

# MUSÉE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE

## Press kit

Maurice Denis. Amour  
12.2 – 16.5.2021



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# MUSÉE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE

## 1. Press release

Comrade of Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard when all three were studying art, Maurice Denis (1870-1943) was a painter and major theoretician of modern French art at the turn of the 20th century. This show – the first dedicated to the artist in Switzerland in 50 years – focuses on the early years of Denis's career. The novel visual experiments of the “Nabi of the beautiful icons” gave way to the serene splendor of the symbolist works, followed by the bold decision to return to classicism. This event, which features nearly 90 works, is organised with the exceptional support of the Musée d'Orsay and thanks to loans from Europe and the United States.

Maurice Denis remains famous for the watchword he devised in 1890, “Remember that a painting – before being a warhorse, a nude woman, or some anecdote or other – is basically a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” Beyond this manifesto, the breadth and depth of his pictorial output make clear the ambitions of a life completely devoted to art, love, and spirituality.

With some of the friends of his youth, Denis founded the Nabi group in the late 1880s. Nicknamed the “Nabi of the beautiful icons,” he set himself and his work apart thanks to his drive to create modern poetic and musical images grounded in nature and the Christian faith. His first model was Fra Angelico, the monk-painter of the Quattrocento whose ascetic life in the service of art Denis aspired to imitate when he was still an adolescent. To express his emotions in painting, he also drew on a decorative simplification and a synthetic expression of forms and colors, which were fostered on the examples of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, the Primitives, Japanese prints, and above all Paul Gauguin.

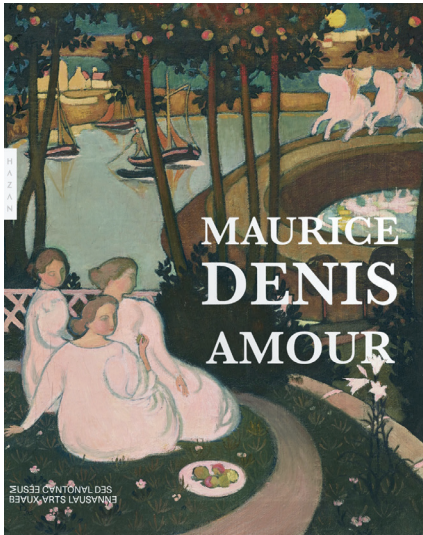
The turn of the century marked a defining moment for the painter with a trip to Rome in 1898. The revelation of the Renaissance wall paintings that he admired at the Vatican confirmed Denis in the direction he wanted his art to take, towards a “new classicism.” Critical of pure painting and of Henri Matisse, who made a name for himself in 1905 at the Salon des Fauves, he denounced the tyranny of the imagination and instinct that was leading to abstract art. Henceforth, venturing down the trail blazed by Paul Cézanne, he would pursue the search for a balance between sensations and style, modernity and tradition.

Curators of the show:

Catherine Lepdor, chief curator, MCBA, Lausanne

Isabelle Cahn, general curator of paintings, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

## Publication



Catherine Lepdor and Isabelle Cahn ( ed. ), *Maurice Denis. Amour*, with essays by Guillaume Ambroise, Jean-Paul Bouillon, Isabelle Cahn, Claire Denis, Catherine Lepdor, Pierre Pinchon, and Fabienne Stahl, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and Éditions Hazan, Paris, 2021, 192 p. ( fr. ). Price: CHF 52.60.–  
( and at MCBA only: CHF 42.– during the show's run )

This event is organised in collaboration with the Catalogue raisonné Maurice Denis, and with the exceptional support of the Musée d'Orsay and thanks to loans from Europe and the United States.



The exhibition has been made possible thanks to the generous support of



Hours: Tuesday–Sunday: 10 am–6 pm

Thursday: 10 am–8 pm

Monday: closed

Good Friday ( 2.4.21 ), Easter Monday ( 5.4.21 ), Ascension Day ( 13.5.21 ) : open

Admission:

Adults: CHF 20.– / 15.–

Children and 18–25 years old: free

First Saturday of the month: free

This ticket includes the entry to the exhibition *Matières en lumière. Sculptures de Rodin à Louise Bourgeois*.

## 2. The exhibition

“The first period of my painting was love...” Denis was to write at the end of his life.

Our exhibition goes back over the many facets of this original and captivating chapter of his career until World War I.

