



LA SALLE A MANGER AU CHATEAU DE CLAYES, 1938, by Edouard Vuillard.
Before Treatment.

History, Analysis and Treatment of LA SALLE A MANGER AU CHATEAU DE CLAYES, 1938, by Edouard Vuillard

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The following report represents the outgrowth of some confusion and curiosity aroused by a large painting on paper by Edouard Vuillard which came to the Intermuseum Laboratory for treatment late in 1982. Sent to us by the University of Kentucky Art Museum as a pastel and upon superficial inspection thought to be gouache, this painting entitled LA SALLE A MANGER AU CHATEAU DE CLAYES was more likely to be distemper, also referred to as "detrempe" or "a la colle", according to a cursory review of related art historical literature. This led to the obvious conclusion that further testing and analysis of the materials was necessary, and research on the artist's technique would be most helpful. The treatment has been completed. With generous grant monies provided by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, research and analysis were made possible.

Edouard Vuillard was born in France in 1868, and did not seriously apply himself to painting and drawing until the age of 19 when influenced by friendships made at school with Ker-Xavier Roussel and Maurice Denis, both later recognized as artists in their own right. Shortly thereafter, Vuillard began attending art classes and met Paul Serusier and Pierre Bonnard, thus forming the nucleus of the group which was to call themselves the "Nabis". A principle belief of the Nabis was that above all, art is decoration and that art should strive for evocative and expressive declaration, particularly in mural painting, rather than remain content with easel painting. Vuillard's embrace of this philosophy is evident in the many large decorative panels painted over his career with expansive areas of flat, matte color, cropped compositions, altered perspective and unusual color relationships. But Vuillard's work and particularly his subject matter also reflect an impressionistic attitude, that there should be no division between the artist's studio and the life that exists around it. Vuillard is also often referred to as an "Intimist" for the frequency with which he depicted family interiors and local scenes. His mother, a dressmaker, and their apartment were used perhaps more than any other model.

After the breakup of the Nabis in 1900, Vuillard established himself with a fashionable social circle, and now had an official dealer. His subject matter reflected this change as he began painting portraits of prospective clients in elegant surroundings. Within this circle Vuillard met and began a very close friendship with Joseph Hessel, a Parisian art dealer and his wife Lucie. Vuillard spent a great deal of time with them at their numerous homes, one of which was the Chateau De Clayes, near Versailles. It is the dining room of this home depicted in LA SALLE A MANGER AU CHATEAU DE CLAYES, and the figures represented around the table include Mme. Hessel at extreme right with various friends and relatives.(1) This painting, accomplished with charcoal and a la colle on ochre-colored paper only 2 years before Vuillard's death in 1940, is exemplary of the materials and technique he most frequently used and the looseness which his brushwork acquired later in his career.

Jacques Salomon, Vuillard's nephew by marriage recalls the artist at social gatherings. "He would suddenly look intently at a group.... and without taking his eyes off his subject he would whip his notebook out of his pocket, seize his Koh-I-Noor 5B and without hesitation, start to draw."(2)

His pictures were almost always done from a sketch, constantly drawing in a book carried with him. Then at home he "would transfer them to a sheet of cardboard or canvas, or more frequently to a piece of paper which he cut from a roll that stood permanently in one corner of his studio." (3)

"Tables, chairs and floor were strewn with pages of sketches to which he paid close attention, consulting them almost before every brush stroke... at last he would stop, collapse into his armchair and meditate with his eyes fixed on his work... then, suddenly, getting up again, he would take a piece of charcoal or pastel to recover some shape which he lost... I must not forget to mention among the implements used by Vuillard the indispensable and enchanting little multicolored feather duster with which he removed the excess charcoal on his canvas before resuming his painting a la colle." (4)

Very early in his career Vuillard began painting on cardboard, primarily for economic reasons, using scraps from boxes in his mother's workroom. He developed a preference for this type of support, appreciating its absorbent quality and "because the ochre and grey tones provided a base for his color harmonies." (5) Considering his technique of painting a la colle, he had become acquainted with it while painting sets and wall decorations at Parisian theatres, and initially used it also for the sake of economy. But Salomon explains "We may wonder, at least in the case of the great interiors painted during his last

twenty-five years, why Vuillard used this distemper process to do what he could have done more swiftly, and on the whole, more conveniently with oils. Distemper as he practiced it demands an elaborate apparatus: a spirit lamp or electric stove, quantities of pots and pans, a host of boxes and bags of powder."(6) Vuillard would soak sheets of Tottin glue, a type of hide glue, and dissolve them in a "bain-marie" in 4-5 times their volume of water, then mixed powdered pigments with the medium, and actually painted from these pots. Again from Salomon, "...not only did Vuillard prize the matte tones obtained by this method of painting, he considered that this refractory process helped him to keep his excessive facility under control, and allowed him to deliberate more fully over his work, if only during the pauses when his colors were drying." (7)

