

# From 'Portraits d'artistes' to the interviewer's portrait: interviews of modern artists by Jacques Guenne in *L'art vivant* (1925–1930)

Poppy Sfakianaki



Figure 1 Laure Albin-Guillot, *Photograph of Jacques Guenne*, 1932

Anatole France remarked in 1894: 'Interviews are not always faithful. Their processes are vague, and they are susceptible to all kinds of errors and omissions. I know it; thoughts are not always reproduced coherently or in their natural course.'<sup>1</sup> In that same year Emile Zola stated during an interview: 'Interviews are a very complicated thing, extremely delicate, not easy at all. To avoid the inevitable betrayals in this sort of articles where sincerity is the prime quality, there should be stenography. But stenography is cold and dry; it does not render the circumstances or the facial expressions, the mockery, the irony. The newspapers should therefore

<sup>1</sup> 'L'interview n'est pas toujours fidèle. Il est incertain dans ses procédés, et donne prise aux erreurs et aux omissions de tout genre. Je le sais; la pensée n'y est pas toujours reproduite dans sa suite et dans son cours naturel'. Anatole France, 'A propos de l'interview', *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, 26 August 1894, 131. All translations are mine.

entrust interviews to competent people, first-rate writers, extremely skilful novelists, who, they, would be able to put everything back in order.'<sup>2</sup>

As these statements exemplify, it was evident from early on that the published text of an interview was not the exact reproduction of a conversation, but a fiction, an echo of the actual interview, which was a realization that provoked this kind of criticism about its credibility. However, the critics of interviews had to put up with the interviewers' mediation and intervention, since it was widely accepted that it was necessary for artists to be mediatized,<sup>3</sup> that is, to have a presence in the mass media which were recognized as an agent that had the power to shape and disseminate one's public image. In other words, it was acknowledged that the mediated self-presentation of artists via interviews – media events created by and for the press – had a positive impact on the interviewees thanks to the visibility and popularity that they gained in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews were a new form of journalism that gained currency rather quickly in the French press of the late nineteenth century. However, artists' interviews in particular appeared only sporadically until the early twentieth century, mostly in the Parisian art press (e.g., *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, *Montparnasse*, *A.B.C. Magazine*, *Comœdia*) and national newspapers (e.g., *Paris-soir*, *Le Figaro*).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it was only during the interwar period that series of artists' interviews started to appear in the press. By that time, artists had become fully conscious of the function and communicative and commercial power of the mass

<sup>2</sup> 'L'interview est une chose très compliquée, extrêmement délicate, pas facile du tout. Pour éviter les trahisons inévitables dans ce genre d'articles, où précisément la sincérité est la première qualité, il y aurait bien la sténographie. Mais la sténographie est froide, sèche, elle ne rend ni les circonstances, ni les jeux de physionomie, la moquerie, l'ironie. Les journaux devraient donc confier les interviews à des têtes de ligne, à des écrivains de premier ordre, des romanciers extrêmement habiles qui eux sauraient tout remettre au point'. Henri Leyret, 'M. Émile Zola interviewé sur l'interview', *Le Figaro*, 12 January 1893, 4.

<sup>3</sup> On the use of the concept of mediatization, see Rachel Esner and Sandra Kisters, eds, *The Mediatization of the Artist*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Artists' interviews have received limited scholarly attention which is largely focused on contemporary art. See, for instance, Christoph Lichtin, *Das Künstlerinterview: Analyse eines Kunstprodukts*, Bern: Lang, 2004; Dora Imhof and Sibylle Omlin, eds, *Interviews: Oral History in Kunstwissenschaft und Kunst*, Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2010; Julia Gelshorn, 'Interview: Two Are Better than One: Notes on the Interview and Techniques of Multiplication,' *Art Bulletin*, 94:1, March 2012, 33–41; Michael Diers, Lars Blunck and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds, *Das Interview: Formen und Foren des Künstlergesprächs*, Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2013; Jérôme Dupeyrat and Mathieu Harel-Vivier, eds, *Les entretiens d'artistes: de l'énonciation à la publication*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013; Laurence Brogniez and Valérie Dufour, eds, *Entretiens d'artistes: poétiques et pratiques*, Paris: Vrin Editions, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews succeeded in a way the visits to artists' studios that were published in the French press during the nineteenth century. See Rachel Esner, 'Les artistes chez eux. L'image des artistes dans la presse illustrée', in Alain Bonnet, ed, *L'artiste en représentation: images des artistes dans l'art du XIXe siècle*, Lyon: Fage, 2012, 139–149. Paul Gsell was among the first art critics who published artists' interviews. See, for instance, Auguste Rodin, *L'art. Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell*, Paris: B. Grasset, 1911.