### Gallery 1 – In the days of Symbolism

Maurice Denis figures among those artists who adhered to the Symbolist movement in the late 1880s, reacting against the materialism of their day. His vocation as a Christian painter became clear at the time of the last group exhibition of the Impressionists in 1886. From the very first during his studies at the Académie Julian, he rejected naturalism, any “objective” copy of reality. It was in the painting of Fra Angelico and the Primitives – those painters who were active before the academic codifications of the Renaissance – that he initially sought solutions for his own art that involved a radical simplification.

With friends from his youth – including the painters Édouard Vuillard, Ker Xavier Roussel, Paul Sérusier, Pierre Bonnard, and Paul Ranson – Denis formed a group they called the Nabis and he would become their theoretician. The discovery of Paul Gauguin’s work confirmed these revolutionaries in their intuitive understanding that “a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order” was imbued with expressive power. Stimulated by Japanese prints, the Nabis abandoned linear perspective and modeling effects, the attempt to suggest relief. They adopted a number of visual strategies that included the construction of the painting based on stacking up pictorial planes, large unmodeled sections of bright subjective colors, and outlines that clearly distinguish shapes. In portraits and landscapes, as in interiors, they preferred formal synthesis and a decorative organization of the surface, drawing on the structuring force of the arabesque and the heightening of ornamental effects.

Deeply religious, Denis set himself off from the other Nabis by above all borrowing from Gauguin the unexpected appearance of the sacred in a profane space. His poetic view of daily life found expression in his choice of subjects, which he limited very early on to familiar landscapes, portraits of his friends and family, and the exaltation of his passion for his fiancée, Marthe Meurier, who inspired him to complete an album of lithographies titled *Amour*.

## Gallery 2 – Towards a new classicism

In 1893, Maurice Denis married Marthe Meurier and now had to provide for his growing family. He exhibited with increasing frequency in the official salons and small galleries, alone or with the Nabis. He kept company with renowned writers and musicians, and built up a clientele among the collectors of modern art.

Denis was part of the avant-garde at this time. In the name of his fellow Nabis, he took sensational stands in the reviews. He fought to have the term “Neo-Traditionalism” adopted, in opposition to the Neo-Impressionists (the heirs to Naturalism) and the “painters of the soul” (the idealist fraction of Symbolism). For the young painter, beauty and the sacred were manifested time and again in nature in and around Saint-Germain-en-Laye and Brittany, and in the life lived beside his wife and children. He saw painting as the only way to find “for every emotion, every human thought, a formal decorative equivalent, a corresponding beauty.”

The year 1898 stands as a turning point in his career. Approaching thirty, Denis made a long visit to Papal Rome. His conversations with the writer André Gide, whom he met up with in the city, and the revelation of Raphael’s frescoes in the Vatican hastened his development as a painter towards a “new Classicism.” While the Nabi group was slowly breaking up, Denis painted *L’Hommage à Cézanne* (Homage to Cézanne), placing his desire for reform under the aegis of the Master of Aix, to whom he paid a visit in 1906. At a time when the avant-garde was beginning its race to formalism and abstraction, Denis distanced himself from the immediate transcription of sensations, refined his style, and worked on compositions that were carefully thought out, organized, and restrained. He was granting greater importance to mythological and biblical subjects now. The series of *Plages* (Beaches) shows his effort to reconcile the Greco-Roman tradition and Christian humanism. Here again, as in his Nabi paintings, Denis proves a peerless colorist.

### Gallery 3 – Decoration above all

Like many avant-garde movements, the Nabis wanted to spread art throughout daily life. “Around the start of 1890, a war cry went up from one studio to another, No more easel paintings! There are no paintings, there are only decorations!” the Nabi Jan Verkade proclaimed.

Following an initial series of decorative panels for a girl’s room which he painted between 1891 and 1892 (on display in Gallery 1), Maurice Denis came up with all kinds of useful objects, including fans, lampshades, wallpaper, ceramic tiles, furniture, screens, and designs for stained-glass windows. In 1895, Siegfried Bing, the director of the gallery L’Art nouveau, commissioned him to do a decorative frieze called *A Woman’s Love and Life*. But his hopes of finding new opportunities for his art were dashed, despite the occasional collaboration with art dealers. For most of his designs and works in the field of the decorative arts, Denis stuck to creating single works of art meant to embellish and spiritualize life at home, like his *Paravent aux colombes* (Screen with Doves).

