however, was through his older sister’s frequent bouts with depression, struggle with pregnancy complications, and contraction of infectious diseases. Seven years older than her brother, Marie Roussel lived with her family in their apartment-studio until 1893 when she married Ker Xavier Roussel, a close friend and fellow Nabi painter of Vuillard. From the very beginning, their marriage faltered as Ker Xavier carried on an affair with an acquaintance, Germaine Rousseau, and Marie spiraled into depression from her new isolation in her husband’s home.11 Vuillard explicitly refers to the “complications in the Roussel household” in his journal in 1895, the year in which Ker Xavier briefly abandoned Marie in the Vuillard home.12 Marie often suffered from long periods of depression while living in the family apartment, and in 1894, moved back permanently after she gave birth to a stillborn child. The oil-on-cardboard painting from 1894, *La Berceuse* (Figure 25), treats the painful period following her difficult pregnancy and suggests the intimacy Vuillard shared with his family during times of illness. In the horizontal composition, measuring twenty-eight by forty-nine centimeters, Marie lies on her back under a bulky floral comforter pulled up over her chin, the tips of her fingers peeking over the top fold as if she is pulling up the blankets in an act of concealment. At the right of the composition, Madame Vuillard sits in a

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11 Ibid., 154.
12 Ibid.
black wicker chair at the edge of the bed, facing Marie in a strong profile view as her right elbow rests on the heavy comforter. The scene is a calm and intimate moment of reflection between mother and daughter, yet Vuillard instills a sense of the macabre by completely obscuring Marie’s face with gray pastel tones. Although the title of the painting implies a lighthearted lullaby, “la berceuse,” Marie’s visage appears hastily scratched so that only a ghostly impression of a young girl remains. Instead of nursing her own baby, Marie has reverted to a child huddled in bed, comforted in lullaby by Madame Vuillard.

Vuillard’s personal encounter with Marie’s illnesses had a significant impact on him and the entire Vuillard household. In a letter to close friend and director of La Revue Blanche, Alfred Natanson in 1894, the artist describes the family’s total despair for Marie during her “crises graves:”

My poor sister has suffered a serious [health] crisis, and we have been on the brink of thinking her lost. She’s a little better now, but not completely out of danger…I’ve gone through a terrible crisis of devastation and revolt against people and things.13

Written the same year as he painted La Berceuse, Vuillard most likely refers to Marie’s acute depression and precarious health following her stillbirth. A pen-and-ink drawing (Figure 26) from Vuillard’s sketchbook, Cahier Saint-Honoré, further elaborates on the presence of illness in the Vuillard household by showing quick sketches of Madame Vuillard, Alexandre Vuillard, and Ker Xavier Roussel in various states of interaction with a doctor.14 In the bottom half of the same composition, a table laden with medical paraphernalia sits next to a dark outline of a bed with rumpled white sheets. From medical accouterment like glass vials, rubber tubing, and liquid

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13 Groom, Édouard Vuillard, 221. Original French text included in Note 1: “Ma pauvre sœur a été atteinte de crises graves et nous avons été sur le point de la croire perdue. Elle va un peu mieux maintenant, mais tout danger n’est pas passé…J’ai traversé une crise épouvantable de désolation et de révolte contre les choses et les gens.”

14 Ibid., 67.
solutions to the doctor’s notes and manuals, the messy bedside table offers a view of the experience of illness in the domestic setting. Similar drawings in Vuillard’s sketchbook (Figure 27, 28) portray the family’s constant vigilance and attention to the infirm patient. In Figure 27, an unidentified man sits facing a faint outline of a bed on the right, and in Figure 28, a physician consults with three members of the Vuillard family next to a hastily sketched bed also at the right.

Vuillard’s exposure to illness within the close quarters of his domestic space also included his sister’s contraction of the viral disease, mumps in 1892. During this period, Vuillard portrayed Marie multiple times resting in bed while her mother perches beside her reading late into the night. The oil-on-canvas painting from 1892, *The Vigil* (Figure 29), evokes the religious spirit of this nocturnal watch as Madame Vuillard hovers behind Marie’s bed and bows her head over a book, creating the impression of a prayer performed over Marie’s frail body. An undated graphite sketch, *Marie sick in her sickbed* (Figure 30), and an oil-on-canvas painting from 1892-93, *Mumps* (Figure 31), further portray Marie’s bout with the viral disease because Vuillard depicts his sister with a headband wrapped around her face, a common method of applying warmth and pressure to the painful swelling of the salivary glands during mumps.\(^\text{15}\) In both compositions, Vuillard deflects attention away from Marie’s facial features and instead emphasizes the large cloth head wrap that envelopes Marie’s head from chin to crown. Although the physical signs of Marie’s swollen glands are undetectable, Marie is completely characterized by her illness, most conspicuously in the oil-on-canvas painting, *Mumps*, in which her entire face is shrouded by a gray and white-spotted wrap.

Édouard Vuillard’s representation of his mother, grandmother, great aunt, and sister as invalids does not simply signal the artist’s intimate relationship with his family, but also his...

\(^{15}\) See Figure 32 for an early twentieth-century illustration of a head wrap used during mumps.
interest in the discourse on health at the turn of the twentieth century. Images of illness during the nineteenth century were primarily found in medical manuals, which illustrated the physical symptoms that doctors evaluated in the clinical space of the hospital. Physicians like Jean-Martin Charcot, who ran a large asylum in the center of Paris, published series of lithographs detailing the signifiers of mental diseases like hysteria (Figure 33), while medical encyclopedias included diagnostic images in their comprehensive notes on disorders. In this respect, Vuillard’s representation of illness was original at the end of the nineteenth century because it was both personal and situated in the private domestic sphere. While intimate portrayals of reclining women had been associated with disease earlier in the century, their pathology was associated with eroticism and not illness. For example, T.J. Clark’s analysis of Édouard Manet’s 1863 Olympia (Figure 34) suggests the general impression of death and decomposition that viewers experienced in front of the painting. A critic for Le Monde Illustré described Olympia as a “cadaver displayed in the morgue” and the journalist Victor Fournel declared, “Like a corpse on the counters at the morgue, this Olympia from the rue Mouffetard, [is] dead of yellow fever and already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition.” Thus the iconic nude in bed was ascribed the physical uncleanliness and decay of illness, yet unlike Vuillard’s reclining females, her infirmity stemmed from the practice of prostitution. As opposed to contemporary representations of courtesans which evoked disease as a social phenomenon, Vuillard’s portrayal of illness was biological in its origin. His treatment of the bed as a pathological site was grounded in the real experience of illness and the increasing medicalization of society at the turn of the twentieth century.

Vuillard’s departure from traditionally erotic perspectives of the bed and the lounging female may be understood as part of the growing preoccupation with morbidity and mortality at the end of the nineteenth century. While the artist’s sickbed imagery is remarkably extensive – more than twenty paintings and sketches in less than five years – other Symbolist artists were also fascinated by the exploration of the macabre. The Danish Symbolist, Ejnar Nielsen, painted the final moments of a sallow, skeletal girl suffering from the last stages of tuberculosis in *The Sick Girl* from 1896 (Figure 35) and the Belgian Symbolist, James Ensor, depicted the debilitated form of a bedridden woman in *Woman in Distress* in 1882 (Figure 36). Vuillard’s portrayal of his mother and sister’s ailments closely mirror the private misery and incapacity of the frail women in both Nielsen and Ensor’s paintings, as well as the spirit of mourning in Edvard Munch’s *The Sick Child* from 1885 (Figure 37).¹⁸ The motifs of death and anguish are pervasive themes in Symbolist imagery and provide a new understanding of Vuillard’s domestic interiors, which have been grouped historically with the mysterious intimacy of the Nabi movement. As historian Guy Cogeval asserted in 1990, “Vuillard est beaucoup plus imprégné par le symbolisme qu’on ne le croit généralement.”¹⁹ Just as Edvard Munch felt that, “Sickness and insanity and death were the black angels that hovered over [his] cradle and have since followed [him] throughout [his] life,”²⁰ I believe it was Vuillard’s personal exposure to illness that inspired a similar malaise in his paintings.

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¹⁸ Edvard Munch’s treatment of deathbed scenes increased dramatically during the 1890’s and early twentieth century. His first visit to Paris was for the Exposition Universelle in 1889, where he became familiar with the Nabi and Symbolist painters. Although no official record exists confirming Vuillard and Munch’s encounter, a significant affinity for sickness and death exists in both their work. For further deathbed scenes by Munch, see: *Death in the Sickroom* (1893; Figure 38), *By the Deathbed* (1895; Figure 39), and *The Dead Mother and Child* (1897-99; Figure 40). Guy Cogeval, *Édouard Vuillard* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 46.


²⁰ Quoted in ibid., 374.
In addition to sharing the Symbolist movement’s inclination toward themes of morbidity, Vuillard’s representation of invalid women recalls the popular practice of post-mortem photography that developed during the second half of the nineteenth century in Western Europe and North America. Mortuary photography became a commercial practice with the rise of professional photography studios, and signaled a general domestication of death during the Victorian period. Advertisements in America proclaimed, “We are prepared to take pictures of a deceased person on one hour’s notice,” and “We take great pains to have Miniatures of Deceased Persons agreeable and satisfactory, and they are often so natural as to seem, even to Artists, in a deep sleep.”21 The custom of posthumous photography developed at a time when death was still an intimate experience which occurred in the privacy of the home, the ambience and setting integral to the experience of a “good death.”22 Deathbed photography sought to recreate and preserve this serene experience in order to distribute the memento of death to distant relatives, to hang on parlor walls, and to paste into family albums.

Vuillard's sickbed illustrations recall mortuary photography because both aesthetic forms evoke the metaphor of sleep and act as a *momento mori*. Post-mortem photography purposefully portrayed the deceased individuals in the comfort of their home, dressed in their own nightgown and arranged artfully under the covers of their bed, to create a pose of “last sleep” (Figure 41).23 Through careful curation of the deathbed scene, the departed would be remembered in a familiar and safe environment, far from the interior of a coffin that could conjure morose images of decomposition and decay. Similarly, Vuillard did not emphasize the precise symptoms of the malady in his sickbed scenes of Marie or Grand-mère Michaud, but instead portrayed his females

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23 Ibid.
as reading or asleep. In the painting, *Sick Woman Reading* (Figure 42), Marie props her head and shoulders on a pillow on the left side of her bed in a composition similar to that of two post-mortem photographs from the early twentieth century (Figures 43 & 44). Like the deceased women in the cabinet photographs, Marie is partially upright in bed with layers of comforters tucked under her forearms. While Marie rests a book on her chest, her facial features are obscured by Vuillard’s hasty brushwork so that the viewer is unsure of Marie’s actual state of consciousness. Although these two cabinet photographs are English, and included in this thesis because of their remarkably similar compositions to Vuillard’s paintings, deathbed photography was prevalent in France as well. The nineteenth-century photographer Paul Nadar took several famous posthumous photographs, including one of Victor Hugo in 1885 (Figure 45) that was later published as a lithograph in *L’Illustration* (Figure 46), as well as one of poet Marceline Desbordes-Valmore in 1859 (Figure 47) and painter Gustave Doré in 1883 (Figure 48).

Therefore given the similar pictorial arrangements of Vuillard’s sickbed paintings and Victorian deathbed photography, it is likely that Vuillard was not only aware of the practice of death-as-sleep portraits, but that he actively drew on their morbid imagery to construct a representation of illness.

At the end of the nineteenth century, sickness and death played out on a theatrical stage that *fin-de-siècle* Parisians not only watched, but participated in daily. The Paris Morgue was one such grisly destination that attracted up to 40,000 visitors a day to gawk at the corpses laid out on marble slabs to be identified by family members.²⁴ Built in 1864 behind the cathedral of Notre Dame on the Île de la Cité (Figure 49), the Paris Morgue was a site for Parisians to live out the gruesome tales of murder and suicide printed in serial feuilletons of the daily newspapers. A

lithograph captioned, “The Morgue at Paris. The Last Scene of a Tragedy” (Figure 50) illustrates this macabre act of voyeurism and its dark theatricality because the corpses are displayed behind a large vitrine as if in an exhibition. The Paris Morgue was “part of the catalogued curiosities of things to see, under the same heading as the Eiffel Tower, Yvete Guilbert, and the Catacombs,” which tourists and locals lined up to see day and night, save for when a dark green curtain was drawn to hide the changing of “exhibitions.” Listed in tourist guidebooks as “one of the most popular sites in Paris,” the morgue acted as a free public theater in which “the identification of dead bodies was turned into a show.” Emile Zola described the morbid attraction in his novel, *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), when Laurent visits the morgue to search for his mistress’ drowned husband. Zola recounts Laurent’s daily visit to the *salle d’exposition* in gruesome detail, noting the strange scene of pleasure that enfolded amongst the spectators:

> The morgue is a sight within reach of everybody, and one to which passers-by, rich and poor alike treat themselves. The door stands open, and all are free to enter. There are admirers of the scene who go out of their way so as not to miss one of these performances of death. If the slabs have nothing on them, visitors leave the building disappointed, feeling as if they had been cheated, and murmuring between their teeth; but when they are fairly well occupied, people crowd in front of them and treat themselves to cheap emotions; they express horror, they joke, they applaud or whistle, as at the theatre, and withdraw satisfied, declaring the Morgue a success on that particular day.

Visitors indulged in their *fin-de-siècle* infatuation with death all while in an atmosphere of “a genuine fairgrounds,” replete with street bands and vendors who sold trinkets and food.

However, Parisians not only vicariously experienced death by visiting the morgue or the Musée Grévin, a wax museum that replicated tableaux of murder trials, they also role-played the state of death, or near-death, in their own private theater of the home.

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25 Ibid., 93.
During the nineteenth century, the condition of infirmity was an ubiquitous and “fashionable” ailment for bourgeois women to contract if they had the luxury to stay at home. According to historian Ann Douglas Wood, illnesses attributed to women were more often socially constructed than pathologically originated because disease was a culturally accepted, expected and even induced phenomenon.\footnote{Ann Douglas Wood, “‘The Fashionable Diseases’: Women’s complaints and their treatment in 19th-century America,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 4 (1973): 27.} Infirmity denoted a bedridden state and a predisposition to illness that characterized the nineteenth-century “cult of female frailty.”\footnote{Diane Price Herndl, Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 25.} \footnote{Wood, “The Fashionable Diseases,” 26.} As American educator Catharine Esther Beecher noted in a survey she conducted of her female acquaintances in 1866, “there is a delicacy of constitution and an increase of disease, both among mature and young women, that is most alarming, and such as was never known in the former period.”\footnote{Ibid.} Her report found that almost all women in her bourgeois social circle were in some manner ill or weak:


While Beecher suggested the incidence of female illness was higher during the nineteenth century, historian Wood asserts that women simply defined themselves more frequently through their sickness at the turn of the century.\footnote{I will discuss the condition of neurasthenia and hysteria further in Chapter Three, which were the main “female” illnesses during the period.} Starting in the 1850s, the professionalization of the medical field galvanized the invalid epidemic because it encouraged the practice of physical diagnosis, using new medical technologies like auscultation and percussion, over the eighteenth-century.
century tradition of interpreting patients’ medical narratives. Clinical treatment became based on visible signs of pathological anatomy, and physicians encouraged preventative self-diagnosis at home through mass-produced medical encyclopedias. As both Wood and literary critic Elaine Showalter argue, the rise of the medical profession imposed a “patriarchal obsession” on bourgeois women because male physicians sought to persuade women they were ill and in need of their professional services. American physician S. Weir Mitchell explained flippantly in his novel *A Comedy of Conscience* (1903), “It is the verdict of women which decides the fortunes of a doctor.” Therefore, women during the second half of the nineteenth century were often compelled to accept the myth of their innate unhealthiness and play the infirm, “natural” role that bourgeois society cast upon them.