media in an increasingly mediatized society<sup>6</sup>. Thus, they were willing to participate in the collaborative project of an interview which contributed, as noted earlier, to the construction of their public image and ultimately – if the project was successful – to the commercial appeal of their work. As Sarah Burns points out, artists learned how to manipulate the media for their own advantage,<sup>7</sup> but at the same time they accepted to be manipulated by the media, ideally to the mutual benefit of both parties. In this context, it is important to stress that this was an interactive game and that it was not only the artist but also the interviewer who could, and did, use the interviews as vehicles through which they shaped their own public image and enhanced their visibility and recognition in the cultural field.

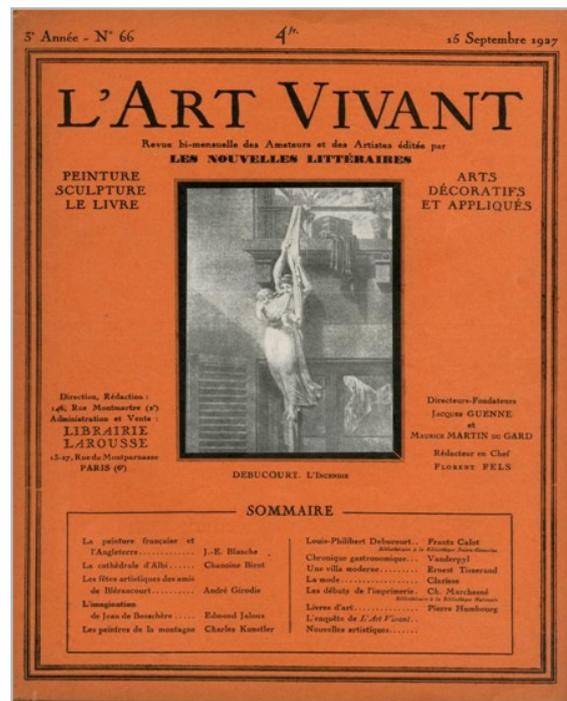


Figure 2 Front cover of *L'art vivant*, 66, 15 September 1927

It is through this perspective that this paper discusses an early set of 17 illustrated interviews with artists published between 1925 and 1930 – that is, when artists' interviews were still not a regular feature in the art press – in *L'art vivant*, one of the most prestigious French art journals. The interviews were conducted by the art critic Jacques Guenne (fig. 1) who, together with Maurice Martin du Gard, founded *L'art vivant* in 1925 as the art supplement of the weekly newspaper *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques* that they jointly managed (fig. 2). The artists interviewed were both established ones and newcomers, French and non-French, old and young, such as Henri Matisse, Moïse Kisling, Marc Chagall, and

<sup>6</sup> For the presence of artists in the press see Laurence Brogniez, Clément Dessy and Clara Sadoun-Edouard, eds, *L'artiste en revues: art et discours en mode periodique*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art & Culture in Gilded Age America*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, 2.

| Name                         | Dates of birth and death | Age at the moment of the interview | Nationality                  | Interview publication in <i>L'Art vivant</i>   |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Bosshard, Rodolphe Théophile | 1889-1960                | 36                                 | Swiss                        | n°21, 1 November 1925, p. 7-11                 |
| Chagall, Marc                | 1887-1985                | 40                                 | Russian, French (since 1937) | n°72, 15 December 1927, p. 999-1004, 1009-1010 |
| Despiau, Charles             | 1874-1946                | 55                                 | French                       | n° 126, 15 March 1930, p. 225-226, 233-235     |
| Favory, André                | 1889-1937                | 36                                 | French                       | n°27, 1 February 1926, p. 85-89                |
| Garets, Odette des           | 1891- [unknown]          | 37                                 | French                       | n°79, 1 April 1928, p. 263-267                 |
| Gimond, Marcel               | 1894-1961                | 35                                 | French                       | n° 128, 15 April 1930, p. 321-322, 327-328     |
| Gromaire, Marcel             | 1892-1971                | 34                                 | French                       | n°34, 15 May 1926, p. 378-383                  |
| Guérin, Charles              | 1875-1939                | 50                                 | French                       | It appears only in the book                    |
| Kisling, Moïse               | 1891-1953                | 33                                 | Polish, French               | n° 12, 15 June 1925, p. 9-12                   |
| Krohg, Per                   | 1899-1965                | 30                                 | Norwegian                    | n° 121, 1 January 1930, p. 5-8                 |
| Laprade, Pierre              | 1875-1931                | 53                                 | French                       | n°96, 15 December 1928, p. 947-957             |
| Lhote, André                 | 1885-1962                | 40                                 | French                       | n°29, 1 March 1926, p. 177-182                 |
| Matisse, Henri               | 1869-1954                | 56                                 | French                       | n° 18, 15 September 1925, p. 1-6               |
| Segonzac, André Dunoyer de   | 1884-1974                | 43                                 | French                       | n°85, 1 July 1928, p. 497-504                  |
| Simon-Lévy                   | 1886-1973                | 40                                 | French                       | n°25, 1 January 1926, p. 4-9                   |
| Terechkovitch, Kostia        | 1902-1978                | 26                                 | Russian, French (since 1943) | n°83, 1 June 1928, p. 439-442                  |
| Wlaminck, Maurice de         | 1876-1958                | 50                                 | French                       | n°55, 1 April 1927, p. 249-253                 |