It was above all in architecture that Denis aspired to return painting to its rightful place. Over the years, he would prove to be one of the main actors of the modern movement to renovate profane and sacred decoration, often setting aside the easel for scaffolding. His model in this instance was Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, the muralist whom he had revered since his youth for his ability to combine decorative synthesis and monumental solemnity. Starting in the early 1890s, art lovers were entrusting him with the decoration of their Parisian residences, like Ernest Chausson, who commissioned him to do an *April* ceiling. After 1900, he broadened his repertory of subjects by illustrating the great literary tales, such as *The Story of Psyche* for Ivan Morozov’s town house in Moscow, or the *Decameron* for Charles Stern’s music room in Paris.

With the end of World War I the second part of Maurice Denis’s equally productive career began and would continue until his death in 1943.

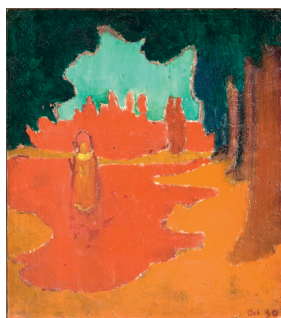


## 3. Press images

The images of the exhibition are available here [www.mcba.ch/presse](http://www.mcba.ch/presse)

The images are duty free for the duration of the exhibition. Any reproduction of them must mention the following: author, title of the work of art, date, name of the museum, name of the photographer, and the copyright.

Other indications (dimensions, techniques, etc.) are welcome but not obligatory. Once the document is published, we would be grateful if a copy was sent to the museum's press department: Service de presse, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne.



1. Maurice Denis, *Tache de soleil sur la terrasse* (*Sunlight on the Terrace*), 1890

Oil on cardboard, 23.5 × 20.5 cm

Paris, Musée d'Orsay, acquired in 1986

Photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /

Patrice Schmidt



3. Maurice Denis, *Régates à Perros-Guirec* (*Regatta at Perros-Guirec*), 1892

Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 42.2 × 33.5 cm

Paris, Musée d'Orsay, acceptance-in-lieu acquisition, 2001

On loan to the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Quimper

Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) /

Hervé Lewandowski



2. Maurice Denis, *Portrait de l'artiste sous les arbres* (*Self-Portrait under the Trees*), 1891

Oil on canvas, 21.5 × 80 cm

Private collection

Photo © Catalogue raisonné Maurice Denis / Olivier Goulet



4. Maurice Denis, *La Cuisinière* (*The Cook*), 1893

Oil on canvas, 81.6 × 59.3 cm

Private collection

Photo © All rights reserved

# MUSÉE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE



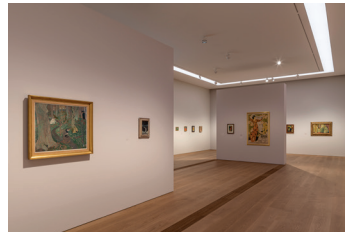
5. Maurice Denis, *Les Muses (The Muses)*, 1893  
Oil on canvas, 171 × 137.5 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, acquired in 1932  
Photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /  
Patrice Schmidt



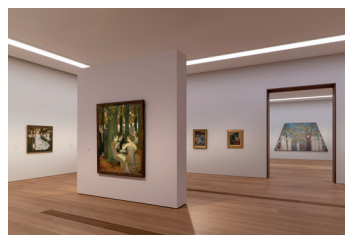
6. Maurice Denis, *Légende de chevalerie (Trois jeunes princesses)*, 1893  
Oil on canvas, 46.5 × 38.5 cm



7. Maurice Denis, *Baigneuses ou Plage au petit temple (Bathers, Beach with a Small Temple)*, 1906  
Oil on canvas, 114 × 196 cm  
Lausanne, musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, acquired with the  
support of the Association des Amis du Musée in 1996  
Photo © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne



8. Exhibition view / *Maurice Denis. Amour*  
Photo © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne



9. Exhibition view / *Maurice Denis. Amour*  
Photo © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne



## 4. Comments on 6 presented works



Maurice Denis, *Tache de soleil sur la terrasse*  
(*Sunlight on the Terrace*), 1890  
Oil on cardboard, 23.5 × 20.5 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, acquired in 1986  
Photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /  
Patrice Schmidt

This small painting in a nearly square format depicts the terrace of the Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where Maurice Denis was in the habit of taking walks. Here he applies Paul Gauguin's Synthetist principles, which were picked up and passed along by Paul Sérusier and adopted by the Nabis in the late 1880s. People out for a stroll, reduced to mere silhouettes, lend the space its rhythm while echoing the vertical lines of the tree trunks. At the center of the composition, a female figure advances in surroundings transformed by the setting sun. The warm and cool colors are deftly fitted together. The resulting vibrations are materialized by the slight almost hesitant chaplets of light accenting the outlines of the shapes and suggesting the technique of cloisonné stained glass.



