

# Anatomy of the Muse: In Misia's Footsteps

Clara Marcellán



Fig. 1  
Pierre Bonnard. *Misia Godebska*, 1908  
Oil on canvas, 145.5 x 114.5 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

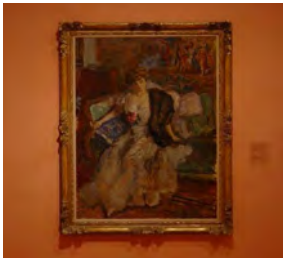


Fig. 2  
Rooms in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2012



Fig. 3  
Pierre Bonnard  
*Double portrait of Misia*, 1906  
Pen and ink drawing,  
140 x 147 mm.  
Private collection



Fig. 4  
Pierre Bonnard  
*Misia with Roses*, 1908  
Oil on canvas,  
114 x 146.5 cm.  
Private collection

Maria Zofia Olga Zenajda Godebska: Misia Godebska. Misia Natanson. Misia Edwards. Misia Sert. All are the names of Misia (1872–1950), the Belle Époque muse known as the “Queen of Paris.” The Musée d’Orsay revisited her reign in an exhibition during the summer of 2012 in which one of her portraits painted by Pierre Bonnard and belonging to the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza was on display [fig. 1]. That event allowed us to become more familiar with the woman who usually observes us imperiously from her wall in Room 33 [fig. 2].

A brief summary of her biography places Misia at the very centre of the cultural life of her age. She was born in 1872 in St. Petersburg, the daughter of the Polish sculptor Cyprian Godebski and his Belgian wife, Sophie Servais, who died in childbirth. Misia was raised near Brussels by her maternal grandmother, surrounded by musicians like Franz Liszt. She learned to play the piano under Gabriel Fauré and continued her studies in Paris near her father’s new family. In 1893, she married her cousin Thadée Natanson, the editor of the art and literary magazine *La Revue blanche*, and she became the muse of the artists, writers and musicians associated with that publication. Around 1904, she divorced her husband to marry the millionaire businessman Alfred Edwards. Their marriage lasted for five years, during which Misia became a patron of the arts in addition to her status as a muse, supporting Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. In 1920 she wed for the third and last time, to the Catalan painter Josep Maria Sert. She died in 1950, surrounded by friends like Coco Chanel and Jean Cocteau.

## Misia by Bonnard

The best way to reconstruct Misia’s path is to follow her footsteps through the literary and artistic creations of her contemporaries. In her early twenties, the wife of Thadée Natanson hosted gatherings in their country house in Villeneuve-sur-Yonne. Their illustrious guests accompanied them for long periods that resulted in portraits of Misia reading, writing and playing the piano, and poems dedicated to her. Bonnard, who remained close to Misia over the course of her subsequent marriages, has bequeathed to us a considerable gallery of paintings related to her, among which the portrait in the Museo Thyssen stands out prominently since, as Guillermo Solana has remarked, it is one of the most ambitious.<sup>1</sup>

The incubation of *Misia Godebska* begins with a curious drawing dated 1906 that was also featured in the exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay [fig. 3].<sup>2</sup> In the drawing Bonnard added a nude sketch to the figure of Misia clothed, one of the few occasions in which she agreed to pose that way.<sup>3</sup> This double portrait in pen and ink is halfway between the composition in the Museo Thyssen and another canvas he painted of her in 1908, *Misia with Roses*, now in a private collection [fig. 4]. In that painting, the artist

reproduced her pose in the drawing exactly, while in the Museo Thyssen's canvas it appears inverted. And, while in *Misia with Roses* the sitter is distracted by the lapdog cavorting beneath the side table, in *Misia Godebska* she appears lost in thought, with an expression more like that of the drawing. Bonnard focuses one's attention on her powerful, full figure, which he adorns with a fur stole and an aigrette in her hair.

Bonnard's Misa in this portrait appears surrounded by the signs of luxury that her marriage to Alfred Edwards permitted. Behind her one can make out the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tapestries that adorned her parlour in their residence on the rue de Rivoli, for which Misa commissioned four panels by Bonnard to complement them.<sup>4</sup> As Misa later recalled, around 1910, "Edwards having allowed the lease of the rue Rivoli to lapse, as he never set foot in it, I settled down in a lovely apartment on the Quai Voltaire. Bonnard painted a very fine mural for my big *salon*, and soon I was able to bring all my friends together there."<sup>5</sup> This work she commissioned presided over her private salon at the Quai Voltaire until 1915, when she sold the panels and they ended up separated among different owners. This was not the fate of her portrait, however, which Misa probably kept until the end of her life.<sup>6</sup>

### Misia, icon of elegance

In addition to the Misa portrayed in the intimacy of her home, there is the public Misa, whose appearances came to be events of some importance. As a result of her marriage to Alfred Edwards, she gained access to the beau monde, to the world of haute couture and fine jewellery, and she began to appear frequently in the society pages. After she had visited the theatre in 1907, a newspaper reported on her dress in great detail: "Mme. Alfred Edwards. [...] In her hair, bluish-grey feathers; marvellous pearls, incomparable diamonds, magnificent rings on every finger, and what a bracelet! [...] Without gloves. With such jewellery, she is the height of chic."<sup>7</sup> The aigrette in her hair mentioned here is probably the one she is wearing in the portrait now in this museum [fig. 5], though because of the painter's technique, it practically disappears amid the sumptuousness and sensuality of the entire composition.