Édouard Vuillard’s series of bedridden women from the early 1890s evokes William Dean Howells’ description of Paris as “little more than a hospital for invalid women,” because the artist’s female models are depicted in countless states of idleness and repose, whether reading, sleeping, or staring blindly outside the pictorial frame. Although not all of Vuillard’s bedroom scenes explicitly refer to the maladies or suffering of his family members, a general spirit of malaise and lethargy imbues his scenes and suggests that Marie Roussel, Madame Vuillard, and Grand-mère Michaud participated in the bourgeois valorization of the sick role. For example, the oil-on-cardboard paintings from 1894, *Marie in Bed* (Figure 51) and *Young Woman in Bed* (Figure 52), portray two women propped up on their elbows with their bodies and gazes turned toward the viewer. By painting both of these females under the covers and in bed, without visual or textual clues to their afflictions, Vuillard sets up a scene that appears to be a quotidian

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view of life chez les Vuillard. In *Marie in Bed*, Vuillard’s sister rests her forehead heavily against her right palm in a posture of utter exhaustion and perhaps exasperation at her brother’s pursuit of painting. As a white duvet envelops the lower half of her body, Marie’s face and mouth tighten into a rigid expression of agitation that leaves Marie appearing ill at ease. On the other hand, in the oil-on-cardboard painting from the same year, *Young Woman in Bed*, a fresh-faced female lounges dreamily under a frothy white chenille bedspread in an idyllic state of ennui. The young woman does not evoke the pathological infirmity of Marie, but rather the idle reverie of a socially constructed experience of feebleness and sickness. Both of these paintings portray different visions of the “cult of female frailty,” yet Vuillard probes the same phenomenon of sickness – whether pathological or cultural – that bourgeois women experienced in the domestic sphere.

Although art historians have traditionally classified Vuillard’s *intimiste* paintings as homely yet enigmatic visions of domestic life, Vuillard’s oeuvre surpassed the mysterious and broached the disconcerting realm of death and illness at the *fin de siècle*. Vuillard was not simply Cézanne “translated into more intimate terms” or the darker foil to fellow Nabis painter Pierre Bonnard, but a modern artist intensely aware of the contemporary *esprit du siècle*. Despite assertions that the artist remained completely secluded in his “world of women,” Vuillard’s uncanny scenes of bedridden women reveal that the artist participated in the larger discourse of medicine and disease at the end of the nineteenth century. He directed his keen observation of everyday life toward the psychology of the invalid within her sickbed, capturing the unnatural stillness that hangs in the air with the coming specter of death. Within his contemporary artistic milieu, Vuillard’s bedroom series embodies the Symbolist’s “devotion to the effective sum of

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infinite suggestion, the indirect glance which catches reality unawares…the heavily laden psychological atmosphere [that] pushes through the surface of domestic ordinariness."40 Although Vuillard was a loyal member of the Nabi group, sharing his fellow artists’ aesthetic interests in flat surfaces and decoration as well as their thematic interest in domesticity, the morbid undertones of his paintings from the 1890s align Vuillard and his oeuvre more with that of Edvard Munch and the Symbolists.

In examining Édouard Vuillard’s portraits of invalid women, which recall deathbed photography and the “cult of female frailty,” it is clear that Vuillard was very much a product of his fin-de-siècle milieu. Although he embedded his macabre imagery within the seemingly safe environment of the home, he conjured morbid visions of his mother, sister and grandmother confined to their beds for weeks at a time. Vuillard not only encountered the discourse of disease and death through his familial experiences of depression, viral disease, and old age, but more broadly through the context of a late-nineteenth-century society that spectacularized and vulgarized death in venues as diverse as newspapers and novels to the local morgue and insane asylum. As a contributor to the avant-garde journal, La Revue Blanche, whose articles touched on subjects from cholera41 and the state of contemporary medicine,42 to French conceptions of degeneration43 and Symbolist art exhibitions,44 Vuillard directly engaged in the fin-de-siècle obsession with morbidity. Although only a short-lived publication between the years 1889 and 1903, La Revue Blanche was a leading literary magazine considered “the mirror of its epoch,

offering a faithful and vast panorama” of turn-of-the-century culture. As the first artist to receive a solo exhibition at the journal’s headquarters, Vuillard was at the center of a rich artistic milieu that introduced him to fellow authors and artists like Odilon Redon who were similarly interested in representing contemporary experiences of malady, a subject explored further in Chapters Two and Three.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Vuillard occupied a quickly industrializing Paris that grappled with issues of illness and health on both a private and public level. Real threats of contagion and the perception of racial degeneration instigated national terror and government action, which in turn menaced the private spaces of the domestic domain. The perils of disease would have been tangible to any Parisian during the last decade of the nineteenth century, and therefore requires serious consideration when examining Vuillard’s representation of invalid women. While art historians have casually grouped his private bedroom scenes with Vuillard’s other intimate depictions of domesticity from the 1890s, an examination of the fin-de-siècle medical milieu reveals these paintings’ close relationship to contemporary interests in sickness and the human condition. Vuillard’s suggestive treatment of his family’s encounter with illness lays the groundwork to re-historicize the Nabi artist within his medical environs and to propose a new understanding of the sense of uncanny in his intimate scenes. In the following two chapters, Vuillard’s oeuvre will be further examined in the light of contagion and its effect on the domestic experience, and the developing field of neurology that pathologized the hysterical woman.

46 I will discuss the epidemics of the nineteenth century, such as cholera and tuberculosis, further in Chapter Two.
CHAPTER TWO

The Anxiety of the Pathogenic Interior

The Étui of the Home

The German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe’s assertion that, “No artist has ever so suggested the soul of an interior – the sense of habitation,”¹ captures Édouard Vuillard’s keen observation and portrayal of the nineteenth-century home. His quiet depictions of women absorbed in their daily lives, from reading in bed to stitching a hem, signal a deep understanding of the experience of domesticity during an epoch when the interior held great symbolic value for the bourgeois family. The twentieth-century philosopher Walter Benjamin emphasized the central role of the home in fin-de-siècle France when he wrote in Passagenwerk (1927-40), “The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his étui.”² According to Benjamin, the home became an étui, or shell, for the bourgeois family by enfolding its activities in homey confines and absorbing each occupant’s human “trace.”³ He describes the melding of home and individual in the following manner:

[The nineteenth century] conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling’s interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet.⁴

Like the intimate pleats of a compass’ lining, the nineteenth-century home enveloped the family in its richly textiled and patterned walls. Yet the domicile was not simply a cozy refuge during the period, but also a space that could provoke a hostile and disturbing domestic experience.

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³ Ibid. In his selection of notes and literary passages, Benjamin constructs a theory of the trace in which an inhabitant’s “impression” is embedded into “plush” interiors – a “material in which traces are left especially easily” (225).
⁴ Ibid.
Benjamin’s description of the interior as a “receptacle” that “encased” its inhabitant conjures the claustrophobic confinement a home imposed on its resident. The lush velvet folds of Benjamin’s metaphoric compass ultimately evoke a sense of suffocation and imprisonment that the philosopher likens to an ensnaring spider’s web:

To live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider’s web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like so many insect bodies sucked dry. From this cavern, one does not like to stir.⁵

In the same way, Vuillard’s densely decorated interiors absorb their female figures and collapse three-dimensional space upon them. Whether the figure of Grand-mère Michaud dissolving into a speckled background in the oil-on-cardboard Grandmother at the Sink (Figure 53) or the elderly woman engulfed in black shadow in the oil-on-cardboard Rue de Miromesnil, the Landing (Figure 54), Vuillard’s subjects become inseparable from their settings and leave disquieting “traces” of their presence. As Benjamin explains, the domestic space “puts on, like an alluring creature, the costumes of moods.”⁶

Although Vuillard’s portrayal of interior life reveals an intimate and familiar vision of domestic space, his compositions are fraught with an inexplicable sense of dislocation and peril. Decorative parlors tilt at precarious angles, dark mahogany furniture looms menacingly over delicate figures, and diligent seamstresses disintegrate into claustrophobic surroundings. Art historians and critics often acknowledge this disturbing sense of danger, citing its subtle threat as what attracts the viewer to Vuillard’s quiet visions of hermetic life. As Guy Cogeval observes, “The artist injects poison into evenings behind closed doors, destroys any comforting privacy,

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⁵ Ibid., 216.
⁶ Ibid.
and condemns his figures to perpetual imprisonment within the pictorial frame.”7 Debora Silverman attributes the scenes’ strangeness to a “nervous vibration” in which figures “teeter on the edges of voids or, alternatively, threaten to disappear into walls.”8 While Vuillard’s paintings are grounded in a recognizable world of mundane domesticity, his oeuvre does not embody the typical “quiet bliss of homeyness” that philosopher Jürgen Habermas uses to describe the bourgeois “intimate sphere.”9 Instead, Vuillard’s intimiste paintings conjure an unstable and perilous milieu that hides an unseen danger within its otherwise quiet and cozy sanctuary.

In this chapter, I will examine how Vuillard’s perversion of familiar scenes of domesticity evokes contemporary discourses of disease and contagion. In particular, I will explore how the artist’s distortion of domestic space diverges from the contemporary conception of the home as a haven by instilling a sense of the “uncanny” in his paintings. Although scholars often associate this atmosphere of anxiety with the artist’s biography, I argue that the Nabi aesthetic eschewed this type of explicit narrative for a more obscure and Symbolist évocation. Thus, in the light of Vuillard’s preoccupation with illness and infirmity discussed in Chapter One, I propose that the unsettling claustrophobia pervasive in his paintings from the early 1890s draws on common fin-de-siècle fears of the home as a foyer of disease. Although paintings like the 1893 oil-on-canvas Mother and Sister of the Artist (Figure 55) do not explicitly refer to the experience of disease, I demonstrate how their disquieting portrayal of domestic life intimates the grande peur of contagion. In particular, I will examine nineteenth-century hygiene and

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9 Habermas discusses the disintegration of bourgeois privacy and the boundaries between public and private spheres in Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 159.
housing reforms that altered the experience of domestic life and portrayed the home as a breeding ground for infectious pathogens. I argue that Vuillard’s representation of the home captures this new anxiety about the domestic sphere, in which le microbe breached the secure privacy of the dwelling and brought previously public fears of illness into the home. From Vuillard’s claustrophobic collapse of three-dimensional space to his “microbial” aesthetic of wallpaper, I claim that Vuillard was deeply aware of fin-de-siècle concerns of contagion and disease during his artistic practice of the early 1890s.

**Fin-de-Siècle Hygiene and the Conflation of Public and Private Space**

During the second half of the nineteenth century, sweeping epidemics across Western Europe and new discoveries of the pathogenic origins of disease created a heightened, and near-hysterical awareness of illness in the general public. With cholera plaguing France repeatedly in 1832, 1849, 1853, 1865, 1873, 1884-85, and 1892, a constant fear of infection and death terrorized residents of dense urban centers like Paris.10 Along with cafés, boulevards, and cabarets, contagion became another spectacle sensationalized in the popular press during the fin de siècle. From the new field of microbiology to the national hygiene campaigns examining families’ “moeurs et habitudes,” personal health was at the forefront of both public and private thought. At the end of the nineteenth century, the anxiety over disease peaked with new discoveries of le monde invisible and ultimately penetrated the previously inviolable space of the home. Microscopic particles, from dust to bacteria, posed a morbid threat that public hygienists sought to eradicate. For example, at the turn of the century, dust from Paris’s large-scale urbanization projects was thought to enter the home and breed lethal diseases. Émile Zola

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described the overwhelming anxiety that these specs of dirt elicited for the Baudus family in his novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883):

> At the slightest gust of wind, clouds of plaster flew about and covered the neighboring roofs like a fall of snow. The Baudus in despair looked on at this implacable dust penetrating everywhere – getting through the closet woodwork, soiling the goods in their shop, even gliding into their beds; and the idea that they must continue to breathe it – that it would finish by killing them – empoisoned their existence.11

Thus, scientists took air samples to examine dust’s microbial contents and public hygienists studied the most effective sweeping methods to dispel these particles from the home. As art historian Marni Kessler claims, this polluted and dusty atmosphere inspired the “scumbled” background of Edgar Degas’ paintings of laundresses (Figure 56), who had a particularly unhealthy profession because they were in close contact with dirty clothes that they repeatedly brushed and beat.12 In considering that Vuillard’s apartment doubled as a corset-making studio, the Nabi artist would have lived in a similarly textiled environment and been aware of the relationship between clothes and dust in the home.

During the Third Republic, newly implemented public health policy was no longer limited to addressing exterior pollution such as Paris’s squalid sewer and water systems. Through agencies like the *Conseil de salubrité* and the *Casier Sanitaire des maisons*, the French government entered the home to monitor both the cleanliness of living conditions and the incidence of disease.13 *Médecins délégués* published reports on the spread of epidemics in each

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arrondissement, and officials from the Paris Commission on Insalubrious Dwellings made more than 76,958 sanitary house visits between 1851 and 1888. With the inspection of *conditions d’existence* in families’ homes, the boundaries between public and private spheres became “porous” and the experience of privacy in the home deteriorated. Not only were state hygiene commissions crossing the threshold of the domicile in order to control disease, but the very pathogens of disease were believed to be invading the home’s borders.

Housing reform during the late nineteenth century addressed these sanitation concerns and further collapsed the divide between personal and public domains. As the “capital of the nineteenth century,” Paris underwent massive urbanization projects that redefined the experience of modern life in the city. Most famously, the Prefect of the Seine Georges-Eugène Haussmann oversaw a great urban renewal program in which the entire Paris cityscape was re-carved and reconstructed during the Second Empire. Applying “the surgical method to the treatment of a sick city,” Haussmann replaced the city’s medieval streets with broad boulevards, created public parks and national monuments, initiated a sewer system of *tout à l’égout*, and enhanced the quality of air and water supplies. Historians like Jeanne Gaillard have described this emphasis on public spaces like cafés and the *grands boulevards* as Paris’ transformation into an “extroverted city,” yet scholar Sharon Marcus maintains that after the year 1850, Parisians consciously “interiorized” in order to protect the domestic space from this urbanization. Her discussion of Haussmannisation’s new *maison à loyer*, or apartment home, creates a helpful framework to consider the public invasion of private life, and to ultimately

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14 Aisenberg, *Contagion*, 117.
15 Ibid., 52.
16 Ibid., 55.
understand the ways in which the experience of disease shaped Vuillard’s representation of the home.

The backdrop of Vuillard’s depiction of private life is the nineteenth-century Paris apartment house, a form of dwelling that arose with Haussmann’s renovation of residential spaces. As Gloria Groom demonstrates in her map of Vuillard’s apartments (Figure 13), the artist lived primarily in the first and eighth arrondissements on the right bank of the Seine during the 1890s. He lived briefly in an apartment at number 6, rue Miromisnil in 1890, and eventually moved to the rue Saint-Honoré where he occupied two apartments: building number 346 from 1891 to 1896, and the neighboring apartment number 342 from 1896. Art historian Elizabeth Easton’s comprehensive study of Vuillard’s residences provides insight into the bourgeois character of the rue Saint-Honoré neighborhood, and the “eclectic interior” aesthetic of the artist’s apartment. She cites an 1884 guidebook description of the area as having “an old entitlement of the bourgeoisie which stresses far back in the history of Paris,” and a prominence of “merchants, principally drapers, furriers, embroiderers and those that sell rich stuffs or other objets de luxe.”