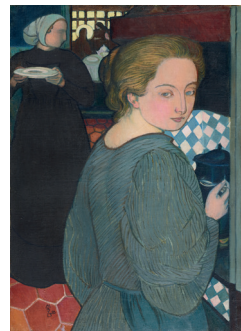
Maurice Denis, *Portrait de l'artiste sous les arbres*  
(*Self-Portrait under the Trees*), 1891  
Oil on canvas, 21.5 × 80 cm  
Private collection  
Photo © Catalogue raisonné Maurice Denis / Olivier Goulet

In this self-portrait, Maurice Denis depicts himself standing and in three-quarter view, his eyes looking off into the distance but his gaze turned inward. The elegant figure is dressed in black in harmony with the two dark tree trunks framing him and whose branches droop in decorative arabesques. In a freely applied pointillism, he covered the canvas with tiny fragmented daubs of paint, juxtaposing blue and pink tonalities, such that his face seems surrounded by light. Denis liked walking in the Saint-Germain-en-Laye woods. He notes in his diary, "The Nabi isolates himself in the deserted forest. He commands the leaves to enrhythm themselves according to his wishes, as the lodestone orders iron filings about as it pleases. And yet he bewails his solitude, to the subdulous song of the larvae in the heavy forest."



Maurice Denis, *Régates à Perros-Guirec*  
(*Regatta at Perros-Guirec*), 1892  
Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 42.2 x 33.5 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, acceptance-in-lieu acquisition, 2001  
On loan to the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Quimper  
Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) /  
Hervé Lewandowski

Maurice Denis depicts here the festivities organized in the port of Perros-Guirec for the feast of St. James in late July. In the foreground Breton women are shown in their traditional costume. On the water can be seen a regatta of red-sailed fishing boats, swimmers competing in races, and pleasure boats with their bellying white sails. By forgoing linear perspective while locating the horizon line high up in the composition, the artist disrupts the organization of the pictorial planes. The strong vertical line of the mast allows Denis to unify the whole, while the swirls and coils of its decorative pattern echo the undulating foam on the sea. The shades of orange lighting the boat's hull, the celadon greens of the sails, and the slightest pink tinting of the sky – these nuances tell us much about the mastery of the painter, a born colorist.



Maurice Denis, *La Cuisinière* (*The Cook*), 1893  
Oil on canvas, 81.6 x 59.3 cm  
Private collection  
Photo © All rights reserved

Marthe Denis is depicted here in the small house the newlyweds occupied during their honeymoon in Perros-Guirec. Her household activities conjure up in the painter's mind the image of Jesus's visit to the two sisters in Bethany. The eye naturally passes from Marthe to the Breton maid, then on to Christ, whose halo stands out against the window. Marthe's striped dress is eminently graphic with its scribbles and cursive lines, and fits into the network of geometric shapes formed by the brick-red tomettes, the distinctive hexagonal tiles on the floor, the blue earthenware tiles on the kitchen work surface, and the folds of the large curtain running along the righthand edge of the picture. This portrait in which the sacred and the profane feely mix is akin to the paintings of the Flemish Primitives that Denis had so admired in the museums of Brussels the year before.



Maurice Denis, *Les Muses (The Muses)*, 1893  
Oil on canvas, 171 × 137.5 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, acquired in 1932  
Photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /  
Patrice Schmidt

Maurice Denis takes up a classic theme here, the nine Muses. The model for each is the painter's wife, Marthe. On the terrace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which is strewn with red and yellow chestnut leaves, young women are depicted strolling amid a timeless setting, while sporting elegant modern dresses. As inspiring powers, they are also intermediaries between men and something beyond reality. A tenth woman, seen from the rear in the distant background, symbolizes the elevation of the soul. The monumental format, the unity of a color range limited to the warm hues of autumn, the synthetic, simplified and stylized treatment of the landscape and the figures, and the dark outlines which clearly distinguish each shape within the whole – everything contributes to the decorative effect of this large picture.