The condition of the painting LA SALLE A MANGER AU CHATEAU DE CLAYES when it arrived at the Laboratory was generally fair. The design layer is applied thinly with intermittent, light impasto. It is extremely matte, quite hard, brittle and insensitive to water and most solvents. Intermittent throughout was cupped crackle, flaking, and small losses, a condition more prevalent in the whites, tints and areas of heavily applied paint. The bond between the design layer and support is only fair, due in part perhaps to the smooth paper surface and to the technique employed in the paint's application. In addition, some fading of pigments is apparent in the purple and reds. This became particularly noticeable when the painting was compared with a reproduction found in a book entitled Vuillard, His Life and Work by Claude Roger Marx, published in 1946. The change in the wine decanters in the foreground and mid-ground, where the intensity of the purple has diminished, is quite marked. Also noteworthy is an apparent decrease in the size of the support. The top and right edges in the book plate show more design area when compared with the existing state. Paint samples were taken from various areas of flaking and mounted in Bio-plastic for cross-section staining to aid in identification of the paint medium. A Ponceau S stain solution, after rinsing yielded an intense red color, confirming the presence of a protein medium. Amido black stains were also used, AB2, and AB3 both giving strong results indicating the presence of a glue medium.

The primary support is quite smooth with only a slight wove pattern visible. A Buiret test for possible gelatine sizing on the surface gave a negative result. Microscopic analysis of fiber samples revealed a significant wood pulp fiber content, and "C" staining carried out on fiber samples indicated approximately 20% groundwood with the remainder bleached softwood fibers.

The support which measures 173 x 134cm is attached overall to a light weight canvas with a starch-type adhesive, confirmed by staining a test swab with an iodine-potassium iodide solution.

To test the adhesive, a damp swab was rolled over the reverse of the support in the upper left corner where an area has detached from the canvas. A drop of iodine-potassium iodide solution was placed on the swab and immediately turned it a dark purplish-black, confirming the presence of starch.

Strips of a heavier weight canvas had been adhered to the secondary support to reinforce the tacking edges on three sides. The canvases were tacked to a seven member wooden stretcher with keys and a Kraft paper tape adhered along all edges covering approximately 5mm of each edge of the support. The primary support is embrittled and appears discolored, although to what degree, it is difficult to determine since the paper is quite uniform in color overall. A large complex tear involving the paper and canvas, that had been previously mended, is evident in the upper left quadrant. Distortions of the support plane were particularly evident in raking light as draws and bulges in all corners of both supports. A slight concave sag was evident particularly when the painting was placed horizontally, and flopping of the supports occurred whenever the painting was moved slightly. Several small circular tide stains along the lower right edge and bottom edge center were visible as light centers with very dark ringing.

After much deliberation among the paper and paintings conservators at the Intermuseum Laboratory, a decision was made to keep the treatment to a minimum. Localized consolidation was absolutely necessary to avoid further loss of design layer. Although the primary support had delaminated from the canvas in spots along the edges, generally the attachment was still good, and neither the adhesive nor the secondary support were causing degradation or discoloration of the paper. To remove the canvas would very likely cause further insecurities in a design layer which had not maintained a good bond with its support, and another auxiliary support would have to be adhered to replace it. The flopping of the supports permitted by the stretcher which could contribute to future paint insecurities could be mollified by substitution of a lightweight, rigid panel. But the attachment of the supports to it would have to be extremely easy to reverse, preferably without heat which might cause further degradation of the paper and paint layer, and without solvents which could cause staining of the paper. Therefore, a decision was made to "loose-line" the painting to a hexcel panel.

Consolidation of insecurities in the paint layer necessarily precluded any further treatment. After extensive testing, a 1.5 and 3% solution of cellulose acetate (Eastman 4644, Vis. 3) in ethyl acetate and acetone (2:8) was found to be the only consolidant which did not darken the paint layer and the paper support. The cellulose acetate was applied with a fine brush to a small area of paint cleavage and cupping. After several

seconds the solvent had softened the paint film slightly, allowing the cupped flakes to be returned to plane without fracturing or pulverizing the otherwise extremely brittle paint. Slight pressure was applied to the treated area with gentle manipulation of a bone folder over a small square of polyester web, returning the paint layer to plane without alteration of the matte surface quality. Excess adhesive on the surface was removed by rolling over the area with an acetone/ethyl acetate dampened swab. Areas of consolidation were located and marked on a Mylar overlay on an 8 x 10 photograph of the painting as the treatment proceeded.

The paper tape adhered over the edges of the support was removed with localized application of deionized water to soften the adhesive, allowing removal with a spatula and tweezers. Excess adhesive was reduced by alternate rolling with damp and dry swabs. The painting was then ready to be put "in traction" in the vernacular of the painting conservator, for the purpose of localized reduction of planar distortions.