Despite this upper middle-class flavor of the rue Saint-Honoré, Vuillard’s family home was a far cry from the hôtel privés of the haute bourgeoisie. Their apartment was situated in a collective apartment building, a modern design during the nineteenth century because it combined the private space of an individual apartment house with the shared spaces of entrances,

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19 His most well-known painting from this apartment is Rue de Miromesnil, the Landing (Figure 54).
21 Easton et al., The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard, 68. The Saint-Honoré neighborhood was a popular location for fashion and dressmaking boutiques, and suggests that along with his mother’s couturier, the district would have provided Vuillard much inspiration in textiles.
hallways, staircases, and even walls. Although the modern apartment house attempted to create a new urban and sanitary living experience, its dense occupancy and communal space rendered the buildings particularly unhygienic. A nineteenth-century hygiene treaty explained that “cohabitation under the same roof” spread disease because of “an exchange of wastes among the diverse parts of the population piled on top of one another from the ground level to the top floors.” Vuillard rarely portrayed the public space of his apartment, yet two tightly-cropped paintings from the period, *A Broom in the Courtyard at 346 rue Saint-Honoré* (Figure 57) and *The Cat on the Step* (Figure 58), depict objects of potential infection in the shared spaces of the *maison à loyer*. In the former, a closely cropped view of a squatting woman and a broom in a courtyard, and in the latter, a cat perched on a door stoop.

Twenty-first century satellite images of the façade at apartment 346 rue Saint-Honoré show large, airy windows that extend from floor to ceiling (Figure 59). No documentation exists for which étage Vuillard’s family occupied, yet an oil-on-canvas painting from 1893, *Marie at the Balcony Railing* (Figure 60), depicts Marie leaning out of a large window on an upper-level floor. However, as writer and historian Gillian Tindall explains, broad windows did not necessarily indicate a light-filled interior:

> Behind the grandiloquent facades and the airy rooms fronting the boulevards, lie cramped, dark corridors, windowless bathrooms, cliff-steep servants’ stairways, and always, at the top, a warren of small, brick-floored rooms initially without water or heat in which the most Parisian of Parisians live like resourceful mice in the crannies of a dwelling built for a mythical race of giants.

The nineteenth-century apartment house shared the same public space as small businesses and merchants because the ground floor of each building accommodated cafés and shops. For

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23 Ibid., 154.
24 Quoted in ibid., 154.
example, a photograph of the *rez de chaussée* at 346 rue Saint-Honoré shows its present-day occupation by several chic clothing boutiques (Figure 61). Elizabeth Easton’s research indicates that during the 1890s, the Vuillard apartment occupied the same building as the headquarters of *L’Aiguillée*, the sole union for the clothing business in Paris.\(^{26}\) With members who were *couturières*, *modistes*, and *brodistes*, Easton asserts that this trade union was likely an organization in which Madame Vuillard, a *corsetière*, participated. Thus, the Vuillard family would have certainly encountered the seeping of the public into private life, and the menace of potential pathogens in their communal apartment building.

Sharon Marcus’s study of nineteenth-century housing suggests that the apartment house altered the relationship between home and city because it “[dissolved] the boundary between residential and collective spaces.” As she explains:

> Apartment buildings were miniature cities whose multiplication of individual dwellings both magnified domesticity and perturbed its customary boundaries…Attempts to separate the city and the home had to contend with powerful celebrations of the apartment house’s capacity to make urban and domestic spaces continuous…\(^{27}\)

The Vuillard apartment’s functioning as both a residence and corset-making atelier would only have amplified this sense of the home losing its conceptual and physical designation as private space. Itinerant seamstresses entering and leaving, bringing with them the literal dirt and grime of the city, would have breached the boundaries of the Vuillard home on a daily basis.

Furthermore, as Easton notes, their apartment would have been covered with textiles and sewing material. The home contained at most two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a dining room, so the private space of the family home would have been infiltrated by the studio’s business activity. Marcus’s argument that during the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a renewed effort to protect and enclose the interior from public influence, to “interiorize” the home, resonates with

\(^{26}\) Easton et al., *The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard*, 29.

Vuillard’s paintings of hermetic yet precarious scenes. As I will discuss in the following pages, Vuillard destabilizes the inner realm of the home by collapsing three-dimensional space and fusing figure with ground. Through his disorienting perspective and dense patterning, the artist instills a sense of the “uncanny” in his paintings, which evokes the transformation of the home from a private foyer to a public foyer d’infection.

The “Uncanny” Confines of Vuillard’s Apartment

In the oil-on-cardboard The Cup of Coffee from 1892 (Figure 62), a pale Marie Roussel sits in three-quarter view at a wooden table holding a blue and white china teacup. With her hair neatly tied back and her upper body leaning slightly forward, she appears solemn as she stares blankly toward the left of the composition. Her environs are modest and nondescript with only a table and two additional chairs in the pictorial frame. Although the subject matter of the composition is banal, a petit-déjeuner or afternoon repast, the scene is far from ordinary and self-evident. Vuillard paints Marie as a pale ghost, her skin a pasty and translucent white tone that pops out against her black collar and the dark voids of her eyes. Using a sketchy brushstroke, Vuillard renders her dress practically see-through by allowing the tan of the cardboard backing to show through the sparse strokes. Marie’s silhouette is undefined and melds into the tan of the background wall patterning. Her disproportionately large form seems to float in the tightly cropped space because neither the wall nor the floor is differentiated in the scene’s perspective. Furthermore, Vuillard instills a sense of dislocation in The Cup of Coffee because Marie’s domestic setting is unrecognizable. A swarm of black atomic particles, reminiscent of the microbial organisms discussed later in the chapter, appear to vibrate around her form. Their abstract and irregular patterning defies any sense of conventional decorative wallpaper. With a
sinister shadow encroaching at the bottom right of the composition, Marie’s spectral figure seems suspended in an enigmatic and dangerous setting.

Vuillard’s painting of Marie Roussel exemplifies the sense of the “uncanny” that imbues many of the artist’s compositions from the early 1890s. First coined in 1906 by the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, the term “uncanny” derives from the German phrase, das unheimliche, which translates literally in English as “the opposite of what is familiar.”28 The expression signifies an inexplicable sensation of unease that one experiences in an otherwise familiar and comfortable environment. Sigmund Freud later developed the principle in his essay, The Uncanny (1919), by linking the condition’s feelings of anxiety to his psychoanalytic theories. While Vuillard painted his strange and unsettling compositions like The Cup of Coffee before the written elaboration of the uncanny, his interior spaces clearly exude what Anthony Vidler describes as “the perpetual exchange between the homely and the unhomely, the imperceptible sliding of coziness into dread.”29 Although the condition of the uncanny eludes succinct definition, instead relying on untranslatable descriptors like heimlich and unheimlich, the principle nevertheless attaches itself securely to the experience of space and the psychological ambiguities experienced in it. Vidler explains the relationship between space and the uncanny in his book, The Architectural Uncanny (1992), noting:

“Equally, space is assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobias that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imagination of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness. Indeed, space as threat, as harbinger often unseen, operates as medical and psychical metaphor for all the possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well being.”30

29 Ibid., 57.
30 Ibid., 167.
Whether lurking within patterned wallpaper or behind hanging tapestries, Vuillard’s paintings from the 1890s similarly evoke hidden terrors: the “harbinger often unseen” as the invisible microbe, and the “space as threat” as contagion’s menace in the domestic sphere.\(^{31}\)

Paintings like the oil-on-cardboard *Half-Open Door* from 1891 (Figure 63) and the oil-on-canvas *Mother and Sister of the Artist* from 1893 (Figure 55) are strikingly disturbing because Vuillard depicts a perilous relationship between the architecture, specifically the wall, and the inhabitant. The artist’s compression of figure and ground creates a physical and psychological discomfort because the three-dimensional space of the interior has been obliterated. Vuillard draws upon the Nabi interest in flattened perspective and decoration to fragment the distinction between the interior and exterior of the apartment in much the same manner as did contemporary discourse on contagion. Therefore, as I will demonstrate in the following discussion, Vuillard’s evocation of a claustrophobic domestic realm does not simply convey the cramped living spaces of the urban *maison à loyer*. Rather, his flattened interiors alter the relationship between home and inhabitant, and suggest the loss of privacy and sense of domestic safety in the face of public infection.

In the vibrantly colored *Half-Open Door*, measuring 27.5 by 22.5 centimeters, Marie stands obliquely with her back to the viewer and her head turned slightly over her right shoulder. Her slim figure appears to stand in the small opening of a doorway, evident in the sliver of brown shadow at the top of the composition and the orange vertical line of the doorframe.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 6. Vidler explains the uncanny in the context of the turn of the twentieth century when it was considered a condition of modern anxiety: “As a sensation it was no longer easily confined to the bourgeois interior or relegated to the imaginary haunts of the mysterious and dangerous classes; it was seemingly as disrespectful of class boundaries as epidemics and plagues. Perhaps this is why, from the 1870s on, the metropolitan uncanny was increasingly conflated with metropolitan illness, a pathological condition that potentially afflicted the inhabitants of all great cities...The uncanny here became identified with all the phobias associated with spatial fear, including “la peur des espaces” or agoraphobia, soon to be coupled with its obverse, claustrophobia.”
bisecting Marie’s form. Although the yellow, teal, and white brushstrokes of the wall’s pattering seem to recede slightly in space because of their denser arrangement above Marie’s head and shoulder, there is no suggestion of depth where the door opens and Marie stands. Instead, Vuillard paints Marie, the open door, and the wall within a single dimensional plane so that all sense of volumetric space is lost. Vuillard further emphasizes the constriction of space through the compact and irregular patterning of brushstrokes that form the floral wallpaper design. Besides the inclusion of a red and blue hassock in the lower left corner of the composition and Marie’s navy-blue and yellow dress, *Half-Open Door* is dominated by the wallpaper’s various tones of yellow paint strokes, an unusually vivid palette for the artist. The short comma-like shapes hide the right side of the doorframe where the door pivots inward, and encroach on the silhouette of Marie through their denser patterning at her sides. Marie’s very face becomes camouflaged in the frenetic design because the yellow tone of her skin closely matches that of the wall. Thus, body and building fuse in the composition as Marie’s figure is flattened within the doorframe. The boundary between the exterior and the interior disintegrates because there is no clear formation of a three-dimensional interior space. Whether Marie is in the process of entering or leaving the room, Vuillard collapses the designation between inside and outside, and renders the residential boundaries porous.

The spatial compression of *Half-Open Door* reflects the Nabi rejection of traditional Renaissance illusionism and their embrace of the flat surface of the canvas. In many of his paintings, Vuillard emphasized the materiality of the paint surface by both purposefully neglecting a sense of perspective, and leaving the cardboard canvas unpainted and visible in the final version. Maurice Denis famously expressed the Nabi interest in the two-dimensional when he claimed in an 1890 article in *Art et Critique* that, “A painting – before being a battle horse, or
a nude woman, or some anecdote – was essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order.”\(^{32}\) The Nabi, Jan Verkade further explained the inherent flatness of painting that could be emphasized through the use of decorative elements:

> Around the beginning of 1890, a war-cry went up from one studio to the other: No more easel painting!... Paintings must not usurp a freedom that isolates it from the other arts. The painter’s work begins where architecture considers its work finished. The wall must remain a surface, it must not be opened for the depiction of infinite horizons. There are no pictures, there are only decorations.\(^{33}\)

Therefore, Vuillard’s anti-illusionist paintings like *Half-Open Door* follow in the Nabi manner of valorizing decoration over three-dimensional perspective, an aesthetic the group shared with the contemporary Art Nouveau movement. As a *peintre-décorateur*, Vuillard, in particular, espoused the effects of decoration and capitalized on the presence of wallpaper and textiles in his mother’s dressmaking studio to reveal painting’s two-dimensional artifice. Vuillard wrote in his journal in 1894:

> Really for a *décoration* for an apartment a subject that’s objectively too precise could easily become unbearable. One would grow less quickly tired of a textile, of designs that don’t have too much literal precision.\(^{34}\)

Vuillard’s compression of space and emphasis on patterning thus align with the broader Nabi mission of restoring painting to its decorative purpose.\(^{35}\)

> With this Nabi aesthetic in mind, Vuillard’s *décoration* of wallpaper emphasized the breakdown of boundaries between public and private lives, a phenomenon that can be closely linked with turn-of-the-century hygiene campaigns. In Georgina Downey’s study of the representation of domestic life, she explains that:

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\(^{33}\) Quoted in Boyer, *The Nabis and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, 113.

\(^{34}\) Quoted in Groom, “Landscape as Decoration.,” 159.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
For the Decadents and Symbolists in fin-de-siècle Paris, doorways and corridors were made to function, in both art and literature, as portals to the ‘mysterious unknown.’ Around the same time (early 1890s) textures and textile-based wall coverings blurred boundaries between interior and exterior.36

Vuillard’s paintings of the home feature many of these types of wall coverings, whether wallpaper on walls, textiles draping doors, or tapestries freely hanging to separate work and domestic spaces in Madame Vuillard’s studio. For example, Half-Open Door (Figure 63) depicts the same yellow wallpaper adhered to both wall and door, Woman Darning (Figure 56) portrays three different swaths of wall coverings, and The Suitor (Figure 57) illustrates the door covered with a different floral pattern than the walls. Indeed, Vuillard’s oeuvre from the early 1890s recalls Walter Benjamin’s reference to Louise Weiss’ description of the nineteenth century as an “Age of Hangings.”37 Yet more than being en vogue during the height of the Art Nouveau movement, wallpaper and door curtains incited beliefs of dangerous camouflage and dishonest masking of the interior and exterior at the turn of the twentieth century. Scholar Ana Araujo examines the fin-de-siècle fear of “architectural cladding,” such as wallpaper, in her analysis of architect Adolf Loos’ publication, The Principle of Cladding (1898). She explains that although a home’s “dressing” unified the architectural space, Loos felt that using wall coverings signaled a disguise of something sinister.38 Thus, the architect argued for an ornament-free aesthetic39 in order to prevent confusion between the “core” of the building and a deceptive, mass-produced covering like wallpaper.

36 Georgina Downey, Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns, 2013, 4.
37 Benjamin and Tiedemann, The Arcades Project, 226. Benjamin includes the following quote from Louise Weiss’s Souvenirs d’une enfance républicaine (Paris 1937), in his compilation of notes: “Lodgings around 1860: ‘The apartment…was situated on the Rue d’Anjou. It was decorated…with carpets, door curtains, fringed valences, double draperies, so that you would think the Stone Age had been succeeded by an Age of Hangings.’”
39 Ibid., 13.
The fin-de-siècle belief that wall coverings were illusory, tricking the eye to what was real and artificial, and blurring notions of where the exterior ended and the interior began, suggests that Vuillard’s depiction of wallpaper denoted spatial fears of the home. Wallpaper’s breakdown of explicit domestic boundaries mirrors the popular opinion at the end of the nineteenth century that private life was deteriorating as public issues permeated the home. As the Goncourt brothers famously wrote in their journal in 1860, “The interior is going to die. Life threatens to become public.” Vuillard’s unsettling conflation of figure and wallpaper in paintings such as Half-Open Door (Figure 63) thus evokes a similar sense of claustrophobia and shrinking of private space. Although bourgeois women were often considered the embodiment of the home, even being viewed as extensions of the architectural space, Vuillard’s merging of the figure with the home was disturbing and not idyllic.

