

Learning from Bonnard

By looking closely at the works of one French master, Alice Mumford has brought variety, interest and colour to her own paintings. The St Ives School of Painting tutor shares advice gleaned from Pierre Bonnard's art



ABOVE Alice Mumford, *The Pink Cloth*, oil on canvas, 100x100cm

RIGHT Alice Mumford, *The Yellow Cloth and Anemones*, oil on canvas, 61x76cm

For many, many years I have been interested in Pierre Bonnard's approach to still life and interiors, and have tried to unpick his paintings. Picasso had no time for what he called Bonnard's "pot-pourri of indecision" but I would suggest that the French artist showed great purpose and achievement. He changed the way we enter and leave a painting. His hesitation meant he dabbed fragments of warm and cool colours next to each other, making them appear to oscillate. It is these contrasting warm and cool dabs that create the effect of intense light.

Bonnard's approach to composition, like his approach to colour, was one of indecision. He would tack several canvasses to the wall, preferring to paint on them unstretched, so as to allow room for alteration. Indeed, in some large canvasses you can see the stitches where an extra panel has been added to complete a composition. However, what made Bonnard so different, and what was to influence many artists who followed, is where he put the points of interest in his paintings.

Having taught for many years, I would say that 90 percent of us, including myself, would naturally start a painting in the middle of the canvas, or at most, slightly off centre. After all, this is where the story starts. However, Bonnard would place something of little interest in the middle, maybe the edge of a radiator or some shapeless trees, leaving the things of animation or interest at the edge. It was as if he was giving us the keys to his house and said "make yourselves at home".

He achieved this sense of intimacy by making us complete the painting in our mind's eye. Round tables are cut off where the canvas finishes, but if we were to draw in thin air where the curve is completed, we would find that the viewer is positioned as if sitting at the table. He built further on this idea, cropping figures so it was as if we were included in the gathering and seeing the activity they were engaged in.

DEVELOPING HIS IDEAS

Bonnard's revolutionary approach to composition has been a source of great inspiration to me. When trying to resolve problems of composition, my mother, the exceptional watercolourist Jan Treloar, suggested I try covering the middle of the canvas with a piece of paper, leaving a margin of about 15cm around the edge. The challenge was to avoid painting on the paper, which meant I couldn't start in the middle of the canvas as usual – it was the equivalent of being asked to paint while standing on my head!

It was a revelation. I was suddenly able to put gaps into my work as Bonnard had done. If you look at *The*





ABOVE Alice Mumford, *Evening at Polgrean*, oil on canvas, 61x76cm

Bonnard achieved a sense of intimacy by making us complete a painting in our mind's eye

Yellow Cloth and Anemones, you can see the result. I would never have had the courage to leave that much space in the centre of a painting before.

Keeping in mind Bonnard's adaptability to different light sources, I have experimented by painting in electric light, with light coming from a side window and even a still life outside at midday. Not living in the south of France, there is less contrast to my colours, so they go from cool to warm, rather than hot.

For example, I painted *Evening at Polgrean* under old-fashioned electric light. To recreate the effect of the light on the cloth, I used Titanium White and a tiny bit of Raw Sienna, contrasted with cool pinks made from Titanium White and a tiny bit of Rose Geranium.

The best way to learn about this effect is to paint a striped cloth, preferably with pale grey stripes so there are warm highlights contrasted with cooler pale greys. I have tried to look really closely at how the shadows vary one from another. It may be less obvious in my painting, but believe me, I had to mix the colours

slightly differently. In Bonnard's paintings, each shadow is clearly different to the next, and relates to an individual object. Try observing these differences. In *The Pink Cloth*, I tried using strong diagonal shadows to structure the painting, as Bonnard does. I also created a high contrast between the light source and the dark interior.

One final tip is to pre-mix your colours on your palette. I begin with a warm side, laying out Lemon Yellow and Alizarin Crimson to make orange, Cadmium Red and Lemon Yellow to make a different orange, then pure Raw Sienna and Burnt Umber. On the cool side, I have Cerulean Blue and Alizarin Crimson to make a dull violet, Ultramarine Blue and Alizarin Crimson to make a bright violet, pure Rose Geranium and then finally Viridian Green mixed with Alizarin Crimson.

Next to each colour I squeeze out two blobs of Titanium White. Taking a small amount of each colour in turn, I mix it into the first white and then slightly less into the second white. I go around all the colours on the palette until I have two tones next to each colour. This keeps the contrast between warm and cool colours, making it easier to keep the tones the same. **Alice Mumford's course, *Bonnard the Revolutionary*, runs 19-21 November at St Ives School of Painting, Cornwall. www.stivesartschool.co.uk**

Which artist has most influenced your work?
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