Maurice Denis, *Baigneuses ou Plage au petit temple (Bathers, Beach with a Small Temple)*, 1906  
Oil on canvas, 114 × 196 cm  
Lausanne, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, acquired with the support of the Association des Amis du Musée in 1996  
Photo © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne

The beach theme took on new importance in Denis's work when he had his "classic conversion" in 1898. A celebration of light and sun, this bathing scene takes place in Le Pouldu in Brittany. The women and children are turned towards the ocean. The shore is depicted as a place of spiritual union with nature, which is ritualized by the plunge into the waves. Decorative and rigorously composed, the piece combines ancient elements (the Doric temple, the white drapery) and modern ones (the beach dresses, the boaters on two heads). Grouped in triads, the bodies alternate rhythmically, displaying a modeling and shaping akin to the sculpture of Aristide Maillol. With the reds of a dress and a bonnet, two figures contrast sharply with the insistent range of blues and pinks.

## 5. Public engagement – Public outreach service

Events in conjunction with exhibition (concert, lecture): See the announcements on our internet pages → [www.mcba.ch](http://www.mcba.ch)

Guided tour (in English)  
First Sunday of the month  
at 2 pm

Guided tour (in French)  
with Catherine Lepdor,  
co-curator of the exhibition.  
Thursday 18 March and  
29 April at 6 : 30 pm,  
and Sunday 16 May at 4 : 30 pm

Guided tour for the Amis du Musée,  
with Catherine Lepdor,  
co-curator of the exhibition.  
Thursday 4 March at 6 pm,  
Thursday 11 March at 12 : 30 pm

Guided tour (in French)  
Thursdays at 6 : 30 pm,  
Sundays at 11 am \*

\* ( except for the last Thursday and  
the first Sunday of the month )

Noon tour (in French)  
First Tuesday of the month  
at 12 : 30 pm

Adults workshop

“Jeux de couleurs” with the artist  
and illustrator Anaëlle Clot

Saturday 20 March, from 2 pm to 5 pm

Discovery of the rich palette of Maurice Denis,  
and putting it into practice in the public work-  
shop.

CHF 70.– / 50.–

Kids Workshop

“Un tableau en mouvement”

Saturday 13 March, 10 April, 8 May, 2 pm to 5 pm

Creation of a very short animated film, image by  
image, bringing Maurice Denis’s  
paintings to life

8–13 years old, CHF 15.–

Family tour

“Paysages à tout âge”

Sunday 4, 11, 18 April,  
3 pm to 4 : 30 pm

Dissect the composition of Maurice Denis’s  
backgrounds, then the whole family will  
make a collage landscape that they can take  
home with them

7 years old and up, adult admission fee

Reservations (limited number of participants) →  
[mcba.ch/agenda](http://mcba.ch/agenda)

Programme for schools and private tours →  
[mcba.ch](http://mcba.ch)

# MUSEE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LE NABI

## 6. Book and Giftshop – Le Nabi Café-Restaurant

### Book- and Giftshop

In the MCBA Book- and Giftshop you can find books on all of the shows currently on view, and a selection of publications on artists in the collection, the history of art and techniques and mediums, books for children, along with a range of items (notebooks, jewelry, scarves, pencils, etc.).



#### Hours:

Hours: Tues., Fri., Sat., Sun.: 10 am – 6 pm  
Thurs.: 10 am – 8 pm / Mon. closed  
Good Friday ( 2.4.21 ), Easter Monday ( 5.4.21 ),  
Ascension Day ( 13.5.21 ) : open

#### Contact and order:

shop.mcba@vd.ch

### Café-Restaurant Le Nabi

Before or after your visit, Le Nabi invites you to take a break. The menu, reflecting the open, welcoming spirit of our museum, is both family oriented and refined. Drinks are all artisanal and the menu emphasizes local products that change with the seasons.



#### Hours:

Tues., Fri., Sat., Sun.: 10 am – 6 pm  
Thurs.: 10 am – 8 pm / Mon. closed  
Good Friday ( 2.4.21 ), Easter Monday ( 5.4.21 ),  
Ascension Day ( 13.5.21 ) : open

#### Reservations :

T. +41 21 311 02 90 / info@lenabi.ch

## 7. MCBA partners and sponsors

The MCBA building was inaugurated on 5 April 2019. The museum's new premises were built by the canton of Vaud with the generous support of the City of Lausanne and the following private partnerships:

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Les Mûrons

Fondation  
Gandur pour l'Art



Nestlé



Abakanowicz art  
and culture charitable  
foundation

Loterie Romande



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