

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

## KUNST



FÉLIX VALLOTTON  
1865 Lausanne - Paris 1925

*Portrait de Vuillard* (Study for *Les cinq peintres*)

Pencil on paper; c.1902-03.

Monogrammed lower right: *FV* and inscribed by the artist with the sitter's name: *Ed. Vuillard*.

260 x 200 mm

PROVENANCE: Estate of F. Vallotton, no. 44 – The artist's brother, Paul Vallotton, Lausanne (1926) – Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne, no. 5806 (1967) – Mme. Curchod (1968) – Florie Brauchbar, Zurich – Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne, no. 13103 (1987) – JPL Fine Arts, London (1989) – Private collection, USA

LITERATURE: Marina Ducrey and Katia Poletti, *Félix Vallotton (1865-1925). L'œuvre peint*, Lausanne, Fondation Félix Vallotton, Lausanne and Zurich, Institut Suisse pour l'étude de l'art, Milan 2005, II, p. 278, fig. 449b

EXHIBITIONS: *Maîtres suisses et français. Aquarelles, pastels et dessins*, Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne 1988, no. 80, repr. – *Félix Vallotton. Paintings, Watercolours and Woodcuts*, JPL Fine Arts, London 1989, no. 20, repr. p. 22

This drawing is a preparatory study for the portrait of Édouard Vuillard in one of Vallotton's best-known paintings, the group portrait *Les cinq peintres* [fig.1]. This large-format work serves as one of the seminal documents of the Nabis group. With the exception of Charles Cottet (second from right, seated), all the figures depicted in Vallotton's painting were members of the group. Painters and printmakers in the Nabi circle considered themselves the heirs of a style created by Paul Gauguin. Like him, they sought to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the image through colour, using simplified forms, patterning and broad, unmodelled areas of colour. In addition, their imagery was strongly influenced by *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. They were particularly attracted by the Japanese approach to spatial organisation, combining diverging lines leading the viewer's eye into the picture space with sharp angles of vision, close-up viewpoints, bold framing devices and asymmetry in a single image. The rules of classic central perspective were thus overridden.

The four artists depicted with Vallotton in the group portrait were his closest and most loyal friends from the 1880s onwards. They are (from left to right): Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard – both founding members of the Nabis – Charles Cottet and Ker-Xavier Roussel. Although no single member of the group appears to take prominence, there is nevertheless a hint of hierarchy between them. Vuillard is the only figure seated frontally. His posture is rigid and recalls a sculptural bust on a plinth. His magnificent domed forehead and bald cranium catch the light, creating a focal point at the centre of the image. His absent gaze and motionless, clasped hands suggest that he is deep in thought.<sup>1</sup> Vallotton depicts himself in the role of a detached observer, standing in the background

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Ducrey, *Félix Vallotton, L'œuvre peint, Catalogue raisonné*, Milan 2005, II, p. 280.

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slightly apart from the group. His expression is pensive and his eyes seem to fix a distant point outside the picture space – in a painterly nod to his reputation as the *nabi étranger*.<sup>2</sup>

Vallotton not only formed a lifelong friendship with Vuillard, but he also held the work of his *ami nabi* in high regard. As Thadée Natanson was to observe: ‘Félix Vallotton, likewise highly sensual – indeed, under the cloak of his impassivity almost pathologically sensual – regarded Vuillard as the painter who could bring him – after Ingres, of course – the greatest aesthetic pleasure.’<sup>3</sup>

Vallotton transferred the formal language of his printmaking, where line, shape and clarity of expression predominated over colour, to oil painting on canvas. The hard-edged, pared-down realism of his work derives from his use of strong lines and simplified forms. His working methods were extraordinarily precise. Shapes, contours, volumes and even areas of shadow would be carefully delineated. He would then use the brush to apply thin, smooth layers of paint without tonal variations, emphasising the flatness of the surfaces. Drawing played a central role in the preliminary stages of his paintings, since the presence or absence of a preparatory study decided, to a greater or lesser extent, their stylised or narrative character. In his preparatory studies Vallotton is known to have used a system of colour coding. This served as an aide-memoire when working up his paintings in the studio and enabled him to simplify or synthesize elements of a composition. The present drawing also displays detailed annotations. Executed in different formats and styles, his sketches and studies therefore have a significant bearing on his portraits and large-format Salon paintings, his nudes and his landscapes.<sup>4</sup>

The authenticity of this drawing has been confirmed by Marina Ducrey of the Fondation Félix Vallotton.

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Schädler, ‘Les cinq peintres, 1902-03’, in *Felix Vallotton – Idylle am Abgrund*, Kunsthalle Hamburg and Kunsthaus Zurich, 2007-8, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> See Roger-Marx 1946, p. 173, cited in Dieter Schwarz, ‘Vuillard extra muros’, in *Édouard Vuillard 1868-1940*, exhib. cat., Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 24 August–23 November 2014, Winterthur, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Marina Ducrey, ‘Ein unzertrennliches Duo: Zeichnung und Malerei in Vallottons Schaffen’, in Dieter Schwarz and Christoph Vögele, *Félix Vallotton - Zeichnungen*, exhib. cat., Kunstmuseum Solothurn, 12 May-12 August 2012, and Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 15 September-25 November 2012, , p. 119.

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Fig. 1 : *Les cinq peintres*, oil on canvas, 1902-03, 145 x 187 cm.  
Kunst Museum Winterthur