For example, in the oil-on-canvas painting from 1893, Mother and Sister of the Artist (Figure 55), Vuillard depicts Marie Roussel and Madame Vuillard in a narrow and confined parlor space. While Madame Vuillard holds solid ground in a commanding “akimbo” pose at the center of the composition, Marie appears to recoil and disappear into the florid wallpaper at the left. As her lower body and hands press into the wall in a gesture of balance, her torso hunches dynamically forward under what seems an invisible weight. Vuillard fuses Marie’s form to the frenetic patterning of the wallpaper and compresses her body downward with a tightly cropped upper border. The skewed perspective of the parlor, in which the ceiling seems to descend as the floorboards rise, renders the scene claustrophobic. In considering the artist’s personal encounter with infection in the home, his compression of space is reminiscent of the oppressive atmosphere

40 Sharon Marcus, Apartment Stories City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 139.
that contagion and its accompanying hygiene reforms cultivated in the home. By melding Marie with the wallpaper, a product believed to dissolve the distinction between interior and exterior, Vuillard further signals contagion’s ability to penetrate the private space of the home.

Lastly, Vuillard’s paintings from the early 1890s evoke the period’s interiorization in the face of public menaces like disease because of the figures’ strange and uncanny placement in the home. For example, in the oil-on-canvas painting from 1894, *The Window* (Figure 66), the artist’s sister Marie withdraws from a large window through which a flat plane of yellow color is visible. Although light rakes in through the window, casting shadows on both the floor and door to the right, the yellow light seems eerily unnatural. Marie recoils against a large wooden bureau in the left corner as if an imperceptible force surrounds and oppresses her. The viewer is unable to pinpoint the exact source of the scene’s horror, but it is clear that Marie flinches away from what lurks outside the window. Similarly, in the oil-on-canvas painting from 1892, *Madame Vuillard’s Dressmaking Studio* (Figure 67), Marie stands at the left of the composition and shrinks away from the space in front of a window. Her upper body leans slightly forwards as if she is slowly retreating backwards, and her right arm reaches behind as if to brace herself on the far wall. Her face is featureless, a tan profile view against a gray background, and her posture is deferential. Although Madame Vuillard stands formidably at the right side of the composition, it is the large window and its view of a latticed gate that proves sinister. In both *The Window* and *Madame Vuillard’s Dressmaking Studio*, Vuillard’s insertion of an strange exterior view – a yellow color field and high fence – renders the interior ominous. Each female figure appears imprisoned and alienated in her own domestic sphere as an external force lingers outdoors.

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42 I examine the formal qualities of the wallpaper in *Mother and Sister of the Artist* in the following pages by comparing its aesthetic to that of microscopic life.
In considering these uncanny scenes in the context of the earlier hygiene tracts, Marie’s withdrawn position calls to mind the fin-de-siècle duty to surveiller\(^43\) the pathogens of disease. Not only did the French government monitor the sanitary conditions of the home, but bourgeois women like Marie were enlisted to “safeguard the physical purity and isolation of the home.”\(^44\) Domestic manuals instructed women how to eradicate external toxins, from sweeping techniques to using natural sunlight for sterilization. Thus, the threat of infection at the end of the nineteenth century altered the experience of the bourgeois home as a haven because even its very walls could be lethal. Since women who were charged with safeguarding the home’s interior, contagion posed an especially disturbing threat for them during the period. Vuillard’s eerie depiction of Marie recoiling from the outside world in *The Window* and in *Madame Vuillard’s Dressmaking Studio* may be understood in the context of this new hostile relationship between home and housewife.

**A “Microbial” Aesthetic**

Vuillard’s domestic paintings from the early 1890s further intimate the disease of the domicile because their dense decorative motifs, verging on horror vacui, conjure the widespread fear that microbes were all-pervasive. First coined in 1878 by the surgeon Charles Sédillot, the term “microbe” emerged out of Louis Pasteur’s study of the germ theory of disease during the 1860s.\(^45\) With the aid of the oil-immersion microscope invented in 1880, dozens of bacteria, protozoa, and viruses were discovered and classified in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. From staphylococcus (1878) to typhoid (1880), tuberculosis (1882), and cholera (1883),

\(^{43}\) Aisenberg, *Contagion*, 126.

\(^{44}\) Marcus, *Apartment Stories City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*, 152.

the field of microbiology sought to solve the mystery of what Pasteur called, “the grandiose power of these infinitely small ones.” Despite an etymology literally signifying “petite vie,” the microbe created a larger-than-life threat to the domestic hearth. Vuillard’s depiction of the home not only evokes the grande peur of the home as a foyer of disease through its uncanny, claustrophobic rendering of space, but also through the actual “microbial” aesthetic of the wallpaper.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, a “microbiomania” escalated in Paris that captivated all social classes and created a collective public nightmare which united the city in fear. Caricatures in popular newspapers like Le Grelot (Figure 68) illustrated the cholera microbe as a monstrous arthropod overpowering men of science, and Symbolist artists like Alfred Kubin depicted the cholera pathogen as a massive slug decimating ant-sized humans in its slimy path (Figure 69). Yet despite this anthropomorphic imagery portraying the colossal power of germs, the microbe was feared more for its lethal invisibility. Germs could be anywhere: in the curtains’ dust mites, the feather bed’s human secretions, or even the mephitic air. While social reform targeted the insalubrity of workers’ housing in Paris, the contaminants of disease permeated all strata of living spaces. As historian Anne-Louise Shapiro cites the claim of a hygienist, “Show me your house and I will tell you which illnesses threaten you.” With the population of Paris increasing by almost fifty percent between 1861 and 1896, the potential sources of infection seemed to grow exponentially. The time lag between the discovery of a pathogenic agent and the subsequent development of its vaccination alarmed Parisians and fostered a sense of

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46 Aisenberg, Contagion, 77.
47 Etymology found on the Centre National de Resources Textuelles et Lexicales at: http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/microbe.
50 Ibid., 487.
hypochondria over *l’infiniment petit*\(^{51}\) that could potentially decimate an entire population. A 

hygiene textbook of the day describes the uncertainty and paranoia over contracting diphtheria:

> Touching one while sparing another, leaping easily from one house to another far away…as if [diphtheria] cared little about the law of contacts and rendering it impossible sometimes to seize the link existing between the different cases.\(^{52}\)

The scientific discovery of the pathogenic organism, combined with continuing superstitious 
beliefs of the miasmatic theory of contagion,\(^{53}\) altered human experience at the fin de siècle and 
imbued the home with a newfound sense of danger.

The use of the term *foyer*, a French noun that signifies household or home, to designate 
the site of disease appeared as early as 1832 in public health discourse. A *foyer d’infection* 
indicated the clusters of disease outbreaks in a specific geographic location, and during the 
nineteenth century, also came to signify the domestic site as an incubator of disease. Aisenberg 
explains the term *foyer* in his study on contagion:

> Whereas [foyer] originally served to express the inexplicable presence in urban life of permanent and concentrated pockets of disease surrounded by sporadic cases, the foyer now explained how the home caused disease transmission in a way that brought together the contested categories of infection and contagion.\(^{54}\)

The conflation of the domestic and pathogenic sites in the term *foyer* reveals the fin-de-siècle 
belief that the private interior was a polluted environment and source of disease. No longer was

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\(^{51}\) Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature*, 88. *L’infiniment petit* was a contemporary term used to describe any organic or inorganic matter too small to be seen plainly (germs, microbes, cells, primordial forms).

\(^{52}\) Aisenberg, *Contagion*, 78.

\(^{53}\) The miasma theory dominated the first half of the nineteenth century and rested on the belief that polluted air, which was filled with decomposed matter, caused disease. Thus, early hygiene movements focused on the deodorization of mephitic smells. While the microbe was sometimes referred to as the “microbian miasma,” by 1880 the myth of miasma was largely outdated. The *pasturien* hygienist Paul Brouardel (1837-1906) explained the new scientific thought: “We can repeat that everything that stinks does not kill, and everything that kills does not stink.” Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 223-24.

\(^{54}\) Aisenberg, *Contagion*, 125.
the bourgeois apartment a “sheltering retreat from the shock and dissonance of urban life,” but a space that concealed and even cultivated public disease.

Living in an apartment house in the center of Paris, Vuillard would have undoubtedly been aware of the public hygiene movement that focused on the urban residence. Not only did the artist explicitly paint le mal, or suffering, of his mother, grandmother, sister, and great aunt during the 1890s, but he was also part of an avant-garde social group that grappled with disconcerting modern issues like disease in the journal, La Revue Blanche. For example, Paul Veber, an author and friend of Vuillard from the Lycée Condorcet, published a short story in La Revue Blanche that clearly evokes the anxiety over microbes’ ubiquity during the cholera outbreaks in Paris. In the article “Choléra” from 1890, Veber wrote about bacteria: “What foolishness! They are trying to stop the invisible, rein in the intangible. It is everywhere in the water we drink, the air we breathe. I know that it is coming.” Vuillard’s close friendship with Odilon Redon, whose series of lithograph “noirs” treat organismal-like forms (Figures 70, 71), also places the artist in contact with ideas and imagery of le monde invisible. Vuillard’s treatment of patterning, whether the floral design of wallpaper or the play of light through a window, transcends decoration and approaches the organic. His dense and irregular brushstrokes seem to swarm the surface of the canvas, disrupting the otherwise quiet and static scenes with a frenetic anxiety. Vuillard’s decorative aesthetic was not simply an interpretation of Art Nouveau’s interest in the vital natural world, in which women transform into “fleur-femmes,” but a study of the natural world that menaces and ultimately decimates. Vuillard adopts the aggressive

55 Downey, Domestic Interiors, 84.
56 Groom, Edouard Vuillard, 5.
57 Quoted in Barbara Larson, “Microbes and Maladies: Bacteriology and Health at the Fin de Siècle,” 388.
imagery of contemporary domestic hygiene manuals, and employs a “microbial” aesthetic to convey the fear of contagion.

As Susan Sidlauskas explains in her study of *Mother and Sister of the Artist* (Figure 55), “‘Wallpaper’ hardly seems an adequate label for the painted surface that animates the interval between mother and daughter”\(^59\) in the oil-on-canvas painting from 1893. Indeed, the artist’s brushstrokes exude a vibrancy and energy that suggest the floral design’s propagation and ultimate consumption of Marie’s slight form. Although the application of off-white, green, brown, and sienna pigments is dense and uniform in the far left corner of the composition, their treatment turns sketchy and haphazard the closer they are Marie. The opaque dark tones and the translucent light tones of the paint increasingly overlap and reveal many erratic layers of pigment. Especially along the left border of the composition, the strokes of paint become larger and looser, no longer resembling the tight atomic particles of the patterning surrounding the mahogany bureau along the back wall. Further, Vuillard does not limit the daubs of paint to the surface of the wallpaper, but blurs the contour lines of Marie’s figure so that the pigments of her dress mesh with those of the wallpaper. In particular, the white brushstrokes of her dress’ geometric patterning blurs with the off-white strokes of the florid design, creating the impression that the flora are actually overtaking her feeble body. In juxtaposition with the static postures of Marie and Madame Vuillard, as well as the still air between them, the dense and chaotic patterning of the wallpaper seems to vibrate with life. With its two-dimensionality and rich textural quality, the painted wallpaper suggests Vuillard’s interest in tapestries he examined at the Musée National du Moyen Âge (formerly, Musée de Cluny) in Paris. He recorded his reactions to the textiles in a journal entry from 1894:

Visited Cluny yesterday. Tapestries and missal illuminations. Calendars. Contemplating the tapestries, I think that by enlarging it, pure and simple, my little panel can be the subject of a decoration. The humble subjects of these decorations at Cluny! Expressions of an intimate feeling on a bigger surface, that’s all! The same thing as a Chardin, for example…A little morsel, very old, in flat, coarse tints, the very powerful charm of color, glaring colors on a light ground. All this makes me think of some of my large paintings [mes machines].

Yet unlike the ornamentation of a medieval tapestry such as La dame à la licorne: À mon seul désir (Figure 72), the decoration in Vuillard’s paintings aggressively overtakes the main narrative. Their floral patterning does not remain in designated space cells as in the tapestry, but exceeds the boundaries of its planar surface and encroaches on Marie’s figure.

Both the organic aesthetic of the floral wallpaper and the disturbing interaction between figure and architecture suggest the menace of the microbe and of disease in the fin-de-siècle domestic sphere. In fact, Vuillard’s treatment of vibrant floral motifs in paintings like Mother and Sister of the Artist (Figure 55), The Suitor (Figure 65), and The Green Interior (Figure 73), evoke a “microbial” aesthetic that may draw on the first illustrations of microbes at the end of the nineteenth century. Daily newspapers capitalized on the public interest in contagion and published grotesque depictions of fictionalized bacteria to both scare and captivate its readers. For example, an illustration in L’astronomie populaire from 1879 depicts a sea of fantastic, biomorphic organisms floating in a petri dish (Figure 74). The caption warns, “Here is what we are drinking in a drop of water.” In the same journal, two side-by-side illustrations (Figure 75) depicting crustaceous creatures are also followed with the cautionary notice, “This is what we are breathing; microscopic animal and vegetal matter floating in the air.” Although these portrayals of the monde invisible are clearly imaginary and even cartoonish, their dense composition and abstract forms recall the horror vacui of Vuillard’s wallpaper. In both the

60 Groom, Edouard Vuillard, 58. Elizabeth, Morowitz, Laura Emery, Consuming the Past; the Medieval Revival in Fin-de-Siècle France (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 136.
newspaper illustrations and Vuillard’s paintings, a mélange of dynamic and varied microscopic material melds together to form a chaotic pattern on a two-dimensional surface. The floral motifs of the wallpaper, door covering, and textiles in a painting like *The Suitor* (Figure 65), recall the disorder of abstract shapes in the petri dish from Figure 69.

In addition to the sensationalized images of germs in the popular press, the first scientific photographs of microbes, a “photographie scientifique,” appeared in publication during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Although photography was used in the scientific disciplines as early as 1840, it was only after 1878 that photographic illustrations were included in books, dissertations, and newspapers. Caroline Fieschi explains that following the reform of Paris universities, the publication of doctorates increased in importance and encouraged the use of photographs to provide positive evidence. From improvements in the gelatin-bromide process to Étienne-Jules Marey’s invention of chronophotography, photographic illustrations of the scientific process allowed for great advancement in research, as well as:

Un remède aux accusations portées contre les savants français de faire entrer l’imagination dans leurs résultats: les savants français n’ont qu’à présenter les photographies des préparations qui leur ont permis leurs découvertes.

Scientific illustration was not simply a great didactic tool, but it was also a means for scientific discoveries to leave the laboratory and enter the public sphere. In particular, the practice of “photomicrographie” in the microbiological field offered the ability to “rendre visible l’invisible.” Images like Figure 76 from 1890, which illustrates pneumonia microbes in saliva, finally provided a visualization of a world that had long remained mysterious and incomprehensible.

