

Les Nabis

Les Nabis was a group of young French artists active in Paris from 1888 until 1900, who played a large part in the transition from Impressionism and academic art to abstract art, Symbolism and the other early movements of modernism. The artists shared a common admiration for Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne and a determination to renew the art of painting, but varied greatly in their individual styles. They believed that a work of art was not a depiction of nature, but a synthesis of metaphors and symbols created by the artist.

The Nabis took their name from the Arabic word *nabi*, or prophet, and the similar word in Hebrew, *nebiim*. The term was coined by the linguist Auguste Cazalis, who drew a parallel between the way these painters aimed to revitalise painting (as prophets of modern art) and the way the ancient prophets had rejuvenated Israel.

Motif Romanesque (1890) by **Maurice Denis** is one of the earliest Nabis paintings.



Pictured by **Maurice Denis** in his *Homage to Cézanne* are many of the key figures from the secret brotherhood of the Nabis, for whom Gauguin was the principal mentor. Included are the symbolist painter Odilon Redon, the focus of attention on the far left, Paul Sérusier centre talking to Redon, and at the back, left to right, Edouard Vuillard, the critic André Mellerio wearing a top hat, Ambroise Vollard behind the easel, Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Pierre Bonnard with a pipe, and on the far right Marthe Denis, Maurice's wife.

Denis, *Homage to Cézanne* 1900

The painting, by **Paul Gauguin** (1848 – 1903), which depicts a revelatory vision of Jacob wrestling with an angel, clearly delineates reality and spiritual manifestation through aesthetic form. While the crowd of churchgoers who experience the vision is in the foreground, the Biblical struggle appears in the background, surrounded by a two-dimensional and vibrantly coloured plane. Gauguin relied upon the abstraction of the red ground to communicate the space of the vision as well as the heightened emotions present at a religious revelation. As this work demonstrates, Gauguin rejected the conventions of industrialised modern society, in both his art and his life, through romanticised evocations of the primitive, the incorporeal, and the mystical. In doing so, he helped initiate the individualised expressionistic vein of avant-garde art that influenced generations of artists throughout the 20th century.



Gauguin, *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob wrestling with the angel)* 1888

Paul Sérusier (1864 – 1927) was a French painter who was a pioneer of abstract art and an inspiration for the avant-garde Nabis movement, Synthetism and Cloisonnism.

In the summer of 1888 he travelled to Pont-Aven and joined the small group of artists centred there around Paul Gauguin. While at the Pont-Aven artist's colony he painted a picture that became known as *The Talisman*, (A talisman is an object which is purported to possess certain magical properties) under the close supervision of Gauguin. The picture was an extreme exercise in Cloisonnism that approximated to pure abstraction.



Sérusier, *Le Bois d'Amour à Pont-Aven (The Talisman)* 1888



Sérusier, *The flower barrier* 1889

Cloisonnism is a style of post-Impressionist painting with bold and flat forms separated by dark contours.

Synthetism emphasised two-dimensional flat patterns, thus differing from impressionist art and theory.

In 1890, Maurice Denis said, in a summary of the aims of Synthetism "It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."



Sérusier, *The Sacred Woods* 1891-2



April or *The Road of Life* 1892

Maurice Denis (1870 – 1940) in addition to painting was a decorative artist and writer, who was an important figure in the transitional period between Impressionism and modern art. He was associated with Les Nabis then the Symbolist movement, and then with a return to neo-classicism. His theories contributed to the foundations of Cubism, Fauvism, and abstract art.

The Road of Life was painted for the bedroom of a young girl.

Denis said "I rejected naturalism and materialism in favour of something more idealistic." And in 1909: "Art is no longer a visual sensation that we gather, like a photograph, as it were, of nature. No, it is a creation of our spirit, for which nature is only the occasion."

***Evening in September* 1891**





Émile Henri Bernard (1868 – 1941) had artistic friendships with Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and at a later time, Paul Cézanne. Most of his notable work was accomplished at a young age. In the years from 1886 through to 1897. He wrote on the theory of art and is associated with Cloisonnism and Synthetism.

Less known is Bernard's literary work, comprising plays, poetry, and art criticism as well as art historical statements that contain first-hand information on the crucial period of modern art to which Bernard had contributed.

***Breton Women in a Green Pasture* 1888**

He said "It [art] is the invisible expressed by the visible," and "There is an invisible meaning under the mute shape of exteriority."

Bernard theorised a style of painting with bold forms separated by dark contours which became known as Cloisonnism. His work showed geometric tendencies which hinted at influences of Paul Cézanne, and he collaborated with Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh.