Figure 3 List of interviewees and interviews conducted by Jacques Guenne

André Favory (see fig. 3 for the full list of interviews and interviewees). Through a close reading of the interviews and by investigating the conditions of their creation and dissemination, this paper has two main goals: on the one hand, it demonstrates how the artists presented themselves and their work as well as what strategies Guenne employed in order to communicate a pleasing and attractive public image of the interviewees to the public. On the other hand, it argues that these interviews not only shaped the public image of all parties involved, but also revealed the interviewer's approach to art and the aesthetic views that he promoted via *L'art vivant*.

### Creating an illusion: structure and techniques

The general title of the series of interviews was 'Portraits d'artistes' (fig. 4). In fact, the interviews constituted the sequel to an earlier series of interviews of the same title conducted by Florent Fels for *Les Nouvelles littéraires* between 1923 and 1924. This weekly newspaper, which combined the format of a newspaper with the contents of a magazine, was published by Larousse and aimed at an innovative form of literary journalism. The interviews of Frédéric Lefèvre with important authors, entitled 'Une heure avec...', and those of Fels with artists, served this purpose and played a determining role in the newspaper's success.<sup>8</sup> Du Gard and Guenne adapted *L'art vivant* to the philosophy and strategy of *Les Nouvelles*

<sup>8</sup> The first issue of *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques* appeared in 21 October 1922 in the format of a daily newspaper. See Hélène Favart, 'Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques', in Martine Bercot and André Guaux, eds, *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises. Le XXe siècle*, Paris: Librairie générale française, 1998, 807; Yvon Houssais, 'Les Nouvelles littéraires ou l'invention de l'actualité', in *Fabula / Les colloques: Les Nouvelles littéraires: une idée de littérature?*, URL : <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document1452.php> (accessed:3 September 2019).



Figure 4 First page of the interviews with Henri Matisse and Simon-Levy

*littéraires*, lying midway between a specialized art journal and a magazine for the general public.<sup>9</sup> Being aware of the impact of the interviews by Lefèvre and Fels, it is probable that they thought that it was a good idea to integrate this genre in the magazine. However, as Fels was appointed editor-in-chief of the magazine, it was Guenne who took over the interviews with artists. He did so on a much bigger scale than Fels, since his illustrated interviews occupied five to eleven out of the 40 pages of the issues in which they appeared.

All of Guenne's interviews are more or less identical in terms of structure: the first part is a long introduction on French art, the second part is a detailed presentation of the artists and their work and the last part consists of questions and answers often preceded by a short description of the circumstances of the interview. What Guenne created through his interviews was what Philippe Lejeune has described as 'an investigation of one's identity, vivid and full of intuition, based on the extensive knowledge of one's work and attentive listening.'<sup>10</sup>

In his introductions, Guenne creates the framework that allows him to integrate the interviewees or their artworks into the French tradition by placing them within a genealogy of great masters of French painting, generally starting with Delacroix, continuing in a linear fashion with the realists and the impressionists,

<sup>9</sup> On *L'art vivant* see Yves Chevretil-Desbiolles, *Les revues d'art à Paris, 1905–1940*, Paris: Ent'revues, 1993, 229–235.

<sup>10</sup> 'Une enquête d'identité, vivante et pleine d'intuitions, fondée sur une connaissance étendue de l'œuvre et sur une écoute attentive'. Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un autre. L'autobiographie de la littérature aux médias*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980, 108.