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63 Ibid., 225. Fieschi draws on Jean-Baptiste Carpentier’s 1884 study on photography in the sciences in this section.
64 Ibid., 233, 238.
Yet despite the presence of scientific illustrations that demystified the image of the microbe, the depiction of infectious agents magnified fears about the now tangible pathogen that invaded the domestic *foyer*. The metaphor of the microbe became dangerous and aggressive, a connotation Vuillard adopts in his own “microbial” aesthetic. Historian Ruth Harris examines this hostile rhetoric of the pathogen in her study on *fin-de-siècle* criminality, citing the following hygiene literature that invokes militaristic speech in its discussion of controlling contagion:

> If one could know the microbe behind each illness…its favorite places, habits, its method of advance, it would be possible, with a *bonne police médicale*, to catch it just at the right moment, stop its progress and prevent its homicidal attack.65

The microbe was no longer simply a biological threat demanding scientific attention, but an illicit danger requiring swift police action. The prominent physicist John Tyndall further appealed to the belief of microbial aggression in 1877:

> Consider all the ills these floating particles have inflicted on mankind, in historic and prehistoric times…this destructive action is continuing today and continued for centuries, without the slightest suspicion as to its causes being permitted to the sick world. We have been both struck by the invisible scourges, we have fallen into ambushes and it is only today that the light of science is reaching those terrible oppressors.66

Thus despite their microscopic size, pathogens became cunning “oppressors” capable of both “ambush” and “destructive action.” Even the presence of the smallest bit of spittle transformed into a “hideous homicidal *crachat,*” eliciting cries of “*Le crachat, voilà l’ennemi!*” because according to bystanders, “Each crachat, is, alas! a veritable army of billions of vigorous microbes, that [one] sends to attack the health of [one’s] wife, children, friends, and neighbors.”67

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66 Quoted Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature*, 86.
Although the press encouraged the hyperbole of the microbe, the fear of contagion and its inescapable reach was a very real experience which Vuillard may have drawn upon in his domestic paintings. The artist’s loose and irregular brushstrokes in wallpaper patterning not only create the impression of breeding life, but of breeding microbial life. The circular and comma-shaped daubs of paint closely imitate those organic shapes of cholera bacilli or tuberculosis bacteria illustrated in contemporary science journals. Figures 77, 78, and 79 highlight formal comparisons between the structures of germs seen under a microscope and the application of pigment in Vuillard’s decorative patterning. These visual comparisons demonstrate the similar organic aesthetic of Vuillard’s wallpaper in Half-Open Door (Figure 77A), The Green Interior (Figure 77B), The Suitor (Figure 78C), and Mother and Sister of the Artist (Figure 79A) as in a diverse set of illustrations of microorganisms. Whether a rod-shaped bacillus and a lozenge-shaped brushstroke, or an annular colony of microbes and a florid motif, Vuillard’s dense decoration resonates with the aesthetic of le monde invisible. This thesis does not argue that Vuillard explicitly represented the microscopic forms of microbes, but that the artist imbued his wallpaper patterning with similar organic motifs. As one of the period’s great spectacles, microbial imagery was pervasive at the turn of the twentieth century and would have been easily visible to an artist like Vuillard.

Furthermore, Vuillard’s treatment of wallpaper evokes the aggressive, militaristic personification of microbes in fin-de-siècle literature because his floral designs appear to violently engulf his passive, female subjects. For example, in Mother and Sister of the Artist (Figure 55), Marie’s thin figure recedes into the animated patterning of the wallpaper as the thick layers of loose brushwork eclipse her silhouette. Her pale hands spread out on the wall behind her as if pushing against a backward force, and her upper body hunches forward and away from
the wall. The relationship between Marie and her surrounding décor is hostile and disconcerting, giving the viewer the impression that the floral wallpaper is both alive and breeding. Vuillard’s blending of pigments from her dress and the wall cause Marie’s form to lose its three-dimensional presence and become absorbed – or consumed – by the patterning of the wall. Just as the lethal pathogen “oppresses” its helpless victim, the microbial aesthetic of Vuillard’s interiors seems to menace its inhabitants. Whether the swarming of yellow and green pigments outside the window pane in *The Green Interior* (Figure 73), the horror vacui of space in *Half-Open Door* (Figure 63), or the sea of floating particles in *The Cup of Coffee* (Figure 62), the atmosphere in Vuillard’s domestic paintings vibrates with the tension of microscopic life.

In addition, the wallpaper in Vuillard’s paintings may have suggested a polluted environment to its fin-de-siècle audience because contemporary reform movements asserted that papered and textiled interior decoration was actually pathogenic. Domestic hygiene pamphlets advised housewives to deodorize the “mephitism of walls,” a location “where the air has difficulty circulating.”\(^{68}\) The identification and regulation of airflow became a “science of scents”\(^{69}\) that required constant vigilance against miasmas adhering to surfaces like wallpaper. Moreover, scientists at the turn of the twentieth century discovered that wallpaper posed a real, poisonous threat to the domestic space through its arsenic pigments. Peter Betjemann discusses the “cultural anxieties involving the relations of ornamental lexicons and human bodies” in his analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” an 1892 American short story whose description of organic wallpaper is eerily similar to that of Vuillard’s pictorial depiction. Betjemann not only cites the fin-de-siècle belief that the Arts and Crafts Movement was

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\(^{68}\) Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 165.  
\(^{69}\) Ibid., 169.
“healthful” because of its absence of ornamentation and consequent dust, but he also points to a medical debate starting in the 1870s over the pathogens present in wallpaper, explaining:70

Anti-wallpaper tracts in periodicals and books stressed a number of threats: wheat-based glues as a source of mold; heavy textures, and particularly flock, as traps for dust and dirt; and arsenic pigments, used in yellow and green designs, as vectors for heavy metal poisoning.71

Most famously, the American health inspector R. C. Kedzie published a scientific study titled Shadows from the Walls of Death (1872), which argued that certain styles and pigments contained more arsenic contamination than others.72 Interestingly, the pigments yellow and “Paris Green,” which have similar tonal values to those in The Green Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist, and Half-Open Door, were believed to be the most poisonous colors in the “walls of death.”73 Kedzie’s book ironically contained a binding of actual arsenic wallpapers to demonstrate the identification of polluted wallpaper, as well as detailed instructions on how to chemically test one’s own décor. While Betjemann does not claim that arsenic was the cause of the narrator’s madness in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” he argues that its pathogens are the context for the story’s “fungus” and “unclean yellow” wallpaper motifs.74 Similarly, Ana Araujo discusses the aesthetic threat posed by wallpaper, citing Oscar Wilde’s dying words, “My wallpaper is killing me…One or the other of us will have to go,” as well as Octave Mirabeau’s attribution of his poor temperament to the “burnt gravy” color of his “ghastly” wallpaper.75

Therefore, wallpaper during the fin de siècle was not only perceived as infectious with its retention of dust, grime, and microbes, but it was scientifically proven to be toxic with arsenic.

71 Ibid., 397.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 398.
Like contemporary literature that elicited anxiety over wallpaper, Vuillard’s “microbial” patternning may be seen as a visualization of this pervasive *infiniment petit*. Not only did the artist convey the sense of claustrophobia that contagion incited in the home, but he also evoked the fin de siècle’s horror at these invisible pathogens. Although Vuillard’s decorative wallpaper is not a direct representation of bacteria, it certainly conjures the teeming, organic nature of microbial life that played out in the Paris imagination.

This chapter’s interpretation of Vuillard’s “uncanny” paintings in the context of fin-de-siècle contagion offers an alternative to the conventional biographical reading of his oeuvre. Although the heavy tension that pervades his scenes is often attributed to his mother and sister’s contentious relationship, the Nabi eschewed direct narrative for what critic and artist Albert Aurier called, the “painting of ideas.” Unlike the Realist and Naturalist movements of the nineteenth century, the Nabis and Symbolists advocated a more expressive mode of art that did not paint an objective image of reality. As Katherine Kuenzli explains, “The goal of painting, as the Nabis conceived it, was not to record natural appearances, but to pierce beyond these surfaces into a realm of invisible essences.”76 The Nabis deemphasized subject matter, and instead employed line, color, shadow, and light to convey subjective experience. The Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé explained the difference between depicting a subject and evoking the subject’s effect in 1891, “To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment…to suggest it, there is the dream.”77 Therefore, the interpretation of Vuillard’s oeuvre strictly in the context of his family drama neglects consideration of the aesthetic mission of the Nabi.

Vuillard’s repetition of ordinary subjects – a seamstress sewing, Madame Vuillard washing

76 Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism*, 82.
dishes, Marie airing out the apartment – are not as much focused on the narrative, as on the évocation of an experience. As this chapter has demonstrated, Vuillard conveyed the claustrophobic and infectious atmosphere of the interior at the turn of the twentieth century. Through a flat perspective that melds the figure and ground, as well through dense decorative patterning, Vuillard evoked the disturbing and subjective experience of the home at the fin de siècle. Just as Kuenzli described the Nabi goal as reaching “a realm of invisible essences,” Vuillard conjured a subjective anxiety of microbial life that disturbed the relationship between home and inhabitant. By drawing on contemporary studies of hysteria, Chapter Three will examine an additional way in which Vuillard imbedded the pathological experience in his paintings during the early 1890s.
CHAPTER THREE
The Déformation of the Hysterical Body

The Age of Diagnosis

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented production of images and optical devices that transformed visual culture and the act of both “seeing” and being “seen.” French writer Jean-Louis Comolli’s characterization of the period as a “frenzy of the visible”\(^1\) resonates not only with the ubiquity of visual stimuli, but also with the intense and overwhelming experience of the visual world at the turn of the century. From advancements in photography and the printing press that disseminated images quickly, to technologies that provided new perspectives, like the stereoscope, microscope, and prism binocular, the visual presentation of images at the fin de siècle was pervasive. Fashionable accessories like the veil and the fan were designed to facilitate both discrete voyeurism and protection from the gaze,\(^2\) while quintessential modern establishments like cafés, cabarets, and department stores encouraged the regard of the flâneur or badaud. Heightened visuality was the crux of modernity in Paris and, ultimately, the backdrop that allowed both artists like Édouard Vuillard and non-artists\(^3\) like Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot to converge in their similar interest in the pathological body.

In this chapter, I will study Vuillard’s engagement with fin-de-siècle medical discourses by examining his treatment of the female form in relation to contemporary neurological studies conducted by Charcot at the Hopîtal de la Salpêtrière in Paris. I will first contextualize Vuillard

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2 Ibid.
3 I use the term non-artist to signify Charcot’s situation in the medical field, outside of the avant-garde art world. As discussed later, he indeed considered himself an artistic persona and incorporated visual practices into his clinical work.
within the medicalized visual culture of the late nineteenth century, and its increasing representation and understanding of the human body in terms of physical health. With the professionalization of the medical field concurrent to widespread fears of physical and moral degeneration, the practice of visually diagnosing the pathological “other” was not limited to the clinical field, but seeped into daily life and consciousness. Charcot’s neurological research at the Salpêtrière established a clear visual vocabulary of hysteria’s pathology, which allowed artists like Vuillard to easily translate the disease’s visual stigmata, or symptoms, into their own avant-garde imagery. Public demonstrations of hysterical patients by Charcot during his leçons du mardi as well as widely disseminated periodicals like The New Iconography of the Salpêtrière (1888) ensured that hysteria became the maladie du siècle that inspired avant-garde artists. By examining Charcot’s visual depictions of hysterical bodies, I will demonstrate how Vuillard similarly engaged a pathological déformation in his treatment of the female form during the 1890s. In particular, I will consider Vuillard’s personal relationship to hysteria through his sister and his fellow artist Odilon Redon, as well as his shared interest with Charcot in theatrical spectacle. Ultimately, I hope to elaborate on Susan Sidlauskas’ study of the “autistic” gesture in Vuillard’s oeuvre in order to demonstrate the hysterical pathology present in paintings such as the 1891 oil-on-cardboard Marie in a Camisole at her Dressing Table and the 1893 oil-on-cardboard Interior with Seated Figure.

At the end of the nineteenth century, and particularly during the 1890s, the human body was central to many of the public debates in the scientific and anticlerical French Republic. Most pressing was the widespread concern that the French race was deteriorating physically, no

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longer superior to powerful neighbors like Germany who defeated the French in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. The zeitgeist of the turn of the twentieth century, degeneration was attributed to almost any political, medical, and social ill because its broad theory of physical, intellectual, and moral deterioration could easily encompass anything “other.” From the decline in the national birth rate to rampant prostitution and the spread of tuberculosis, degeneration was, according to French psychiatrist Bénédict Morel (1809-1873), “a morbid deviation from a normal type of humanity.” At a time when visuality was central to fin-de-siècle culture, this aberrancy was also thought to be manifested visually. Although Morel’s vision of degeneration verged on the grotesque, claiming plague-like contamination and symptoms ranging from webbed feet to cleft lips, its diagnoses were founded in the visible realm and influenced such followers as Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau in their own cultural analyses.

While working at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière in the mid-nineteenth century, Morel developed a theory of degeneration that established a precedent for visually documenting abject stigmata, a practice that would directly inspire Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot at the same asylum decades later. Morel commissioned thirty-five photographs of physically and mentally disabled patients in order to record how degeneracy manifested itself in the body. The prospect of a fin de race incited physicians, anthropologists, and even politicians to scientifically map and classify the physical body for clues to a universal “stigmata of degeneracy.” Drawing on diverse traditions of medical documentation, from the ancient Greek representation of the four humors to

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7 Although the marks of deviancy could be invisible and untraceable, thus making it all the more terrifying, the central discourse surrounding degeneration was based on identifiable, visual stigmata. Fae Brauer, “The Stigmata of Abjection,” 169.
8 Ibid., 171. Charcot included Morel’s photographs in his publication, Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière (1888).
9 Ibid., 171. Charcot included Morel’s photographs in his publication, Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière (1888).
the eighteenth-century physiognomies of the mentally ill\textsuperscript{11} and early nineteenth-century books of *physionomie* personality portraits.\textsuperscript{12} Morel’s photographs demonstrate a transition from lithography to photography in visualizing madness.\textsuperscript{13} Publications depicting the external manifestations of internal conditions were not uncommon, even the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* held *Concours de la tête d’expressions* to represent the physical expression of emotions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{14} Yet, at the *fin de siècle*, fears of degeneration played out in a new light of positivism, which inspired a more precise rendering of the pathological body.

Revived at the beginning of the nineteenth century by philosopher Auguste Comte, positivist thought embraced empirical and scientific knowledge to support inquiry. Accordingly, the practice of medicine shifted from subjective patient narratives to physical diagnoses founded on identifying pathological anatomy. As Jens Lachmund explains in his study of nineteenth-century Parisian hospital-medicine, “Disease was held to be a local anatomical lesion inside the body and had to be classified according to the visible alterations.”\textsuperscript{15} The objective and visual diagnosis by physicians created a taxonomical model for Parisians to consider the human body and its abnormalities. During the same period as Charles Darwin’s theories of evolutionary biology, Parisians regarded the body with a clinical gaze that differentiated between a healthy,\textsuperscript{11} During the eighteenth-century, Johann Lavater used physiognomies to study the insane. Not only could they reveal madness through physical features, but they were also believed to reveal social phenomena like character, class, and occupation. Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 24. Jane Kromm, “The Flâneur/Flâneuse Phenomenon” in Kromm and Bakewell, *A History of Visual Culture*, 27 .\textsuperscript{12} Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.\textsuperscript{13} Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 42.\textsuperscript{14} Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, 5. The *Concours de la tête d’expression* began during the eighteenth century as an academic exercise to improve naturalistic representation. Despite the transition from the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* to the *Académie des beaux-arts* in 1816, the competition continued throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} Jens Lachmund, “Between Scrutiny and Treatment: Physical Diagnosis and the Restructuring of 19th Century Medical Practice,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 20, no. 6 (1998): 781.
hygienic physique and a morbid, abject form. *Fin-de-siècle* visual culture was saturated with these corporeal and diagnostic images, from criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s anthropometric photographs of felons’ skull size and facial symmetry (Figure 80) to the visible signifiers of criminal madness (Figure 81). Max Nordau’s seminal text on degeneration, *Dégénérescence* (1894), which was dedicated to Lombroso, even organized its chapters according to visual diagnosis, starting with “The symptoms” and moving on to “Diagnosis” and “Etiology.”

