

# Unit 2: Friends and Family

## Edouard Vuillard

### *Lucy Hessel Reading*



Edouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940)  
*Lucy Hessel Reading*, 1913  
Oil on canvas, 39 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 32 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (100.2 × 82.9 cm)  
Lore Ross Bequest, 2010–23

## Getting Started

- Describe the sitter. What can we learn about her from her pose, her clothes, and what she is doing? What questions are left unanswered?
  - Describe the setting. What aspects of the interior does the artist emphasize? What details seem to be missing?
  - Describe the composition, that is, the arrangement of elements within the picture. Does anything seem curious or confusing about how the artist treats the space of the room? (*Consider flattened, compressed spaces; density; ambiguity of objects and spaces.*)
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## Looking Closely

In the **foreground** of the painting, Lucy Hessel is shown in profile, sitting at a writing desk and poring over a book of some kind. Books of all sizes cover much of the desk's surface. Lucy's short black hair and dark blue cloak contrast with her fair skin and the stark white of her collar. The bed, nightstand, and lamp suggest she is in her bedroom. In the upper left corner of the painting is a window or its reflection in a mirror, in which can be seen a view to greenery outside. Also in the background is a door leading out to another space. Vuillard compresses the space and leaves some shapes sketchy and ambiguous. Although the scene is set indoors, it seems dappled with light, as if the sun is shining through the leaves of a tree. The cool blues, whites, and grays of the bedspread and wallpaper complement the warm orange-browns of the wooden door, bed frame, nightstand, and chair, as well as the yellows of the lampshade and desk. In some parts of the work, Vuillard applied the oil paint in short brushstrokes, while in others he used longer sketchier strokes, occasionally letting parts of the canvas show through.

## About the Work

*Lucy Hessel Reading* is one of many images of Lucy Hessel and her husband, Jos, that Vuillard painted during his long friendship with the couple. In the early 1900s, Vuillard began to show his work in the Parisian gallery of the Bernheim-Jeune family, where Jos Hessel was a partner. Lucy quickly became Vuillard's patron, close friend, and muse, and the artist spent many summers with her and her husband. This painting, set in the Hessel's country home in northern France, does not seem like a portrait in the conventional sense. Although the sitter is identified in the title, her face is barely visible, and she occupies a relatively small part of the canvas. Vuillard remarked, "I don't do portraits. I paint people in their surroundings." Scholars have noted that Vuillard was both a painter of portraits and a painter of interiors, depicting his sitters in domestic settings that reflect their personality or character. Often, as in this work, Vuillard's interest in the shapes and textures of fabrics, wallpapers, carpets, and furniture produces a spatial ambiguity and dense overall effect, creating a tension between the surface of the canvas and the illusion of three-dimensional space within the image.

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## About the Artist

Edouard Vuillard grew up in Paris, surrounded by the colorful, richly patterned textiles that his mother and sister used in their dressmaking business. He enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the prestigious French art academy, but spent most of his time at the Louvre copying seventeenth-century Dutch **still life** and **genre paintings**. He joined a group of young avant-garde painters who called themselves the **Nabis** (the Prophets). Their style emphasized color, texture, pattern, flattened spaces, and simplified forms.

Early in his career, Vuillard focused on everyday life, painting scenes such as his mother and sister reading and sewing at home. When he met Lucy and Jos Hessel in 1900, they introduced him to leading figures in Paris—bankers, lawyers, doctors, writers, and poets. About that time, Vuillard shifted his attention to the lives and homes of his wealthy friends and patrons. In a diary entry of 1893, he wrote, "Why is it in the familiar places that the mind and the sensibility find the greatest degree of genuine novelty?"

## Sources

Brown, Stephen. *Edouard Vuillard: A Painter and His Muses, 1890–1940*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012, pp. 112–13.

Salomon, Antoine, and Guy Cogeval. *Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance, Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels*. Vol. 2. Paris: Wildenstein Institute, 2003, no. VII-416.

Thomson, Belinda. "Vuillard, Edouard." *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 2, 2016.

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## Further Discussion

- Do you consider this painting a portrait? Why or why not?
- Do you consider this work finished even though you can see the canvas showing through the artist's brushstrokes? Why do you think the artist chose to paint in this way? What is the effect?
- Personal spaces can say a lot about a person. What does Lucy's room reveal about her identity?
- Ask students to think about their own personal spaces: places they have lived or visited frequently. Have them journal and then share which personal spaces in their own lives provide insight into their identity. How do those spaces communicate aspects of their identity?

# Raphael Soyer

## *Dancing Lesson*



Raphael Soyer (American, b. Russia, 1899–1987)

*Dancing Lesson*, 1926

Oil on canvas, 24 × 20 in. (61 × 50.8 cm)

Gift of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, 2008-225

Fleeing the persecution of Jews, Raphael Soyer and his family emigrated from Russia in 1912 and settled in the Bronx in New York City. Although academically trained as a painter, Soyer remarked: "As soon as I left the academy, I made a conscious effort to forget everything I had learned there . . . I started from the beginning again and painted in a frank and almost naive manner subjects of ordinary interest that were part of my immediate life."

Set in the living room of his family's apartment in the Bronx, *Dancing Lesson* is a family portrait set up as a genre painting. In the center, we see Soyer's sister, Rebecca, teaching his twin brother, Moses, how to dance. His youngest sibling, Israel, accompanies them on the harmonica. His parents look on, his mother having lifted her gaze from a Yiddish newspaper. His grandparents witness the scene symbolically—they appear in the black-and-white portrait hanging on the wall. The room is sparsely decorated: aside from the photograph and the couches, the only other elements are a rubber plant and a decorative carpet. Uniform blocks of pale colors, flattened spaces, and minimal shading are all part of the "frank and almost naïve manner" Soyer was experimenting with at this early stage of his career.

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## Sources

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972, p. 16.

Kleebblatt, Norman L., and Susan Chevlowe, eds. *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900–1945*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 1991, p. 155.

## Discussion Ideas and Questions

- What is each figure in Soyer's painting doing? How do the figures interact with one another?
- Describe the composition. (*Consider how Soyer uses the foreground and background and how he plays with verticals and horizontals, as well as shifts in scale.*)
- Although this scene initially appears to be a snippet of everyday life, it could also be interpreted as a commentary on the assimilation, acculturation, and Americanization of a Russian immigrant family. What visual evidence in the painting supports this interpretation? (*Rebecca and Moses are practicing a secular dance step; part of Rebecca's leg is visible between her dress and stocking; the portrait of the grandparents hanging on the wall might symbolically suggest a separation between generations, between the new and old worlds.*)
- Both Soyer and Vuillard focus on close friends or family members. What are some advantages of painting people with whom you are close? What are some challenges?
- Rather than show us realistic representations of their friends and family, both Vuillard and Soyer simplify their subjects and flatten their spaces. However, their artistic strategies are quite different. Compare Vuillard's and Soyer's techniques for depicting their subjects and interiors.
- One could argue that Soyer's and Vuillard's works are both genre paintings (scenes of everyday life). Ask your students to debate whether they are portraits or genre scenes. How might an image that includes more than one person, space, or interpersonal interaction reveal more about a person's identity than a traditional portrait?