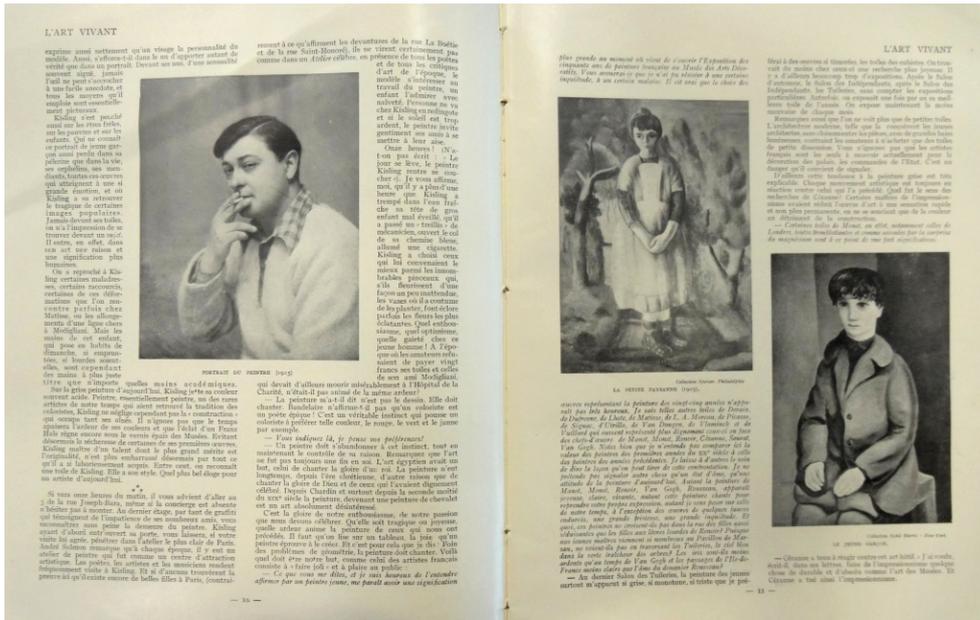


Figure 5 Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Moïse Kisling', *L'art vivant*, 12, 15 June 1925, 10-11

and ending with Cézanne. This was quite important especially for the legitimization of the work of young artists who were interviewed such as Rodolphe-Théophile Bosshard and Favory. Then, Guenne draws favourable portraits of the artists. He uses a flowery language to describe their facial features, their outfits and some of their habits, while for the first five interviews he accompanies his texts with photos of the artists that are meant to visually acquaint the readers with them (Fig. 5). He praises their art production, especially the recent one, for its originality, sensitivity and lyricism, and draws attention to their personality by showing them to be intelligent, humble, patient, and most of all dedicated to their work. For example, in the case of Marcel Gimond, Guenne remarks: 'From the outset, everyone figures out that he is a sculptor. His very hand gestures seem to help him mould his ideas. It is clear that only one world exists for him, the world of forms.'<sup>11</sup> What Guenne also stresses is the artists' sense of regional identity and their connection with the French land regardless of their social status.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he introduces equally enthusiastically Marcel Gromaire as a peasant artist from the North of France who has seen the rugged local figures that he represents and de André Dunoyer de Segonzac as a gentleman farmer, a rural landholder artist from Burgundy who has an ideal experience of his landscapes. But Guenne also praises those who have travelled, discovered and appreciated the French land that they depict in their paintings, as is the case of Maurice de Vlaminck.

Despite the descriptive nature of this section of his interviews, Guenne evokes snapshots of the interviews and of his personal contact with the artists.

<sup>11</sup> 'D'emblée, chacun devine qu'il est sculpteur. Ses gestes mêmes semblent l'aider à modeler ses idées. Il est clair qu'un seul monde existe pour lui, celui des formes'. Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Marcel Gimond', *L'art vivant*, 128, 15 April 1930, 321.

<sup>12</sup> On the matter of regionalism in French art, identified with peasants and the life of the soil see Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Beside physical descriptions, he quotes the artists verbatim providing various pieces of personal or art-related information as well as anecdotal stories revealing, in the words of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, 'an episode from the secret life of the hero'.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in his interview with Vlaminck he mentions that the artist's appearance (tall and stout) did not fit the cliché image of the thin and pale artist. As a result, when a policeman visited him the previous year in his farmhouse for conscription purposes and asked him what his profession was, he was not convinced that he was an artist and registered him instead as a farmer. Another interesting element of Guenne's narrative strategy in his interviews that reinforces the myth of the artists is that in some cases he draws imaginary portraits of the interviewees in their childhood. One such example is the interview with Vlaminck in which he conveys his fantasy of the character of the artist as a child, his relationship with nature and the first time that he painted for fun. Even though such accounts were totally unrelated to reality, they had an impact on the readers and their impression of the artists.

