

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Edouard Vuillard (1868 - 1940)

Card Players at Les Clayes

Pastel and charcoal on brown paper, laid down on board.

Signed EVuillard at the lower left.

200 x 268 mm. (7 7/8 x 10 1/2 in.)

This pastel sketch depicts a card game at the Château des Clayes, a château near Versailles which was the country estate of Vuillard's close friends, Jos and Lucy Hessel. The Hessels had moved there in 1926, and Vuillard was to become a frequent visitor to the house, where he had his own room. Indeed, Les Clayes, conveniently close to Paris and with its large park designed by André Le Nôtre, became the artist's rural retreat for the last decade of his life. As Kimberly Jones has noted, 'The time he spent away from Paris in the countryside was essential to Vuillard's productivity; it offered him repose, but also a change of scenery that helped expand his own perceptions of the world around him.'

In later years Jacques Salomon, the artist's nephew by marriage, recalled of Vuillard at Les Clayes that 'he was constantly drawing his friends, and those who found his eye upon them knew they must hold the pose in which he had caught them...I can still picture Vuillard at a social gathering. He would suddenly look intently at a group...with a direct stare. Then his face would grow grave, and without taking his eyes off his subjects he would whip his notebook out of his pocket...and, without hesitation, start to draw. He worked with great speed, scarcely glancing at his paper, entirely preoccupied by the sight before him.'

The present sheet may be grouped with a small number of paintings and pastels of card players by Vuillard at the Château des Clayes, all dating to the first half of the 1930's. These include a large painting in distemper in the collection of the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums and a pastel drawing of The Game of Cards in the Musée Municipal de l'Évêche in Limoges. Four other pastel drawings of the subject of card players at Les Clayes are known through old photographs.

The bearded man at the right may be identified as the novelist, playwright and journalist Tristan Bernard (1866-1947), an old friend of Vuillard's and a member of the circle of friends centred around the Hessels who was also a frequent guest at Les Clayes. Bernard had met Vuillard when both were students at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris.

The provenance of this small pastel includes several members of Vuillard's circle of intimate friends. Its first owner was Jos (Joseph) Hessel (1859-1942), who was a close friend of the artist and his principal agent and dealer for the latter part of his career. Hessel's wife Lucy was to be Vuillard's muse, model and lover for almost forty years. The present sheet was inherited by the Hessel's adopted daughter Lulu Grandjean-Hassel, later Mme. Jacques Arpels (1921-2004), who appears in many of Vuillard's paintings, drawings and photographs after 1930. Sold by her at auction in 1963, the drawing came into the possession of the art dealer Sam Salz (1894-1981), who had been introduced to Vuillard by Hessel

in 1938. Salz, who was painted by the artist in 1939, handled the sale of many of the most important paintings by Vuillard today in American collections. The present sheet was acquired in 1978 by the New York collector Joanne Melniker Stern (1924-2011).

Provenance:

Jos Hessel, Paris and Château des Clayes, nr. Versailles
By descent to their daughter, Mme. Jacques Arpels, Paris
Her sale, London, Sotheby's, 12 June 1963, lot 52
Sam Salz, New York
William Beadleston, New York
Purchased from him in June 1978 by Joanne Melniker Stern, New York
Thence by descent until 2012.

Literature:

Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval, Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance. Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels, Milan, 2003, Vol.III, p.1571, no.XII-236 (where dated 1930-1935).

Artist description:

At the start of his career, Edouard Vuillard joined a group of young artists - including Maurice Denis, Paul Sérusier, Pierre Bonnard and Kerr-Xavier Roussel - who called themselves the Nabis and were united by a desire to develop a new, more expressive pictorial language, inspired by the work of Paul Gauguin. In the 1890's, Vuillard began receiving a number of private commissions for wall panels intended to decorate the rooms of private houses. This was a genre in which he was to become very successful, and between 1892 and 1901 he painted a number of these large-scale panneaux décoratifs, almost all the result of commissions from a small group of mutual friends and enlightened collectors. Vuillard's work of this type remained largely unknown to the public at large until several panels were exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1905.

In the early years of the new century, enjoying the fruits of a commercial arrangement with the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Vuillard began expanding his repertoire of decorative panels and small, intimiste domestic interiors to include portraits and landscapes. Although his work as a peintre-décorateur was largely confined to private homes, he did receive a handful of public commissions, including the decoration of the foyer of the newly built Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1912. The later years of his career found Vuillard saw mainly as a portrait painter, often depicting his sitters within an interior setting. He rarely exhibited in public after 1914, and it was not until a large retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1938, two years before his death, that interest in Vuillard was renewed.

As a modern scholar has noted, 'Vuillard was in many ways the supreme graphic artist among the Nabis. He drew throughout his life, indeed daily...' From around 1900 onwards he used mainly pastel for his drawings, and came to master the subtlety and vibrancy of this challenging medium. In one of the first monographs on the artist, the critic and art historian Claude Roger-Marx wrote that, 'Vuillard often found expression by means of pastels', and he made more extensive use of the pastel medium than perhaps any French artist since Degas in the previous generation. Pastel was to become an essential part of Vuillard's working process until the end of his career, and was used for landscape and figure studies, compositional drawings, still life subjects and as preparatory studies for portraits.