In addition to the anecdotes surrounding the objects belonging to her, Misa is also linked to the history of fashion with pieces like the necklace she commissioned from Cartier in 1934, thirteen strands of spherical ruby beads tied to two palmettes likewise adorned with rubies by means of a silk string falling down her back.<sup>8</sup> Her name can turn up in the least expected of places. Coincidentally, for instance, we encountered her not long ago in the exhibition *Cartier* held at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza from October 2012 to February 2013. One of the objects presented on that occasion, a platinum cigarette case, bears Misa's signature on the inside of the lid, along with those of

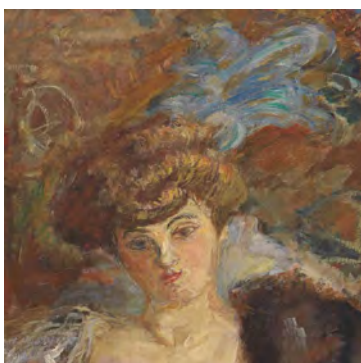


Fig. 5  
Detail showing the aigrette that Misa  
is wearing in Bonnard's portrait



Fig. 6  
Cartier cigarette case, 1931  
Platinum, baguette-cut diamond,  
10 x 7.75 x 7.25 cm.  
Sold to Baron Adolph de Meyer



Fig. 7  
Horst P. Horst, Misia in the Gallerie dell'Accademia  
in Venice wearing clothes designed by Chanel, 1947.  
Horst Estate, Miami



Fig. 8  
Reproduction of Bonnard's portrait of Misia,  
together with images of salons, in *Un siècle  
d'élégance française* (pp. 102-3)

other friends of the owner [fig. 6]. Among them is Coco Chanel, one of the people closest to Misia after they met in 1917.

Misia introduced Chanel into her circle of artist friends when she was still a promising young fashion designer, and as a result, Chanel was soon collaborating on the creation of costumes for the ballet and the theatre. Both women would later compete in matters pertaining to patronage and, despite temporary periods when they grew further apart, they would over the years support each other in their sentimental difficulties, illnesses, and other setbacks. In her mature years, Misia allowed her friend to look after her, and she assisted Chanel on numerous projects—the launching of a new perfume, a trip to Hollywood... She also showed off Chanel's mythical designs, with an effect not dissimilar to that of being the subject of paintings [fig. 7]. Accordingly, the final image of Misia on her deathbed was in fact the work of her friend the designer, who dressed her and applied her makeup. Once more, Misia became a work of art. Curiously, the attire Chanel chose for her, a white dress and a rose on her breast, recalls her appearance as she was immortalized forty years earlier in the portrait now in the Thyssen Museum.

During her life, Misia had already entered the history books as an icon of elegance. In 1943, Nicole Vedrès published *Un Siècle d'élégance française*, in which she included the work by Bonnard that occupies us here [fig. 8]. The elegance that Misia symbolized is defined in the book's prologue in the following way: "But elegance alone endures, by virtue of qualities stronger than anything hereditary, stronger than any habit of the eye or of the spirit: For it is an art of the *personnage*, and in this country there are always those born to renew it, to invent on their own persons what others compose on canvases or on walls."<sup>9</sup>

### Between reality and fiction

The image of Misia—her public persona and the way in which she was represented in the press or in such texts as those we have already cited—intermingles with the fictional characters she inspired. On 7 December 1908, a play by Thadée Natanson and Octave Mirbeau, *Le Foyer*, premiered at the Comédie Française. According to the catalogue published by the Musée d'Orsay on the occasion of *Misia, Reine de Paris*, the work was based on Natanson and Misia's divorce following the pressures and trickery of Edwards, who was obsessed with making her his wife.

In 1906, Edwards himself had written the comedy *Par ricochet*, in which he allegedly presents the stratagem with which he managed to get Misia to separate from her first husband in order to marry him. The work was staged that same year, with the unfortunate outcome that the lead actress, Geneviève Lantelme, became Edwards's lover, leading to his split with Misia in 1907.