The question-and-answer section is almost always preceded by a few lines in which Guenne explains where the interviews were held, treating these places – be they studios, i.e. the holy sites of artistic creation, or the artists' homes, i.e. their private spaces, or the famous cafes in Montparnasse, i.e. public hubs of observation and exchanges of ideas – as meaningful markers of the artists' identities.<sup>14</sup> For instance, he describes Simon-Levy's plain and unadorned studio associating it indirectly with the simplicity and methodological approach of his work. Or, in André Lhote's interview, he describes the artist's overloaded studio while outlining his exuberant personality, thus treating the former as the product and reflection of the latter. Providing details about the space, time and conditions of the interviews allows Guenne to communicate their particular atmosphere and aura to the readers.

The questions and answers serve as a platform for the artists' self-promotion, mediated by the interviewer. Generally speaking, Guenne focuses on three sets of questions that he repeats in almost every interview: Firstly, he asks biographical questions putting emphasis on the artists' period of apprenticeship. Consequently, the artists emphasize their personal struggle, their persistence, their passion against all sorts of difficulties, personal or systemic. Secondly, Guenne asks questions which give the artists the opportunity to analyse their creative process. Most of the artists present it as the result of a profound need to express themselves and their emotion, which they treat as their guiding force, and thus as a process full of risk, solitude, and experimentation. Thirdly, Guenne asks the artists' opinions on the French artistic tradition and contemporary trends in art. This usually leads to praising the

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, 10–11.

<sup>14</sup> There is vast bibliography on the portrayal of artists' studios in the press. See, for instance, Philippe Junod, 'L'atelier comme autoportrait', in Pascal Griener and Peter J. Schneemann, eds, *Künstlerbilder–Images de l'artiste*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1998, 83–97; Rachel Esner, Sandra Kisters, and Ann-Sophie Lehmann, eds., *Hiding Making – Showing Creation: The Studio from Turner to Tacita Dean*, Amsterdam: AUP 2013; Rachel Esner, "'At Home": Visiting the Artist's Studio in the Nineteenth-Century French Illustrated Press', in Esner and Kisters, *The Mediatization of the Artist*, 15–30.

French artistic tradition and lamenting the current crisis in artistic values and expression. It is worth noting that Guenne's questions as well as the artists' answers are rather sophisticated with many references to specific art works, which means that the interviews were intended for a cultivated readership with at least some specialized knowledge of art rather than for the general public.

Louis Marin has argued that every written conversation must be treated as the fiction of an oral one, with the act of transcription being intended to give the impression of an immediate execution of the ephemeral 'reality' of the dialogue.<sup>15</sup> Taking this into account, we observe that Guenne uses some communication and mediation techniques in order to liven up the texts of the interviews, add a theatrical effect and give the readers the impression that they are present at the interviews. Thus, he seeks to capture moments and gestures using the past and present tenses interchangeably. For example, in his interview with Odette des Garets he gives the following snapshot in between two questions: 'She stood up, poked at the fire which was suddenly revived as soon as the ashes had slowly subsided.'<sup>16</sup> He even tries to communicate the moves and experience of the artist's personal space during an interview. In his interview with Charles Guérin he notes: 'Suddenly, taking me by the arm, he led me towards his bedroom.'<sup>17</sup> Guérin showed Guenne the portrait of his mother and then 'he invites me to enter his bedroom.'<sup>18</sup> Having entered the room, Guenne shares with the reader his enthusiasm upon discovering two unknown paintings of Rousseau as well as Guérin's reaction and comments on them. In another interview, the one with Lhote, Guenne quotes several times the artist who gives answers on aesthetic matters describing and using as examples paintings in his studio that he shows to him. In his account, Guenne uses interchangeably the present and past tenses, which may be interpreted as the result of his effort to convey a past moment into the present as vividly as possible. Often he even tries to convey silences, and thus uses ellipses to signal his silent encouragement to an artist to continue or elaborate on an answer. The use of these techniques in the published transcriptions of the interviews may be treated as equivalent to the modern sound and motion recording technology that is available to interviewers. Both serve the need of the media game to create the illusion of an accurate reproduction of the actual interview, including spontaneous and natural exchanges between the interviewer and the interviewee.