Thus, visual representation provided the framework to both understand and treat degeneration at the end of the nineteenth century, fostering the sense of an age of diagnosis. Not only was the individual Parisian susceptible to disease, but art historian Richard Thomson asserts that France, too, was envisioned as “a giant abstract body, a conceptualized ‘patient.’”

Thomson characterizes the period pastime as one of diagnosis, and proposes that at the end of the nineteenth century, a new medicalized manner of seeing developed. Édouard Vuillard’s situation in Paris from the time of his birth in 1868, as well as his involvement in the visual culture, suggest that the artist would have been particularly sensitive to this new visual vocabulary of the pathological body. Despite Vuillard’s preference for abstraction, this chapter will illuminate how Vuillard’s own treatment of physical form and posture aligns with Charcot’s clinical gaze and representation of pathological hysteria.

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16 Dégénérescence was originally published in German in 1892, and later translated into French in 1894.
19 Ibid., 72.
The Visual Practice of the Salpêtrière

Nicknamed both the “Napoleon of the Neuroses” and the “Caesar of the Salpêtrière,” Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot was the founder of modern neurology and a formidable figure in Paris society during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Born in 1825, Charcot revived interest in the ancient disorder of hysteria and as the médecin en chef, oversaw the largest psychiatric institution in Europe, the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière, colloquially termed “l’Hôpital Charcot” during the period. Described by a student as “the most celebrated doctor of his time…[who] ruled supreme over the whole faculty of medicine,” Charcot ushered in a “golden age” of hysteria in the 1880s and 1890s during which up to ten new hysterical patients were admitted each day. French writer Jules de Claretie described the omnipresence of the disease in Paris in 1881:

The illness of our age is hysteria. One encounters it everywhere. Everywhere one rubs elbows with it…Studying hysteria, Monsieur Lassegue, the illustrious master, and Monsieur Charcot have put their finger on the wound of the day. It is not only enclosed within the gray walls of the Salpêtrière; this singular neurosis with its stupefying effects, it travels the streets and the world.

In a sense, Paris experienced a hysteria of hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century in which this specially “Parisian disease” incited writers like Claretie to exclaim, “Hysterics, hysterics! All hysterics!” and psychiatrist Paul-Max Simon to write in 1881, “It is certain that today, primarily

21 Louis XIV founded the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière in the mid-seventeenth century in an old gunpowder factory (salpêtre, an ingredient of gunpowder) with the name, Hospice de la Salpêtrière. It is located on the left bank of the Seine in the thirteenth arrondissement, and currently operates as a hospital under the name, Hôpital Pitié-Salpêtrière.
23 Ibid. Martha Noel Evans also notes that between 1841 and 1881, the percent of hysteria patients at the Salpêtrière went from 1% to 20%, in *Fits and Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 9.
in the cities, hysteria is the illness in vogue. It is everywhere….”25 Less than three miles away from Vuillard’s apartment on the rue Saint-Honoré, Charcot fostered an environment of endemic malady that, as Claretie noted, seeped into the larger cityscape of Paris.

Today, historians of hysteria often refer to the disorder as a “wastebasket diagnosis” because its symptoms cover such a breadth of unrelated ailments.26 Although the disease is no longer clinically diagnosed and is instead associated with conditions such as anxiety and histrionic personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the illness is ancient in origin. The earliest medical record, which cited a “roaming uterus,” dates to 1900 BCE in the Egyptian Kahun Papayrus, and the Greek philosopher Hippocrates first applied the term “hysteria” to the disorder in the fifth century BCE.27 Physicians believed that the uterus, hystera in Greek, roamed throughout the body and occupied any location, from the foot to the throat. By the nineteenth century, hysteria had transitioned from a gynecological to a neurological disorder, although the discourse surrounding the malady remained predominantly focused on the female gender.28 A further distinction arose during the nineteenth century between the term hysteria and its American counterpart, neurasthenia. In this chapter, I use “hysteria” to discuss Charcot’s neurological practice and Vuillard’s response to its imagery, yet at their root, “hysteria” and “neurasthenia” are nearly interchangeable. The American neurologist George Beard popularized the term “neurasthenia” in 1869 to denote a nervous condition affecting upper-class women in New England. Although “hysteria” was originally perceived as a

25 Quoted in Rae Beth Gordon, “From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema” in The Mind of Modernism, 93.
working-class disorder specific to poor women, the term became more widespread by the late nineteenth century and paralleled “neurasthenia.” Both terms were used in fin-de-siècle Paris, yet because Charcot’s practice employed the term “hysteria,” I use his terminology.

The symptoms of hysteria ranged from nervousness, exhaustion, and insomnia to depression, tender gums, and excessive yawning. George Beard’s catalogue of hysterical ailments occupied seventy-five pages in A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (1880), and described symptoms as diverse as indigestion and dry skin. Although physicians claimed hysteria was inherited or caused by a source of trauma, they focused their attention on the physical diagnosis and treatment of the disorder, rather than its prevention. In the positivist spirit of the late nineteenth century, Charcot developed a nosological system for classifying the visible signifiers, or “stigmata,” of hysteria. Like the new fields of evolutionary biology and microbiology, Charcot sought to ground the disease in science through objective rules and classification. Paris physician Pierre Bracquet explains, “Hysteria is governed, in the same way as other morbid conditions, by rule and laws, which attentive and sufficiently numerous observations always permit us to establish.”

Thus, the Salpêtrière practice developed taxonomies of the visible stigmata and stages of hysterical attacks. Photographic plates like “The Approaching Attack” and “Onset of the Attack” (Figure 82) in the Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière (1881) not only demonstrate the cataleptic posture of a hysterical patient, but also the actual transition from an aura hysterica to a grande attaque. Diagnostic charts like the twelve-column table published in Etudes cliniques in 1881 (Figure 83) objectively break down

30 Charcot and the fin-de-siècle medical community used the word “stigmata” to describe the visual symptoms of hysteria. The term originates in the witch-hunting manuals of the Inquisition and its phrase, stigmata diabolic, to indicate the visual markers of witchcraft. Sander Gilman, “The Image of the Hysteric” in Hysteria beyond Freud, 352.
31 Quoted in ibid., 258.
an attack into phases through thumbnail caricatures: *période épileptoïde, période de clownisme, période des attitudes passionnelles, and période de délire*. Further taxonomic classifications clarified the different visible indicators of *petite hystérie, hystérie ordinaire, and grande hystérie*.

Through this positivist study of hysteria, Charcot used visual observation and documentation to prove the disease’s “scientificity.” By demonstrating that the visible physiognomic signs of hysteria were easily classifiable and recognizable, Charcot was able to dispel skeptics’ claims that hysteria was fictitious and demonstrate his belief that, “Hystera always existed, in all places and in all times.”32 Charcot turned to historical representations of madness to further assert hysteria’s universality “for all countries, all times, and all races” in such books as *Les démoniaques dans l’art* (1887)33 and *Les difformes et les malades dans l’art* (1889).34 In these publications, Charcot approached paintings like a physician, diagnosing its depicted pathology in order to prove that his nosological practices were rooted in a broader, historical iconography. Thus, the visual arts were integral to Charcot’s research, not only in depicting diagnostic criteria, but also in establishing the validity of Charcot’s practice as a whole. Just as scientists like Louis Pasteur used the microscope to prove the presence of invisible microbes and bacteria, Charcot used photography to document clinical hysteria, as well as historical painting, to attest to hysteria’s storied history. As historian Sander Gilman explains, “It is immediately evident that the new field of psychiatry needed to create a visual epistemology for itself parallel to that existing for the other medical sciences in the age of microscopy,

32 Ibid., 231. Original quote, “L’hystérie a toujours existé, en tous lieux et en tous temps.”
bacteriology, and radiology – all new sciences dominated by the visual image. See it and it is real.”

Yet more so than other medical disciplines during the *fin de siècle*, Charcot’s practice privileged the role of images to such an extent that hysteria became an “object of scientific investigation and aesthetic contemplation.” Charcot considered himself an artist and photographer, and at the age of eighteen, even considered a career as a painter over one as a physician. With a wife and daughter who were artists as well, Charcot’s aesthetic inclination carried over into his clinical practice. Sigmund Freud, a student of Charcot’s during the 1880s, eulogized his mentor in 1893 by stressing this visual spirit: “He was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist – he was, as he himself said, a *visuel*, a man who sees.”

Thus, with what his students called a “piercing, prying gaze,” Charcot envisioned the Salpêtrière as a “living pathological museum” that displayed hysterical bodies as works of art. The hospital not only housed a full photographic service with dark rooms and studios (Figure 84), but also a plaster cast workshop for the construction of teaching models that depicted neurological disorders (Figure 85).

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37 Madame Charcot showed her work at the Exhibition of the Arts of Woman in 1892. Elaine Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender” in *Hysteria beyond Freud*, 310.
39 Student and biographer Georges Guillain quoted in Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism and Gender” in *Hysteria beyond Freud*, 309.
40 Charcot wrote, “The great asylum, as you are all surely aware, contains a population of over 5,000 people, including a great number called incurables who are admitted for life…In other words, we are in possession of a kind of *living pathological museum*, the resources of which are considerable.” Quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman and J. M Charcot, *Invention of hysteria: Charcot and the photographic iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 281.
41 Fae Brauer, “The Stigmata of Abjection,” in *A History of Visual Culture*, 173. French photographer Albert Londe was the director of the photography service and the first professional photographer to be hired fulltime by a European hospital.
Whether through pen-and-ink charts, photographs, or wax models, Charcot constructed an archetype of hysteria that allowed non-physicians like Edouard Vuillard to easily identify and understand the marks of the disorder. In particular, Charcot’s use of the art historical term, “iconography,” in his most famous publications, *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (1878) and *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (1889), signals the physician’s construction of a schematic visual vocabulary that reduced complex neurological disorders to simple signifiers. Just as an art historian may identify a saint through his particular stigmata, the neurologist diagnoses the hysterical body through reductive marks like gait, posture, or asymmetry. For example, the plate “Hystéro-Epilepsie” (Figure 86) in the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, identifies the pathological state through the stigmata of a blank stare, rigid body position, and clenched hands. The juxtaposition of the photograph with the large block lettering in the caption, “Hystéro-Epilepsie,” transforms the patient into an icon. Without any further text or explanation of the condition, the patient’s vacant expression and deflated posture become equated with a diagnosis. The repetition of this iconography with slight variations in such plates as “Blépharospasme Hystérique” (Figure 87) or “Onset of the Attack” (Figure 82), establishes a clear system of pathological imagery. Although Charcot staged the patients and manipulated the mise-en-scène according to aesthetic conventions, the photographs were published with the goal of complete verisimilitude.42 The neurologist’s famous exclamation in 1881, “Voilà la vérité!” while looking at his photographs, reveals his belief in the Salpêtrière photographer Albert Londe’s assertion, “the photographic plate is the scientist’s true retina.”43

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43 Quoted in Didi-Huberman and Charcot, *Invention of Hysteria*, 32.
Vuillard and the Pathological Body

At the turn of the twentieth century, the image of the withdrawn and “nervous” woman was a recognizable and fashionable trope in the fine arts. Much like the fetishization of infirmity discussed in relation to sickbed imagery in Chapter One, the iconography of hysteria was a popular model often embedded in Victorian portraiture. In American painting in particular, the portrayal of weak and exhausted women was a common motif because neurasthenia, a disorder almost exclusively associated with the upper class, implied the sitter’s wealth. A recent exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, *Women on the Verge: The Culture of Neurasthenia in Nineteenth-Century America*,44 explores the production of “Woman at Home” portraits by a group of New England artists called, The Ten. Paintings like Julian Alden Weir’s oil-on-canvas, *A Gentlewoman* from 1906 (Figure 88) and Walter Launt Palmer’s oil-on-canvas *De Forest Interior* from 1878 (Figure 89), portray delicate and fair women staring gloomily downward in their bourgeois settings. In *A Gentlewoman*, a young female with an elongated torso clasps her hands together and tilts her head away from the viewer in a downward angle. Her skin appears pasty and anemic, her eyes heavy, and her hair slightly disheveled, a frizzy strand escaping onto her forehead. Although the facial features of the young woman in *De Forest Interior* are distant and illegible, she similarly gazes downward in a blank, inexpressive stare. With her ankles crossed, elbows perched on the arms of the chair, and a fan resting on her lap, the woman shrinks into a busy Gilded Age décor reminiscent of Vuillard’s own *horror vacui*.

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Despite the sumptuous wealth and leisure implicit in these depictions of “Americanitis” or neurasthenia, the artists instill markers of disease through weary eyes, slouched posture, and an overall apathy. Thomas Eakins’ oil-on-canvas painting from 1885, Portrait of a Lady with a Setter Dog (Figure 90), approaches a more explicit pathology in his sitter’s sallow face and dark under-eye circles, yet the overall effect remains one of “morbid introspection.” Art historian Wanda Corn’s assertion that, “[Artists] contributed imagery that helped enforce the medical discourse of neurasthenia,” suggests that these late-nineteenth century portraits established a framework to understand hysteria in the domestic interior. Unlike photographs from Charcot’s clinical practice, these paintings embed views of nervous exhaustion in a setting both familiar and relatable to the fin-de-siècle viewer. The situation of the models’ deflated and melancholic body language within a recognizable home, domesticates the notion of hysteria and demonstrates that its symptoms are not only present within the sterile walls of an asylum. Édouard Vuillard’s contemporary representation of hysteria in the Paris apartment conveys a similar domestication of the maladie du siècle, yet as I discuss later in this chapter, Vuillard establishes a more concrete déformation, or pathologization, of the female form.

The catatonic imagery of a hysterie’s “before” photograph (Figure 77), in contrast to one during a grande attaque (Figure 91), also informed the choreography of staged portraits at the end of the nineteenth century. The numerous photographs taken during the 1860s and 1870s of the Countess de Castiglione, an Italian aristocrat and mistress of Emperor Napoleon III, reveal

47 Zachary Ross, “Rest for the Weary,” 23.
the pervasive influence of hysterical stigmata in the construction of feminine identity. Art historian Heather McPherson’s study of the Countess’s “self-conscious posing and role-playing” of hysteria supports the popularization of the disease’s pathology in fin-de-siècle France. In the undated photograph at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *La Comtesse de Castiglione* (Figure 92), the Countess sits on a low chair in a stark photography studio with her arms limply crossed and her right index finger tucked within the pages of a book on her lap. A large, elaborate skirt decorated with brocade patterns sprawls out on the floor in front of her, creating a triangular composition from its ruffled hem to the crown of her head. The Countess’ staged posture is one of complete lethargy and passivity. Her shoulders slump forward and her head, tilted to the right side, appears heavy with the weight of her highly coiffed hairstyle. The corners of the Countess’ mouth droop downward in a prominent frown and her eyes, cast in dark shadow, stare blankly toward the bottom left of the composition. Not only does the Countess’ posture evoke the pose of ennui in early nineteenth-century physiognomies of melancholy (Figure 93), but her mask-like face and immobility signal the codified markers of hysteria.

McPherson explains this similar pathological inexpression:

> The photographs of the Comtesse and those of the hysterics at La Salpêtrière, which are grounded in a common aesthetic lineage and theatrical paradigm, manifest an oddly nonexpressive expressivity in which physiognomy and gesture are disembodied and function as pathological signs. Like the images of the Comtesse, the photographs of the hysterics are elaborately staged tableau vivants.\(^{50}\)

Thus, whether in photographs of hysterical patients, or in the staged portraits of the Countess de Castiglione, the signs of hysteria were aestheticized at the end of the nineteenth century.