Tacks were pried from the edges, the stretcher removed and the reverse lightly vacuumed of surface grime. The tacking edges were flattened with the use of damp blotters and a tacking iron. Strips of heavy weight polyester web had been cut 12 inches wide and molten Beva brushed on over a 1 1/2 inch wide area. With the painting face up, the Hollytex strips were attached to the underside of the tacking edges with a tacking iron. The work strainer constructed for this purpose was placed around the painting and the Hollytex strips pulled from under the strainer around the outer edges and stapled, placing the painting under moderate, even tension. At this point, areas of heavy surface grime on the obverse were lightly drycleaned with vinyl eraser crumbs, rolled over the surface around the design layers.

Distortions in the supports were reduced with localized moisture application and low heat. The area containing the bulge or draw was sprayed with a fine mist of deionized water to relax the paper, and a damp blotter placed behind in contact with the canvas. A tacking iron set on low temperature (approximately 100 degrees Fahrenheit) was applied to the area for several seconds over a medium weight polyester web, essentially drying and shrinking the area of expanded paper. The treated area was then placed between blotters and weighted overnight. Some of the areas with more severe distortions were treated several times in this manner. Areas of the paper support which had delaminated from the canvas mount were readhered with wheat starch paste used undiluted in order to provide maximum tack for the adhesion of this heavy weight paper and also to minimize any chance of creating tide lines from too much moisture being absorbed by the support. These areas were covered with blotters and weighted until dry. The large complex tear was reinforced with a heavy-weight Japanese paper and wheat starch paste on the reverse of

the canvas. The adhesive previously used to make the mend appeared to be a PVA emulsion and was so insoluble even in strong solvents, that it was felt that to undo it and remend would very likely cause more damage than was justified to improve the appearance.

Tide stains along the bottom edge were minimized by repeatedly rolling a damp swab over the area, thereby feathering the stains' dark edges.

A Hexcel panel was constructed to replace the wooden stretcher, composed of a 1 inch aluminum Hexcel core with a 1 inch thick softwood collar and 4-ply, acid-free, matboard faces, materials chosen for their stable, lightweight properties. Epoxy adhesive was applied to the reverse of the matboard faces, the Hexcel core and wooden collar placed between them and weighted overnight. The panel was allowed to cure for one week in order for complete evaporation of any volatile substances in the adhesive to occur. After checking the fit of the painting to the panel, Beva was brushed along only the edges at full strength (approximately 30% solids) to promote even attachment of the canvas and prevent any scalloping of the edges.

The painting, still in its work strainer, was placed over the panel, staples removed from the polyester strips and the strainer removed. After proper placement of the painting, the strainer was removed and a tacking iron was applied to the edges, adhering them to the panel. Copper tacks were also used to insure stability of the tacking edges.

Inpainting of larger losses in the paint layer was carried out with watercolors. The painting will be returned to its home in Lexington Kentucky where it will be framed and glazed for exhibition.

As with any art object requiring conservation, the extent of treatment is dictated by the nature of the object as well as its condition. Stabilization must be limited to the degree that it can be accomplished without endangering the integrity of the object. In this case, significant inherent vice, present in both the materials chosen by the artist and the technique used in its application, had contributed to the painting's deterioration. However, the steps necessary to thoroughly stabilize the object's condition had to be weighed against the paintings reaction to the undoing of previous mounting and restoration. Would the correction of less than ideal, past treatment possibly inflict more damage and risk further loss? In this case the answer was yes. After much deliberation, it was decided that the present

condition of the object did not warrant extensive conservation treatment at this time, that is, the benefits did not justify the risk. Treatment and materials were applied minimally and in localized areas with the consideration that they would be relatively simple to reverse in the future when the painting requires further treatment.

In conclusion, I would like to express my appreciation to the paper and paintings conservators at the Intermuseum Laboratory for their invaluable assistance on the treatment of an object which required the expertise of more than one conservation specialty, and often several pairs of hands. I also want to acknowledge the suggestions, ideas and information offered by all the art historians and art conservators consulted during the research and treatment of LA SALLE A MANGER AU CHATEAU DE CLAYES.

Footnotes

- 1) Correspondence with Mme. Juliet Bateau, working with M. Antoine Salomon on the catalogue raisonne of Vuillard's works.
- 2) Salomon, Jacques. "Vuillard Remembered" from Vuillard by John Russell, Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1971, p. 128.
- 3) Ibid., p. 127.
- 4) Ibid., p. 129.
- 5) Salomon, Jacques. Vuillard: Temoignage De Jacques Salomon, Paris: Albin Michel, 1945, p.124.
- 6) Ibid., p. 127.
- 7) Ibid.

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