In the above painting there is no perspective to create a sense of space, and little or no modelling (light and shade) to suggest solid form. However, there is a sense of weight and even monumentality to the figures, which express a sense of quiet dignity and self respect (*amour propre*), in keeping with Bernard's socialist principles. Set on an almost undifferentiated green colour field it is only the relative sizes of the figures which implies a sense of space to the scene, and the little flick of the red parasol of the furthest figure which pushes the surrounding green further into the background. The single touch of bright red itself is held in place by its placing behind the edge of the frame and clipped by the gentleman's black hat. In spite of its look of informality and rudimentary technique this is clearly an intelligently worked out piece of design.

Paul Ranson (1864 – 1909) was a painter and writer. He studied at the Académie Julian where he met Sérusier in 1888. From 1890 he became a member and a creative leader of the Nabis group, who gathered each Saturday at his studio in the Boulevard du Montparnasse.



***Nabis Landscape* 1890**

The Académie Julian was a private art school for painting and sculpture, founded in Paris in 1867 by the painter and teacher Rodolphe Julian (1839–1907). It was active from 1868 until 1968. It is famous for the number of artists from many countries who attended during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and who subsequently ushered in so many new modes of artistic expression.



Félix Edouard Vallotton (1865 – 1925) was a Swiss/French painter and printmaker. He was an important figure in the development of the modern woodcut.

During the 1890s, when Vallotton was closely allied with the avant-garde, his paintings reflected the style of his woodcuts, with flat areas of colour, hard edges, and simplification of detail.

The Cogent Reason a woodcut from the series *Intimités* 1898



Bathers on a Summer Evening
1892–93



Moonlight 1895

Examples of his Nabi style are the deliberately awkward *Bathers on a Summer Evening* and the symbolist *Moonlight*.

Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867 – 1944)

In 1888, he enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts, and soon began frequenting the Académie Julian where Maurice Denis and other students formed the group Les Nabis.

He is best known for paintings of French landscapes usually depicting women, children, nymphs, and fauns in bucolic settings.



Rural Festival 1911 – 13



Jean-Édouard Vuillard (1868 – 940) was a painter, decorative artist and printmaker, and a prominent member of the Nabis, making paintings which assembled areas of pure colour, and interior scenes, strongly influenced by Japanese prints, where the subjects were blended into colours and patterns.

Self-portrait with cane and straw hat 1891-92

Vuillard acquired a personal collection of one hundred and eighty Japanese prints, some of which are visible in the backgrounds of his paintings. The Japanese influence appeared particularly in his work in the negation of depth, the simplicity of forms, and strongly contrasting colours. The faces were often turned away, and drawn with just a few lines. There was no attempt to create perspective. Vegetal, floral and geometric designs in the wallpaper or clothing were more important than the faces. In some of Vuillard's works, the persons in the paintings almost entirely disappeared into the designs of the wallpaper.



The Printed Dress 1891



The Woman in a Striped Dress was shown in the first exhibition of Les Nabis, which received mixed reviews. The critic of *Le Chat Noir* wrote of "Works still indecisive, where one finds the features in style, literary shadows, sometimes a tender harmony."

Vuillard's journal records the formation of his artistic philosophy. "We perceive nature through the senses which give us images of forms, sounds, colours, etc." A note from shortly before he became a Nabi states: "A form or a colour exists only in relation to another. Form does not exist on its own. We can only conceive of the relations." In 1890 he returned to the same idea: "Let's look at a painting as a set of relations that are definitely detached from any idea of naturalism."

Le Corsage Rayé 1895

Pierre Bonnard (1867 – 1947) was a painter, illustrator, and printmaker, known especially for the stylised decorative qualities of his paintings and his bold use of colour. He was a founding member of the Post-Impressionist group of avant-garde painters Les Nabis, and his early work was strongly influenced by the work of Paul Gauguin, and the prints of Hokusai and other Japanese artists. He was a leading figure in the transition from impressionism to modernism.



The Bonnard Family in the Garden, screen 1896

Some notable alumni of the Académie Julien:

France

É Bernard, P Bonnard, J Crotti, M Denis, A Derain, J Dubuffet, M Duchamp, JH Lartigue, F Léger, H Matisse, P Ranson, K-X Roussel, P Sérusier, J Villon, É Vuillard

France (+USA)

L Bourgeois

Belgium

F Khnopff

Switzerland

F Vallotton

Britain

R Bevan, F Cadell, GF Carline, G Clausen, C Conder, J Epstein, A Gross, SW Hayter, CRW Nevinson, W Rothenstein

Ireland

E Gray, J Lavery, G Moore

United States

TH Benton, CC Cooper, C Demuth, R Henri, LC Perry, M Prendergast, R Rauschenberg, JS Sargent, E Steichen, G Wood

Mexico

D Rivera

Germany

H Arp, E Barlach, K Kollwitz, E Nolde

Russia

L Bakst

Czechoslovakia

F Kupka, A Mucha

Lithuania (+France and USA)

J Lipchitz

Lebanon (+USA)

K Gibran