Although there is no evidence that the Countess did, in fact, have a nervous disorder, the

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50 Ibid., 62.
spectacle and pervasiveness of hysteria provided her, and other artists like Vuillard, a rich and avant-garde model of portraiture.

Édouard Vuillard’s depiction of the pathological body in paintings like the 1893 oil-on-cardboard Interior with a Seated Figure (Figure 94) and the 1891 oil-on-cardboard Marie in a Camisole at her Dressing Table (Figure 95) evoke both the catatonic rigidity and theatrical convulsion of a patient’s typical episode of hysteria. While the late nineteenth century witnessed what historian Janet Beizer calls a “hystericization of culture,” Vuillard’s interest in the diseased figure transcended the general fascination with the hysterics “otherness.” In the following pages, I will examine Vuillard’s distortion of Marie Roussel and Madame Vuillard’s forms in relation to Symbolist ideology of déformation, which advocated for a de-naturalization of familiar subjects to reveal universal truths. In addition, I will discuss Vuillard’s engagement with the avant-garde Théâtre de l’Oeuvre which, like Charcot’s clinical practice, valorized the spectacular and choreographed the aberrant. Lastly, throughout my analysis of Vuillard’s pathological imagery, I will discuss the artist’s personal association with hysteria through family members like Marie Roussel and fellow Symbolist artists like Odilon Redon.

Although scholars have historically distanced the Symbolist movement from positivist ideology by emphasizing the group’s involvement with mysticism and the imagination, art historian Allison Morehead argues in her 2007 doctoral dissertation that Symbolist methodologies drew on positivist experimental psychology. She asserts that at the same time as adhering to an archetypal spiritualism and esoterism, the Symbolists also engaged with a positivism that is traditionally associated with nineteenth-century Naturalism. Maurice Denis, a

51 Beizer, Ventiloquized Bodies, 8.
52 Morehead, “Creative Pathologies,” 66.
member of the Symbolist and Nabi movements, explained the Nabi emphasis on “scientific” truths and positivism in an article, “Notes sur la peinture religieuse” in 1896.53

Certes non, ce n’était pas une théorie idéaliste. Résultat immédiat des philosophies positives, alors en vogue, et des méthodes d’induction que nous eûmes en si grand respect, ce fut bien la tentative d’art la plus strictement scientifique.54

In his call for a “strictly scientific” artistic practice, Denis invokes his early studies for the philosophy baccalauréat-es-lettres, during which he focused on the positivist philosophy of critic Hippolyte Taine.55 Although the Nabis did not fully practice Taine’s naturalism and instead employed a kind of “de-naturalism” or abstraction to represent form, Denis incorporated this interest in induction, observation, and science into Nabi theory. By using a “pathological method,” the Nabis developed a formal method of “othering” that could reveal a universal interior experience. Whether in the pathological rhetoric manifested in Denis’ distortion of classical figures, in Edvard Munch’s “aberrational surfaces,”56 or in Vuillard’s “somnambulant arabesques,”57 the reorientation of form illuminated new truths, as Morehead explains:

Denis might have added that déformation enabled the formation of truth; that deforming nature provided the opportunity to know nature. Like the experimenter who chooses “experiments prepared by nature” as his privileged objects of study, the artist chooses the pathological or the abnormal in order to access nature’s truths. Altered states, emulation of the art of the primitive, déformation: all provided ways of “othering” holding the promise of truth production.58

53 Ibid., 167. Morehead explains that although Denis did not publish his theories on déformation and positivism until the mid-1890s, he developed the theories as early as 1888 with the formation of the Nabi group.
54 Quoted in ibid., 117.
55 Ibid., 115-16. Morehead refers to Hippolyte Taine’s positivism as “second wave” because it is “represented by the curious mix of spiritualism and positivism.”
56 Ibid., 101.
57 Ibid., 495.
58 Ibid., 187-88.
Thus, the Nabi “déformateurs,” as the critic Alphonse Germain designated them,\(^{59}\) promoted a vocabulary of “otherness” through positivism, not unlike the pathological iconography being recorded at the Salpêtrière during the same period.

Because Vuillard was a close colleague of Denis during the last decades of the nineteenth century, writing in his journal in 1890, “influence toujours de Denis,”\(^{60}\) the artist’s abstraction of form closely parallels this Symbolist “pathological method.” More so than the other Nabis, Vuillard remained attached to the positivist practice of close observation in his painting, a component he shared with the experimental science of Charcot’s clinic. Vuillard explained his interest in observation in an undated journal entry:

> On observe, on ne peut vouloir observer. L’émotion contenue (l’observation) est la première condition d’une œuvre d’art avant l’esprit de méthode et l’intelligence pratique qui naissent de l’âme même qui subit cette émotion. […] L’observation pure et simple est un acte de vie simple et c’est cette simple et primitive observation qui est nécessaire, qui est.\(^{61}\)

Even though Vuillard portrays the stigmata of hysteria through a distorted and abstracted style, his observation remains objective and grounded in the visual world.\(^{62}\) Thus, both Vuillard, in his analytical regard for people in his surroundings, and Charcot, in his clinical view of patients, exercised a similar positivist method of observation and diagnosis.

Beyond this objectivist approach, the Symbolist “pathological method” provided Vuillard a compelling aesthetic to portray Charcot’s hysterical stigmata at the end of the nineteenth century. Allison Morehead explains that “déformation as method” sought to develop formal

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 163. Alphonse Germain writes, “En se donnant pour tâche une déformation anti-physique, nos jeunes déformateurs semblent les interprètes d’une marcescente, les rôpographes d’une race dégénérée, agonisante; autant pourtraire des foetus ou illustrer des atlas tératologiques.”

\(^{60}\) Quoted in ibid., 207.

\(^{61}\) Quoted in ibid., 254.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 218. Vuillard’s involvement with the avant-garde journal, La Revue Blanche, also indicates the artist’s exposure to “second-wave” positivism because the journal, whose tagline was “Literature, Arts, and Sciences,” published the latest scholarship on psychology and philosophy.
strategies of “othering.” Rejecting the academic norms of modeling and perspective, the Nabis used de-familiarization, de-naturalization, and deformation to depict a state of “otherness” that unveiled an inner truth. While Morehead cites the arabesque line as Vuillard’s method of déformation, the artist also conveyed a pathology of form through posture, gesture, and facial expression. His formal “othering” not only evoked the visual stigmata of hysteria, but also the inner psychopathology of the hysteric that avant-garde artists sought to reveal.

During the early 1890s, Vuillard’s déformation evoked two corporeal types of hysteria: the listless, melancholic body and the staged, convulsive body. Inspired by medicalized visual culture of the fin de siècle and the Symbolist interest in the “other,” Vuillard’s use of pathological imagery was ultimately grounded in Charcot’s iconography of hysteria. The Vuillard apartment on the rue Saint-Honoré was situated less than three miles from the Salpêtrière and one mile from Charcot’s hôtel particulier on the boulevard Saint-Germain, where the physician held his famous leçons du mardi. The audience at Charcot’s Friday lectures and Tuesday evening receptions spanned the artistic and literary avant-garde, even leading one physician to complain about the large number of non-professional spectators. From 1887 to 1889, Charcot led these weekly case discussions with demonstrations of “passionate poses” by female patients with hysteria, as depicted in Andrée Brouillet’s oil-on-canvas from 1886, Leçon Clinique à la Salpêtrière (Figure 96). Charcot’s evening receptions featured a more intimate display of the hysterical stigmata for a selective audience of intellectuals and artists like Edmond

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63 Ibid., 114.
64 Morehead describes an arabesque as an “automatically-produced line” (101) and Denis describes it as a contour line “aussi peu trompe-l’œil que possible” (108).
65 Didi-Huberman and Charcot, Invention of Hysteria, 18.
Considering Vuillard’s involvement with the Symbolist circle and the influential patrons of *La Revue Blanche*, it is likely that the artist either personally attended or heard about the spectacle of pathology at these events. Odilon Redon, a close friend and colleague of Vuillard’s, frequented lectures on medicine and science at the medical school where Charcot was Professor of Pathological Anatomy. Art historian Megan Kilcoyne’s study of the “Charcotian visions” in Redon’s oeuvre suggests Redon’s likely attendance of Charcot’s *leçons*, which lends credence to Vuillard’s direct knowledge of Charcot’s iconography. With the Salpêtrière hysteria demonstrations depicted in newspapers, medical journals, and even tourist books during the *fin de siècle*, it would have been difficult for Vuillard to avoid the pathological imagery emanating from Charcot’s practice.

Vuillard’s frequent representation of Madame Vuillard and Marie Roussel seated despondently indoors conjures the depression and catatonia of hysterical patients before a *grande attaque*. In the oil-on-cardboard *Mother and Daughter against a Red Background* from 1891 (Figure 97), the oil-on-canvas *Schematized Portrait of Marie Vuillard* from 1890 (Figure 98), and the oil-on-cardboard *Interior with Seated Figure* from 1893 (Figure 94), Vuillard draws on a similar iconography of a seated woman with clasped hands and a blank stare. In *Mother and Daughter*, Vuillard depicts Madame Vuillard’s bulky form with a strong black contour line that emphasizes her immobile and deflated posture. Her broad shoulders curve forward as her arms rest limply on her lap, forming an almost continuous contour line from her neck all the way down to her thighs. The stark outline highlights the older woman’s exhausted and drooping form, clad in an orange dress, against the solid red background. Vuillard’s erasure of his mother’s neck by placing her head low and forward on her shoulder frame, further creates the impression of

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67 Ibid.
68 From here on, referred to as *Mother and Daughter*.
69 From here on, referred to as *Schematized Portrait*. 
Madame Vuillard sunken into a listless body. With her face half cast in shadow and her eyes fixed in a despondent gaze, the mother embodies physical exhaustion and mental depression. Her emotional distance and isolation from Marie Vuillard sitting rigidly at her right side only further emphasizes a physiognomy of melancholy.

Similarly, Vuillard portrays his older sister Marie in somber, apathetic poses that signal an inner, psychological despair. In the 1890 Schematized Portrait (Figure 98), Marie sits rigidly upright with her hands clasped tightly together at her waist. Although Marie’s posture is markedly erect unlike that of her mother in the previous painting, her body exudes the pathology of depression. Her broad shoulders appear raised and clenched, a marker of anxiety, and her black pinpoint pupils stare blankly forward, an indicator of emotional despondency. With her head tilted slightly left and her mouth pursed into a tight line, Marie’s body language is far from at ease. In another composition from three years later, Interior with Seated Figure (Figure 94), Marie similarly sits with her hands clasped and her gaze fixed blankly outside of the pictorial frame. Her posture evokes the fatigue and lifelessness of her mother’s pose in Mother and Daughter, yet the dissolution of her body into the background wallpaper recalls the blending of body and architecture in Schematized Portrait. Vuillard allows the brown cardboard backing to peek through the paint surrounding Marie’s face and dress folds, thus disintegrating both Marie’s form and eliciting a loss of identity.

Each of these portraits, as well as many of Vuillard’s other paintings such as Lady in Black, Seated (Figure 99) and Marie Seen in Profile (Figure 100), employs an iconography reminiscent of Charcot’s comatose hysterics. Although hysteria is often associated with the manic gesticulations of a grande attaque (Figure 101), an inexpressive and passive body language was

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70 Cogeval and Salomon identify the female figure as Marie in Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval, *Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance: Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels* (Milano; Paris: Skira ; Wildenstein Institute, 2003), 279.
common during the *aura hystérique* phase, as well as during the physician’s hypnotic treatment. A series of eight photographs in Charcot’s *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (Figures 102, 103) illustrates the apathetic stigmata of “la période cataleptique du grand hypnotisme.” Just as Marie wearily sits with her hands clasped and head tilted in *Interior with Seated Figure*, so does a young patient stare blankly ahead in the upper left photograph of Figure 102. Slight variations on this rigid physiognomy appear in the photographs of Figure 103, in which a physician off-camera leads a patient through a series of prompted poses. With hysteria manifesting itself subtly in facial features, Vuillard even borrows the hysteric’s prototypical asymmetry of the face in his treatment of Madame Vuillard and Marie’s expressions (Figure 104). Thus, Vuillard imbues his female forms with a set of hysterical stigmata that visually mark them with the pathology of otherness. In the same way that early nineteenth-century illustrations of melancholy used the external features to indicate internal turmoil (Figure 105), Vuillard and Charcot treated the female body as a tabula rasa for an inner condition of depression. Although Marie’s portrayal in *Schematized Portrait* (Figure 98) lacks the explicit and diagnostic captions of Charcot’s photographs, such as “Hystéro-Épilepsie” (Figure 86), her stiff and withdrawn posture conveys an implicit hysteria that would have been easily recognizable to a *fin-de-siècle* viewer.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Marie Roussel experienced great personal turmoil in her unsuccessful marriage to the Nabi painter, Ker-Xavier Roussel. As discussed in Chapter One, she not only endured her husband’s open affair with a family acquaintance, but she suffered a devastating stillbirth delivery in 1894. Her frequent depiction in bed during the early 1890s suggests Marie’s familiarity with sickness and its accompanying seclusion in the home. Although the prescriptive “rest cure” was associated with Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell and American neurasthenia, the philosophy of sequestering the woman in the home for
her own “good” was common practice in fin-de-siècle Paris as well. Vuillard’s personal journals and correspondence do not recount Marie’s diagnosis of hysteria, yet the artist’s reference to her “crises graves” suggests his sister did struggle with a nervous or anxiety disorder. According to physician and historian Katherine Williams, the experience of childbirth was particularly linked with neurasthenia, and thus offers one possible source of Marie’s disorder. Neurologist George Beard describes this connection between reproduction and neurasthenia in his book, American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences (1881), writing:

How many, also, to whom the simple act of giving birth to a child opens the door to unnumbered woes; beginning with lacerations and relaxations, extending to displacements and ovarian imprisonments, and ending by setting the whole system on fire with neuralgias, tremors, etc. and compelling a life-long slavery to sleeplessness, hysteria or insanity.

Despite a lack of evidence for Marie or Madame Vuillard’s condition of hysteria, it is likely that both female figures suffered from a melancholic spirit that Vuillard studied innumerable times in his paintings and sketchbook. Pen-and-ink drawings like Figure 106, a study of a seated woman similar to Marie in Interior with a Seated Figure (Figure 94), and graphite sketches like Figure 107, a sketch for Schematized Portrait (Figure 98), demonstrate that Vuillard was intensely interested in observing and representing the stigmata of depression. Drawings like Figure 108 and Figure 109 from his carnets intimes further reveal the artist’s study of pathological physiognomy in order to convey an inner expression of pain.

In addition to imbuing his models with the catatonic and impassive facial signifiers of hysteria, Vuillard also imbedded the more archetypal imagery of grande hystérie in his paintings.

71 Vuillard’s journal entry reads: “Ma pauvre sœur a été atteinte de crises graves et nous avons été sur le point de la croire perdue. Elle va un peu mieux maintenant, mais tout danger n’est pas passé…J’ai traversé une crise épouvantable de désolation et de révolte contre les choses et les gens.” Groom, Edouard Vuillard, 221.

