

Student Lightning Talk: *The Evening Meal*



The Evening Meal, Pierre Bonnard, 1903, oil on canvas, 37.4 x 45.5 cm.
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello, my name is Maya Biddulph, and I'm a first year Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences student at the University of Birmingham, majoring in History of Art. In this podcast I'll be exploring *The Evening Meal*, a small picture painted by Pierre Bonnard in around 1903.

To begin, take a look at the image – or the actual painting if you can - and consider your first impressions. Despite being comparatively small-sized (measuring just 37x45 cm), and somewhat dark — and so perhaps easily overlooked compared to some of the bigger and brighter paintings around it in the gallery setting — I think this painting immediately conveys a distinct set of emotions. It has a cosy and intimate atmosphere which makes it pleasing to look at and engaging, encouraging you to take in more of the visual details. You feel you may be intruding on a family's private moment at home, and despite being a fairly unremarkable scene of daily life, its quietness is reassuring.

In the scene, we see three figures sitting at a round table inside a room. This is one of Bonnard's several intimate scenes of family meals, where he used his own family as models. Here, the older woman on the right, almost consumed by the shadows, is Bonnard's sister, Andrée. And near her are her two children; the youngest girl who is silhouetted against the lamp is Vivette, and her older brother Robert sits opposite her.

The room is very dark, and our attention is drawn to the boy's glowing face from which the light reflects, where the paint is applied more thickly. There's a lot of detail also on the wall behind him, where the cross-hatched brushstrokes of the brick wall evoke a tapestry, contributing to the room's warmth and cosiness. This contrasts with other areas of the painting, such as in the bottom right hand corner where the paint is very thin. The single light source and warm colours really give a feeling of intimacy and security.

This homely and comforting feeling is enhanced by the inclusion of simple, modest furniture within the scene. The elegant wooden table in the centre almost appears to be floating due to the way that its legs are

obscured by darkness. The cuckoo-clock hung up on the wall is very sweet and quaint, and the simple wooden style of the decor suggests we are in the countryside of southern France. This modest setting emphasises familial bond over fashion and materialism.

Interestingly, the painting has had different titles over time, including 'Leçons' – 'lessons' in English – and 'La Dinette', which translates as 'tea-party'. In another alternative title, 'The dolls' dinner party', the choice of the word 'dolls' adds a slightly surreal nuance, reducing the representation of the family to toy figures. The silhouette of the girl cut out against the lamp emphasises her doll-like frame and the specks of darkness in the boy's eyes give him an eerie, vacant stare. I find this painting really interesting because it places the viewer as both an intrusive spectator (like a child peeking into a doll's house) but at the same time entices us into the scene through depicting modest home-cooking and the comforting presence of the children and what appears to be their nanny, or mother.

Bonnard was born in 1867 in a region just outside of Paris. In 1888, he joined a group of artists in Paris known as the Nabis. Although the short brush strokes and emphasis on light in *The Evening Meal* appear to conform to the Impressionist style, Bonnard and the Nabi group set themselves apart from the Impressionists. They were more interested in decorative motifs and domestic life and were influential in the transition towards abstract art. Paintings of domestic interiors such as this one became known as the *Intimiste* genre. Furthermore, Bonnard was inspired by Chinese shadow plays and also worked on theatre sets in Paris, both of which are clearly reflected in his attention to the decor. You could almost say that it's through the decor — the furniture and the room itself — that the figures are brought to life. This experience and inspiration are also reflected in the way he uses light and shadow very powerfully to create an intimate indoor setting. He often maintained a distance from new movements in Paris (such as Fauvism in 1905 and Cubism from 1907) and consequently is often set apart from other recognised artists of his time; on top of this, his particular choice of subject matter was distinct from other trends that were in fashion at the time.

The Evening Meal communicates a lasting impression of warmth and rest where the family are gathered together. Alongside the presence of the nanny or mother figure, we are encouraged to feel at ease, secure and protected. Ultimately, this scene reminds us of the physical, mental and emotional comforts wrapped up in the idea of home and the value of those habitual, day-to-day moments spent with family and friends. Perhaps it is a reminder to us in lockdown of the importance and unifying power of a shared meal in a space untainted by the invasiveness of working from home; a time and place where we can momentarily forget the imposed regulations which we must adhere to outside of the home.