### **The presence of Guenne in the interviews**

The most interesting aspect of Guenne's interviews that distinguishes them from others of the same period, such as those of Fels or the art critic Tériade, is the way in which he uses them to disseminate his personal aesthetic and ideological

<sup>15</sup> Louis Marin, *De l'entretien*, Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1997, 14–15.

<sup>16</sup> 'Elle se leva, tisonna le feu soudain ranimé dès que les cendres eurent lentement tombé'. Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Odette des Garets', *L'art vivant*, 79, 1 April 1928, 267.

<sup>17</sup> 'Soudain, me prenant par le bras, il me conduisit vers sa chambre'. Jacques Guenne, *Portraits d'artistes: Th. Bossard, A. Favory, M. Gromaire, Ch. Guérin, Kisling, André Lhote, Matisse, Simon-Lévy, Vlaminck*, Paris: Marcel Seheur, 1927, 130

<sup>18</sup> 'Et Charles Guérin m'invite à entrer dans sa chambre'. Guenne, *Portraits d'artistes*, 135.

preferences, which also represent those of *L'art vivant*. Both Fels and Tériade pose very brief questions to their interviewees and their introductions to the published interviews are short, often up to ten lines.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, Guenne creates a hybrid form of interview since the long introductions and descriptions that precede the question and answer section make his interviews lie in between an art critical essay and an interview. Thus, he allows himself ample space to express his views, and create the context that he desires for the reception of the artist, manipulating in a way the reader's horizon of expectations. In a similar fashion, some of his questions are quite long – 35 lines the longest one –, and in fact constitute statements rather than questions; subsequently, the artists' answers confirm Guenne's statements, validating his ideas.

One of Guenne's principal aims was to denounce the repression of creativity by the academic and other state institutions. Besides, the term 'art vivant (living art)', the journal's title,<sup>20</sup> represented the art produced and promoted outside such institutions (official Salons, Académie des Beaux-arts, state patronage, the Rome prize). It was more or less identified with independent art that covered a wide spectrum from naturalism to various formal expressions of post-cubism, and was promoted by the Salon des Indépendants, the Salon d'Automne and private galleries. It is not by accident that the only interview that preceded the series of interviews with artists in the journal was the one that Guenne made with Paul Signac in his capacity as president of the Salon des Indépendants, who in this context criticized the academic system and the state salons.<sup>21</sup> In many of his introductions to the interviews, such as those of Matisse and Lhote, Guenne praises the interviewees for not succumbing to a comfortable academic career and for rejecting the 'easy' – as he calls them – academic rules in favour of searching for their own personal idioms of artistic expression.

Furthermore, Guenne denounces the inhuman intellectualism of cubism. The solution that he proposes is the revival of romanticism, which was in any case the aesthetic line that *L'art vivant* promoted through its artistic discourse, and in this context he makes endless references to Delacroix. Though he does not deny Picasso's and Braque's talent, he is critical of the young artists who copied unwisely their cubist path. So, he quotes Kisling stating about his early years in Paris: 'I witnessed the heroic growth of young painting (*jeune peinture*) and I am happy to report that I was not beheaded by the picassist guillotine, which worked so well for several years.'<sup>22</sup> In the same spirit, Guenne asks Bosshard if sensibility is absent

<sup>19</sup> For Tériade's interviews with artists for the Parisian newspaper *L'Intransigeant*, see Poppy Sfakianaki, 'Artists' Confessions to Tériade in *L'Intransigeant*, 1928–1929: The Construction of a Public Image', in Rachel Esner and Sandra Kisters, eds, *The Mediatization of the Artist*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 61–78.

<sup>20</sup> The title of the journal was taken from the book of the same title of the art critic André Salmon (Paris: G. Crès, 1920), an influential book at that time.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Guenne, 'Entretien avec Paul Signac, président du Salon des Indépendants', *L'art vivant*, 6, 25 March 1925, 1–4.