From the 1891 oil-on-cardboard Marie in a Camisole at her Dressing Table (Figure 95) to the 1891 oil-on-cardboard Half-Open Door (Figure 63), Vuillard’s representation of awkward and unnatural body positions conjures the hysteric’s dynamic posture during epileptic seizures and while under the influence of hypnotism. His déformation of Marie and Madame Vuillard’s natural forms is infused with the drama of Charcot’s clinical practice. The neurologist’s presentation of hysteria in photographs and at his weekly lectures evoked the grand theater through his intentional efforts to stage and choreograph his case studies. Performed in a newly-built amphitheater with five-hundred seats at the Salpêtrière, Charcot’s demonstrations included footlights, spotlights, and even costumes for his patients that heightened the drama of the event.

According to art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, Charcot’s lectures were carefully written, rehearsed, and memorized like a play so that physicians and patients even seemed to perform soliloquies and follow stage directions. Thus, the visual rhetoric of hysteria was conflated with a sense of spectacle that paralleled contemporary theater’s interest in and choreography of the “other.”

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Vuillard worked as a metteur-en-scène and playbill designer at one such theater, the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, which was well-known for staging marionette productions. These plays, written either for puppets or for actors performing like puppets, embraced an aesthetic of rigid posture, stilted movement, and unnatural body positions. Like the nineteenth-century interest in physiognomies that reveal emotion, the theater emphasized body language to convey inner conditions. Art historian Susan Sidlauskas claims that this new comportment in the theater was “autistic,” expressed in “a strained way of holding

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73 From here on, referred to as Marie in a Camisole.
75 Didi-Huberman and Charcot, Invention of Hysteria, 243.
76 Physician Charles Hacks published Le Geste in 1892 as an aid in deciphering body language and movement.
the body, a slightly asymmetric posture, an unexpected tilt of the head, or an unusual movement of the limbs.” Sidlauskas asserts that Vuillard, while designing sets at the theater, applied this “autistic gesture” to paintings like *Marie in a Camisole* (Figure 95) and *Half-Open Door* (Figure 63) because the figures’ bodies assume a “contrived unnaturalness.” In this way, Vuillard’s involvement in avant-garde theater, which practiced a *déformation* through puppetry, aligns with the Salpêtrière’s vision of hysteric pathology. Whether the rigid movement of a marionette or the convulsive gesticulations of a patient with hysteria, Vuillard applies these similarly dramatized visions of “otherness” to his own de-naturalized and hysterical female forms.

For example, the oil-on-cardboard *Marie in a Camisole* (Figure 95), depicts Marie standing in front of a mirror with her back to the viewer and her arms raised in the air. She appears to be in mid-action because her hands are suspended above her shoulders, the right holding a pale pink ornament and the left turned inward to her face. Although Marie’s lifted arms and positioning at the right of a dressing table signal an act of self-adornment, the viewer is unable to detect her reflection in the mirror. Instead, Marie stands directly in front of the back wall and stares forward into what seems nothing. Her arms float eerily in the air as if frozen in time by the photographic lens of Charcot at the Salpêtrière. Vuillard’s depiction of Marie in this strange and unnatural pose, repeated in the 1891 pastel-on-paper composition of the same title (Figure 110), evokes the rigidity and manipulation of limbs in photographs of hysterics under hypnosis. “Planche XXXIII” from the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (Figure 111) and “Mélancolie cataleptique” from the *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (Figure 112) depict two patients in strikingly similar poses as that of Marie. In all three compositions, the woman’s

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78 Ibid.
arms are raised vertically to hover at shoulder height, recalling the suspended arms of a marionette on stage.

Vuillard’s representation of women dressing themselves in the home further parallels the images of Charcot’s hysterical patients. In the pastel-on-paper *The Fitting* (Figure 113) from 1891, as well as the oil-on-cardboard *Woman Putting on an Apron* (Figure 114) and pastel-on-paper *Woman Ironing* (Figure 115) both from 1890, the female form bends and twists into a contorted position as the woman prepares for the day. Whether reaching her arms backward to tie the laces of a dress in *The Fitting*, or bending over to iron a garment in *Woman Ironing*, each woman dramatically distorts her feminine figure into a strange and “other” posture. This déformation of natural movement captures the classic pathological signs of patients with hysteria undergoing hypnosis. For example, Vuillard’s depiction of a woman’s hunched back and splayed arms in *Woman Ironing*, mirrors the collapse of a patient’s upper body in the photograph, “Catalepsie: Planche XXV” (Figure 116). In both the painting and photograph, the artist emphasizes the profile of the woman in dynamic movement, rather than her individual characteristics. Vuillard positions his female models in front of a light-filled window (Figures 113, 114) or a light-colored wall (Figure 115) in order to create a strong silhouette of their awkward gestures. A vivid example of this juxtaposition of form against background appears in the oil-on-cardboard *The Half-Open Door* from 1891 (Figure 117). A woman in a dark dress stands inside a doorway facing the viewer. Vuillard creates a sharp contrast between the yellow light streaming in behind the woman and her dark clothing cast in shadow. The dramatic silhouette of her figure against the yellow backdrop draws attention to her rigid, asymmetrical pose. As the woman’s left arm reaches out to the door, her head tilts severely left so that her neck seems to disappear in her contortion. By rendering the woman in shadow against a bright
background, Vuillard accentuates a déformation similar to that of Charcot’s patient in the photograph, “Hystéro-Epilepsie: Contractures Provoquées” (Figure 118).

Therefore, drawing on a positivist spirit of observation, Vuillard engaged a visual vocabulary of hysteria in his depiction of the female form during the early 1890s. Although there is no evidence that Vuillard went to the Salpêtrière or personally encountered the pathological physiognomy of a hysterical, the pervasiveness of Charcot’s photography and the wide dissemination of similar diagnostic images during the fin de siècle suggest his probable awareness. Furthermore, Vuillard’s close friend and colleague, Odilon Redon, infused “Charcotian visions” into his own series of gloomy Noirs from the same period. Although Redon’s compositions are often considered fantastical and detached from reality, his work demonstrates a nuanced attention to both the physical body and the psychological mind. His charcoal-on-paper composition from 1878, The Celt (Figure 119), for example, reflects the melancholic facial expression, crooked neck, and tightly intertwined hands characteristic of a patient with hysteria. Just as Charcot believed that the external signifiers of hysteria indicated an internal condition, Redon was greatly interested in the science of physiognomy, sketching many variations of facial structures in his journal. Both Redon and Vuillard shared this interest in observing facial features for indicators of “otherness,” but it was ultimately Vuillard who translated hysteria’s symptoms from the clinical setting to the real space of the bourgeois home.

During the early 1890s, Vuillard pathologized the bodies of his female figures by instilling within their forms the external markers of hysteria. Whether the comatose posture of a patient during the aura hystérique phase, or the awkward gesticulations of a patient during a grande attaque, Vuillard borrowed the pathological vocabulary of Charcot’s practice at the

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Salpêtrière. He does not depict his female figures as patients with hysteria, but rather, as bourgeois women who embodied some of the characteristics of hysteria. As discussed in Chapter One, the condition of being ill, or feigning illness, was pervasive in the upper-middle classes of Paris. Vuillard’s depiction of his mother and sister with the rigid postures typical of hysteria thus situated his family in a medical milieu that valorized, and even induced, the pathological condition. Today, art historians speculate that perhaps Vuillard himself may have exhibited signs of hysteria. Following a discourse of the “mad” artist at the end of the nineteenth century,80 art historians like Susan Sidlauskas note how Vuillard’s contemporaries described him as “deeply sensitive,” “highly strung,” and “haunted by anxiety.”81 The artist’s effeminacy and life-long bachelorhood would have further signaled a predisposition to neurasthenia during the period. Regardless, Vuillard exercised a formal method of “othering” during the early 1890s, in which he reduced his female figures to the iconic markers attributed to hysteria. He was clearly attuned to the contemporary representation of hysteria, and was sensitized to the way the disorder played out within the domestic space. Vuillard’s depiction of his family members with visible symptoms of hysteria reveals the profound influence that developing neurology and the medical milieu had on his paintings during the 1890s.

CONCLUSION

In discussing the disconcerting mood of Édouard Vuillard’s domestic paintings, art historian Antoine Salomon wrote in the artist’s catalogue raisonné from 2003, “Vuillard’s interiors may be ‘intimate,’ as has too often been said, but they are first and foremost disturbing, stamped with strangeness.”¹ This sense of the uncanny in Vuillard’s paintings from 1890 to 1895 drives my exploration of his densely patterned and claustrophobic interior scenes at the turn of the century. However, rather than fully embrace art historians’ conventional biographical narrative for the paintings’ disquiet, I have introduced the context of fin-de-siècle disease as the basis for an alternate interpretation.

In the first chapter, I examined Vuillard’s iconography of the invalid woman in bed, which not only draws on the artist’s personal exposure to illness, but also establishes his underlying interest in disease and its representation. These small-scale paintings of infirmity, which share remarkably similar subjects and compositions, reveal Vuillard’s recurrent study of the home as a locus of convalescence and set the stage for my study of disease within the artist’s oeuvre. In the second chapter, I examined the patterned world of Vuillard’s bourgeois apartment as a foyer d’infection. I argued that Vuillard infuses the home with fin-de-siècle fears of contagion by collapsing three-dimensional space and employing a “microbial” aesthetic that obliterates any distinction between figure and ground. Drawing on contemporary studies about the unhygienic nature of wallpaper, I argued that Vuillard’s décoration conjures the invisible pathogens of the period. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I investigated how the medicalized visual culture of the late nineteenth century may have informed Vuillard’s déformation of the female figure. I argued that the unnatural and rigid body positions of Madame Vuillard and Marie

Roussel evoke the pathological stigmata of patients with hysteria at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière. Whether in his portrayal of the body or of architectural space, Vuillard imbeds contemporary concerns with illness and death in his very paint strokes and forms.

The objective of this thesis is not to demonstrate that Vuillard’s paintings from the 1890s are explicit representations of disease. Nor does this thesis argue that all of Vuillard’s work from the period was informed by contemporary discussions about degeneration and health. In fact, many of his commissions by wealthy patrons depict otherwise idyllic scenes of bourgeois women reading indoors or strolling in the garden, such as Square de la Trinité (Figure 120) for Thadée Natanson in 1894. Instead, I have demonstrated that a general spirit of malaise and malady informs the artist’s private domestic paintings of his family members in the Vuillard apartment. Although there is no proof that Vuillard’s apartment was particularly infectious or that his sister Marie Roussel was, in fact, une femme hystérique, I have shown that Vuillard destabilizes his domestic visions by evoking contemporary imagery like microbes and hysterical stigmata. I have introduced a new lens through which Vuillard’s uncanny scenes may be understood, and I have ultimately broadened the conventional historicization of the artist’s works.

Before the publication of the artist’s private journals in 1980, art historians primarily considered the disquiet of his domestic scenes as a reflection of a hostile relationship between Madame Vuillard and Marie Roussel. Indeed, many of Vuillard’s paintings depict his mother with a formidable stature while her daughter disintegrates into a floral background or slumps dejectedly into a chair. Yet as Gloria Groom and Allison Morehead note, Vuillard’s carnets intimes cast little light on the nature of his familial relationships, nor on his aesthetic practices.²

The artist’s stream-of-conscious writing addresses his day-to-day activities, but provides little evidence that his oeuvre should be understood as personal iconography. The fin-de-siècle medical milieu offers a new context in which to understand Vuillard’s distortion of familiar domestic spaces, without relying on an unfounded biographical narrative. Although Chapter One examines Vuillard’s sickbed paintings in relation to familial illness, its emphasis on biography establishes the artist’s underlying awareness of disease, not the visual source for his depictions of contagion and hysteria.

Vuillard’s portrayal of infirm women in bed, claustrophobic interior spaces, and hysterical figures suggests that the artist was not solely an intimiste treating the quiet idyll of bourgeois domesticity, but an artist intensely aware of his morbid social environs. This thesis does not intend to separate Vuillard from the Nabi brotherhood with the chapters’ focus on darker Symbolist motifs like illness and contagion, but to reestablish the artist within the broader Symbolist circle to which he belonged. As Guy Cogeval asserted in 1990, “Vuillard est beaucoup plus imprégné par le symbolisme qu’on ne le croit généralement.”

Although the artist shared an interest in domesticity and decoration with Nabi artists like Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard, he also shared the fin-de-siècle theme of illness with Symbolist artists like Edvard Munch and James Ensor. Through this thesis, I have examined the morose undercurrents of Vuillard’s oeuvre during the 1890s in order to broaden his contextualization as a Nabi in the history of art.

After 1900, Édouard Vuillard’s experimentation with an avant-garde aesthetic dramatically declined as he entered a new circle of influential patrons. With commissions from socialites like the art dealer John Hessel and the Bernheim brothers, Vuillard reverted to a conservative Academic style. The artist no longer painted his family members at work in their small apartment, but rather his wealthy patrons posing in their airy hôtel particuliers, such as

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3 Ibid., 209.
Marcelle Aron from 1914 (Figure 121) and Madame Marcel Kapferer at Home from 1916 (Figure 122). Even with this shift away from Symbolist themes, Vuillard never completely eschewed his interest in and observation of medicine. In 1918, he depicted his patron Dr. Henri Vaquez treating an infirm woman in The Cardiologist Henri Vaquez and his Assistant Doctor Parvu (Figure 123), and a young boy in The Doctor Henri Vaquez (Figure 124). Another patron, Dr. Louis Viau, commissioned the artist to document his medical practice in the oil-on-canvas Doctor Viau in his Office Treating Annette Roussel (Figure 125), and in the oil-on-canvas Doctor Viau from 1936 (Figure 126). In these paintings, Vuillard’s depiction of illness and the medical practice is explicit and intentional, his attention to the hospital setting in Vaquez’s paintings and technical tools in Viau’s paintings creates a real clinical space. The patients are clearly subjects of medical interest because the physician, holding a prominent position in each composition, directs his attention to their medical needs. Despite a marked departure from Vuillard’s evocation of disease in earlier paintings like La Berceuse (Figure 25) or Mother and Daughter Against a Red Background (Figure 97), the later paintings demonstrate a continued observation of human physical and mental health.

Vuillard’s Kodak photograph (Figure 127) of his elderly mother seated on her bed in 1928, the year she died, offers a final view of not only Madame Vuillard, but the artist’s representation of his mother’s illness. In the gelatin silver print, Madame Vuillard sits on the edge of a small bed, facing the viewer with her hands resting on her lap. She is dressed in a white nightgown and cap, under which her head is balding, and she smiles widely revealing a dark orifice with missing teeth. Although Madame Vuillard sits up alert in the photograph, unlike the sickbed paintings from the 1890s, Vuillard associates her finals days with the space of the bed. He does not dress her up and situate her in the family salon, but rather positions her in the private
bedroom on what would soon become her deathbed. Thus, Vuillard returned to the theme of illness, and the accompanying confinement to the home, in his artistic productions throughout his life. The fin-de-siècle culture of the 1890s instilled in Vuillard deep concerns for the pathological body and domestic environment, which ultimately infused his unsettling depictions of Madame Vuillard and Marie Roussel in the family apartment. From microbial wallpaper to female hysterical postures, Vuillard embedded this medical imagery in his intimiste paintings and appropriated the dark tones of his fellow Symbolist artists. By supplementing the conventional art historical analysis of Édouard Vuillard with a socio-medical perspective, this thesis situates Vuillard within the world evoked in Max Nordau’s Dusk of Nations and reveals a new understanding of the uncanny in his interior scenes.
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Figure 124: Édouard Vuillard, *The Doctor Henri Vaquez*, 1921. Oil on canvas. National Academy of Medicine, Paris.
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