Marcel Proust, who referred to Misia as “a monument of history,” would create two characters inspired in her for *À la recherche du temps perdu*: Madame Verdurin and Princess Yourbeletieff. Proust characterizes Misia’s relationship with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, which she discovered and took under her wing in 1908, thus:

and when, with the prodigious flowering of the Russian Ballet, revealing one after another Bakst, Nijinsky, Benois, and the genius of Stravinsky, the youthful sponsor of all those new great men appeared wearing on her head an immense, quivering aigrette that was new to the women of Paris and that they all sought to copy, it was widely supposed that this marvellous creature had been imported in their copious luggage, and as their most priceless treasure, by the Russian dancers [...].<sup>10</sup>

Her close friendship with Diaghilev led to fruitful collaborations among the writers, artists, designers and musicians of her circle—as we have noted, she was a consummate pianist herself—resulting in revolutionary performances.

In 1914, Jules Case published his novel, *Le Salon du Quai Voltaire*, which may well have been inspired in the salons of Cécile Sorel and Misia Godebska, as a contemporary review suggested, since both women resided on that street along the Seine. In one passage, he describes the parlour of one of the characters, which recalls Misia’s:

[Among his latest acquisitions] other canvases by very young painters were plentiful. Their colours and line perturbed the eye and the spirit. He looked at them little and pointed at them with an offhand gesture. He protected these bold Neo-impressionists in the same way that he extolled the Symbolist poets, whose works, luxuriously bound, were lined up behind the gilded lattice of a delightful display cabinet.<sup>11</sup>

The dramatization of her life would persist into her later years, when her popularity began to wane. Jean Cocteau, a protégé of Misia’s since 1910, found inspiration in the trio she formed with her third husband, the Spanish painter Josep Maria Sert, and his mistress Roussie Mdivani, a Georgian-Russian sculptor, for characters in Cocteau’s *Les Monstres sacrés*. The work was premiered in 1940 at the Théâtre Michel in Paris.

### **An enduring character**

Misia, immortalized in every possible way, was highly cognizant of the construction of her *personnage*, her “character.” When Josep Maria Sert, her great love, died in 1945, Misia, now half blind and dependent on morphine, related her life to the journalist Boulos Ristelhueber, with whom she would live until her death. Certain lacunae are conspicuous, for example her relationship with Chanel or other episodes that she

censors. The Spanish edition, which appeared in 1983, was translated and annotated by her nephew by marriage, Francisco Sert. This edition rectifies many of the (probably intentional) imprecisions, omissions and adjustments to her biography that appear in the French original, from 1952.<sup>12</sup> In his preface, Francisco Sert identifies one of the keys to understanding the way in which Misia herself constructed her character: to live projected onto others. Her willingness to invite others to paint her, dedicate musical compositions and poems to her, dress her up, and to talk about her—in short, her ability to construct a character for herself—had a playful dimension that Misia recalled in the following terms: “It is with a slightly amused smile that I evoke the image of the carefree and tremulous young woman that I was at that time, hung as I am now on the walls of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg or appearing in the catalogue of the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia.”<sup>13</sup> Misia would continue to smile if she saw herself today on the walls of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, and she would have been even more amused to wander through the exhibition, *Misia, Reine de Paris*.

## Notes

- 1 Remarks from a lecture Solana gave on *Misia Godebska* at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza on 25 April 2009, part of the lecture series “Retratos de mujer en el Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza” (Female portraits in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza).
- 2 See the catalogue entry in Isabelle Cahn et al., *Misia, Reine de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d’Orsay; Gallimard, 2012), p. 174.
- 3 Renoir’s insistence that Misia appear with a lower neckline in his portraits is well known, and in her memoirs she laments not having posed nude for the Impressionist painter. See Misia Sert, *Misia and the Muses: The Memoirs of Misia Sert* (New York: J. Day, 1953), p. 82. The French original was published as *Misia* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).
- 4 Gloria Lynn Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Roussel, 1890–1930*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), pp. 176–78.
- 5 Sert, *Misia and the Muses*, p. 113.
- 6 The first indication of another ownership appears in the Sotheby’s auction catalogue from 28 June 1961, where the portrait is described as “the Property of a Gentleman” with no further indications about its provenance. After the auction it ended up in the possession of the Spencer A. Samuels and Co. gallery, and Baron Thyssen acquired it in 1970.
- 7 Viscountess Odette, “Carnet Mondain,” in *La Revue Diplomatique*, no. 52, 29 December 1907, p. 12.
- 8 Misia provided the precious stones for this piece, which La Maison Cartier mentions in its catalogues and essays on its pieces inspired in South Asian motifs from the 1930s. See Judy Rudoe, *Cartier, 1900–1939* (Paris: Somogy Éditions d’Art, 1997), 164; and Hans Nadelhoffer, *Cartier* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 175.
- 9 Nicole Vedrès, *Un siècle d’élégance française* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1943), p. 11.
- 10 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 4, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1992), p. 193.
- 11 Jules Case, *Le Salon du Quai Voltaire* (Paris: Société d’Éditions Littéraires et Artistiques, 1914), p. 137.
- 12 Misia Sert, *Misia*, trans. Francisco Sert (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1983).
- 13 Sert, *Misia and the Muses*, p. 44.