<sup>22</sup> 'J'ai assisté au développement héroïque de la jeune peinture et je suis heureux d'affirmer que je n'ai pas été décapité par la guillotine picassiste, qui a si bien fonctionné pendant plusieurs années'. Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Moïse Kisling', *L'art vivant*, 12, 15 June 1925, 10.

from current art production and the latter answers that most artists give priority to reason instead of creating with their heart. Guenne recognizes Cézanne as the most important modern artist and uses him as a yardstick for younger artists; what he appreciates is how he uses colour to shape forms, in other words the structural value that he gives to colour. Cézanne's value is a common place in all of his interviews. For instance, he often asks his interviewees about the impact of Cézanne on younger artists. Simon-Levy answers this question in a way that confirms Guenne's opinion: 'Some painters – and among those who think they are the best informed – have misunderstood the lesson of the master of Aix. They were much more interested in Cézanne's canvas than in his spirit [...] Cézanne simplified the forms, maybe, but his forms remain vivid, thanks to his coloration [...] they are of great interest to us.'<sup>23</sup> Likewise, when Gromaire is asked a similar question, he states that Cézanne 'is part of our common background.'<sup>24</sup> What Guenne propounds is a modest modernism and art as the product of the artists' subjective vision of nature, an expressive naturalism, a lyrical expression of emotions. He promotes some post-cubist artists, but very selectively so, while he totally ignores the surrealist and abstract artists. Accordingly, his choice of artists to interview serves his vision of art since they represent a middle ground (*juste milieu*) between figurative art and cubism.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, Guenne believes in the supremacy of French culture and thus he persistently presents the art of his French interviewees to be firmly grounded in the aesthetic values of their national tradition. On the other hand, when he interviews foreign artists, he argues that gradual assimilation of the values of French art helped them improve the quality of their work, an argument which is expected to facilitate their endorsement by the French cultural establishment. A typical example is his interview with the Russian artist Kostia Terechkovitch. Probably as a way to promote the artist, Guenne subtitles it 'The influence of French painting: a painter of the School of Paris.'<sup>26</sup> In his presentation of Terechkovitch, Guenne points out that he comes from a bourgeois family, that he grew up studying Sergei Shchukin's collection of French art which was the one that influenced him, and that he was not Jewish. Moreover, foreign artists are often quoted recognizing Paris as the capital of the arts. For instance, Chagall closes his interview by singing the praises of Paris and the Latin spirit. On the French side, when de Segonzac is asked by Guenne if he feels unhappy about the invasion of foreigners to the French

<sup>23</sup> 'Certains peintres – et de ceux qui se croient les mieux informés – ont mal compris la leçon du maître d'Aix. Ils ont été bien davantage tentés par le canevas de Cézanne que par son esprit [...] Cézanne a simplifié les formes, sans doute, mais ses formes restent vivantes, grâce à son chromatisme [...] elles présentent un grand intérêt pour nous'. Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Simon-Levy', *L'art vivant*, 25, 1 January 1926, 9.

<sup>24</sup> 'fait partie du bagage commun'. Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Marcel Gromaire', *L'art vivant*, 34, 15 May 1926, 383.

<sup>25</sup> On the wide range of artists that the term 'juste milieu' covered during the interwar period, see Toby Norris, 'Between the Lines: The *Juste Milieu* in Interwar France', in Natalie Adamson and Toby Norris, eds, *Academics, Pompier, Official Artists and the Arrière-garde: Defining Modern and Traditional in France, 1900-1960*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009, 139-167.

<sup>26</sup> 'Le rayonnement de la peinture française: un peintre de l'École de Paris'.

School, he answers: 'Quite on the contrary. I am pleased, as you are, that France is currently the "home of painting". And there is no doubt that these strangers help us renew our vision. Moreover, our genius always knows how to keep its independence, if it does not refuse to enrich itself with foreign influences.'<sup>27</sup>

Guenne's attitude may justly be treated as patronizing, but it must be stressed that, even through the argument of assimilation, he supported foreign artists at a time when many French art critics expressed xenophobic views.<sup>28</sup>

Another feature which reinforces Guenne's arguments in the interviews is illustration. Apart from the few photos of artists, the interviews include many reproductions of the interviewees' recent works. Guenne seeks to publish emotional, sincere representations of nature, be it a lyric landscape or the human figure, in the form of a palpable nude or a portrait. These categories of illustrations correspond in fact to the artists' analyses of their painting. For instance, Bosshard and Favory explain their love and passion for the female body and Vlaminck, Simon-Levy and Pierre Laprade concentrate on landscape painting because, as they state, they cannot resist the power and sensitivity of nature (fig. 6).

