

Bonnard's 104 Brush Ink Drawings for *La 628-e8*

by Richard Nathanson

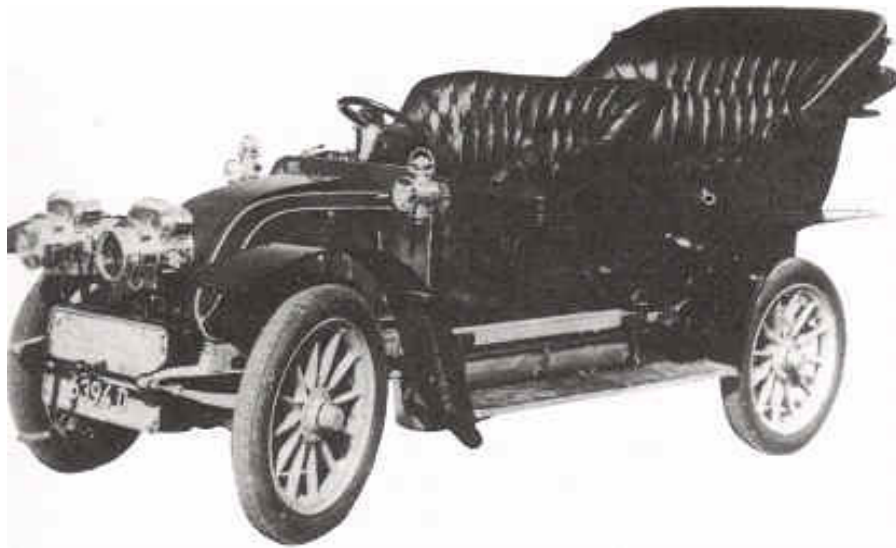
Bonnard, in 1906 and 1907, made over one hundred brush and Chinese ink drawings to illustrate Octave Mirbeau's imaginative account of a series of journeys which he made in his 1904 four-cylinder Charron Girardot & Voigt. It is believed to be the first book about a motorcar journey to be illustrated by a great artist. Mirbeau chronicles his voyage as beginning in April 1905 *Through a small part of France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany. And above all, through a little bit of myself.*

A newly discovered art treasure has about it a touch of magic. La 628-E8 is itself a rarity having been published by Fasquelle, in a limited edition of only 225 copies. This collection of 106 drawings including two unpublished works « Departure » and « Balzac on his Deathbed » comprises the complete set of illustrations for the book.

Major books on Bonnard, including the 1927 monograph by his nephew, Charles Terrasse, document Bonnard's involvement in the book and reproduce drawings from it. Yet this is the first time the drawings will ever have been exhibited. They have been taken, some folded, from Mirbeau's handwritten copy, where interleaved they have remained hidden and in private ownership since their creation.

The art of travel is the art of life, for each of us has embarked upon a journey. A journey through which we remain unaware, blissfully and otherwise, of what the next bend will reveal. And so, too, it is with this journey. A kaleidoscope of characters and situations unfolds before us. Brossette the chauffeur, the knitting frontier lady, the Belgian waiters, King Leopold, an English lady taking tea, the Kaiser, fig-leafed statues, the giant rabbit of Flanders, horses, hens, ducks and many others, spring from these pages to draw us into their world. And presiding over this myriad activity is the magnificent, indomitable and irrepressible Charron Girardot & Voigt, a mouthful for even the French and thus abbreviated to

« CGV », and known as just The 628-E8, after its number plate. With a roar and thrust of its engines, The 628-E8 conjures forth event upon event, giving to each a life which, without the magic touch of painter and storyteller, it would not possess.



A 1904 - cylinder

Charron

This is a portrait of life in all its richness, variety, pathos, drama and humorous absurdity. Indeed, as Mirbeau suggests, it is a journey through ourselves. Mirbeau's journal was first published in France in 1908, and titled *La 628-E8*. And a special edition, limited to 225 copies, reproduced Bonnard's drawings. Until now, this was the only publication combining the text and drawings. It made no attempt however, visually to integrate the text with the drawings, which were considerably reduced in size and often incomplete.

Sketches of a Journey reproduces the complete set of Bonnard's 104 drawings, for *La 628-E8* but it has been designed to allow each drawing to breathe. Mirbeau's text is also translated into English for the first time, but not in full. For

now the roles are reversed, and it is Mirbeau who, in one sense, provides the captions to Bonnard's drawings.

Bonnard met Mirbeau through Thadee Natanson, the art collector and publisher of the famous art journal, *La Revue Blanche*. *La 628-E8* was born out of a deep friendship between writer and painter and their mutual passion for motoring. 'I was very fond of Mirbeau', wrote Bonnard, 'although we had completely different characters, opposite even, I would say. I was first involved with him in his account of a journey of the Low Countries. He had just purchased his first motor car, The *628-E8*, and chose his number plate for the title. I made a whole series of drawings for the margins. This amused me very much, for I appreciated Mirbeau's humour enormously. And the whole book is filled with it.

Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917) was passionate, eccentric, fearless, impulsive, and fused with an enormous energy and appetite for life - a character larger than life. Novelist, playwright, art critic, traveller, businessman, horticulturist, Sunday painter, art collector and raconteur, Mirbeau succeeded at whatever he turned his hand to. He was a loyal friend, and on intimate terms with many of the leading French figures of his day. He championed many causes artistic, literary, social and political, and his early legal training served him well in the courtroom. He wrote some of the most perceptive catalogue forewords to important exhibitions by the major artists of the period, among them Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Renoir, Rodin and Pissarro, and he purchased their work when they were still making their way. Mirbeau was a pivotal force at that particular moment of French genius. And his own novels and plays (listed in the glossary) reflect a highly individual blend of realism, fantasy, poetry and humour, expressed with a painter's eye. Like Bonnard he sought happiness and repose in nature, observing that 'Nature is a strange magician, a perpetual creator of dreams, and a tireless renewer of the ideal - the untarnished source from which we can take all emotions and all miracles'.

The *628-E8* is Mirbeau's heroine, and the vehicle through which his rich, varied and combustous nature, with its deep rooted humanity, is given full vent.

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) did not accompany Mirbeau on his more prolonged travels, but he was inspired by the spirit of Mirbeau's account, and by the trip he himself made in 1906 with Misia Natanson, Thadee's wife, along the waterways of Belgium and Holland and down the Rhine. Wherever he went, Bonnard recorded his impressions. He too was a fervent motorcar enthusiast, acquiring in 1911 an 11 CV Renault, which he drove with memorable recklessness.

But from where did this spirit we call Bonnard come ? To which school does he belong? And how do we begin to analyse his influences, technique, and all the other paraphernalia which grind down the imagination, and take us ever more distantly from the truth?

Anyone who is moved to pleasure and well-being by Bonnard's art, happily leaves these preoccupations far behind. For Bonnard's joy and wonder at the beauty around him, and his humanity, seize eye and soul, transporting them to an inner kingdom.

Bonnard is French to his core. His theme is the beauty of human beings, Nature, and the home. He is a kindred spirit to Renoir. But this is to do both a gross injustice and say nothing of what it is that makes each unique.



Bonnard at the wheel of his first car in 1912

The Chinese painter Ching Hao (900-960 AD) in a note on brush work wrote:

*Resemblance reproduces the formal aspects of objects but neglects their spirit.
Truth shows the spirit and substance in like perfection.*

Let us for a moment - for longer would detract from their magic - consider these drawings. As a group they are unique in Bonnard's work, both for their unifying theme and humour, and for their range of subject which touches upon virtually every aspect of Bonnard's work. Their seemingly childlike simplicity and freedom are deceptive. The ability to express humour and pathos in a line comes only from tremendous insight and passion. Their theme « Life » belongs to us all. But it is given to very few, to convey Life's elements in so direct and universal a way. Following the fracas with the French customs, readers will be brought to an even more abrupt halt by a list at the end of the book, (by no means complete) of publications of Bonnard's work. But among the many books on Bonnard, this journey stands alone, for it is both by Bonnard and about him. It is not a catalogue of drawings, but an idea about life, which Bonnard chose to illustrate and make his own. It brings into play all his imagery, his love of people and Nature, and an artistry which continues until the last perfectly controlled caress of a single brush hair.

The drawings that Bonnard made with such enthusiasm and affection for Mirbeau, underline the creative potential of a harmonious association between artist and writer. They brilliantly illustrate Mirbeau's text providing a subtle foil to his often acerbic wit. And they offer fresh insight into Bonnard's quiet and gentle genius. Perhaps because *La 628-E8* was also a symbol of wealth, power and progress - and thus the dilemma of our age, Bonnard's drawings pass beyond the immediate into a timeless world of their own.

The car is a feature of our everyday life. But compare the quality of the journeys we make, with The *628-E8*'s perambulating sense of adventure and enjoyment. *La 628-E8* was the only motoring book ever to be illustrated throughout by a very great artist. And if something of the art of observing and experiencing portrayed in these pages, could enter our own journeys, however long or local,

then Bonnard and Mirbeau will have accomplished all that they set out to achieve. But perhaps the greatest tribute will be the touching enchantment they bring to both young and old, to Bonnard scholars, and to many who will be seeing Bonnard and reading Mirbeau for the very first time.

Richard Nathanson - 2007

Adapted from Richard Nathanson's introduction to 'Sketches of a Journey' published by Philip Wilson. His catalogue forewords for the 1978 London showing and 1979 Edinburgh Festival Exhibition of the collection. And his November 1978 Sunday Times Magazine article.