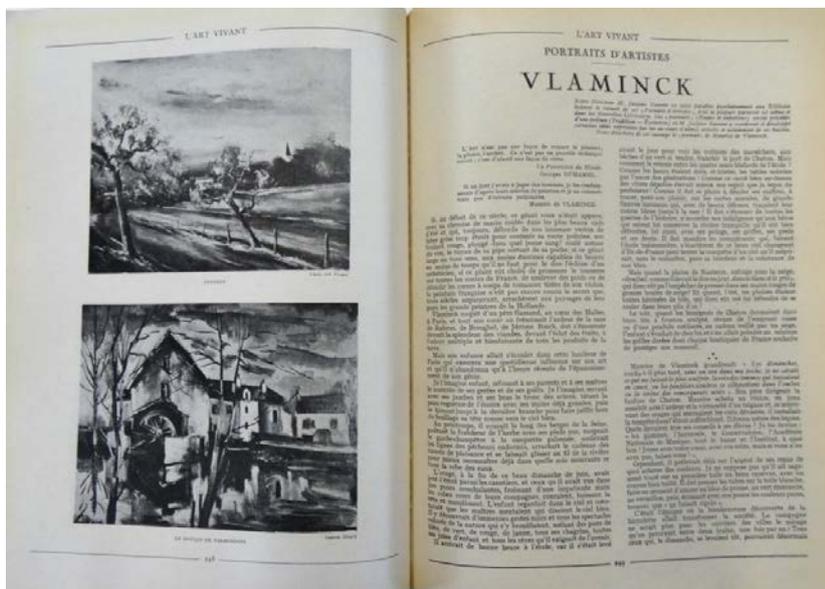


Figure 6 Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. Vlaminck', *L'art vivant*, 55, 1st April 1927, 248-249

## Increasing the interviews' impact

Reprinting collections of interviews in book format had been common practice since the 1890s, but it concerned almost exclusively interviews with literary authors,<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Bien au contraire. Je me réjouis, comme vous, de ce que la France soit actuellement le "foyer de la peinture". Et il n'est pas douteux que ces étrangers nous aident à renouveler notre vision. Au reste, notre génie sait toujours garder son indépendance, s'il ne refuse pas de s'enrichir des influences étrangères'. Jacques Guenne, 'Portraits d'artistes. André Dunoyer de Segonzac', *L'art vivant*, 85, 1 July 1928, 504.

<sup>28</sup>*L'École de Paris, 1904-1929: la part de l'autre*, exhibition catalogue, Paris: Paris musées, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> On this matter see Marie-Françoise Melmoux-Montaubin, 'Du feuilleton à l'interview: une littérature en décadence?', in Sylvie Triaire, Marie Blaise and Marie-Ève Thérenty, eds,

with few exceptions, such as the reprint of the interviews that Fels had conducted with artists for *Nouvelles littéraires*.<sup>30</sup> In his interview with Vlaminck, Guenne announces the forthcoming publication of an anthology of all the interviews that he had done until then. The book was indeed published in that same year, 1927.<sup>31</sup> According to the relevant press releases, Guenne's book was the first instalment of a project of reprint of his interviews, but eventually no other such volume appeared.

Guenne did not simply reprint his interviews. First, his book includes a long introductory chapter in which he puts forward his ideas about the evolution of French art. Second, contrary to the original interviews, the book does not contain any photos of artists. Furthermore, the works that have been selected for reproduction are different from those that had been originally published in *L'art vivant*. The reason for these changes in illustration is not clear.

As for the texts of the interviews, some appear in the book almost identical to those published in *L'art vivant*. However, most of them have changes in the order of questions and answers, parts that have been rephrased, as well as additions or deletions whose purpose seems to be the strengthening or elucidation of the arguments of both Guenne and the artists. Deletions include information of an ephemeral nature, such as remarks on current Salons or exhibitions that at the time of publication of the book had become meaningless. For instance, references to the exhibition *Cinquante ans de peinture française, 1875-1925*, which was discussed in some of the interviews, were altogether omitted in the book. Such occurrences lead us to assume that Guenne wanted to give the edited reprints of the interviews in the book a timeless character.<sup>32</sup>

In some interviews, especially those of Matisse and Kisling, Guenne increases the length of the introductions and in many interviews he omits some parts of the questions transforming the answers into uninterrupted narrations. It is reasonable to assume that it was Fels who provided the model for this emphasis on the narrative, as he himself had omitted all his questions in his book – published two years before that of Guenne – editing the artists' answers into continuous narratives.

Guenne's book was met with positive reviews in the press that praised his approach to art and his portrayal of unknown sides of the artists' lives.<sup>33</sup> Previously, edited versions of a number of his interviews had been published in other art journals and newspapers in France. Such cases include the reprint of the interviews of Matisse in *Le Bulletin de la vie artistique* (1 October 1925), of Vlaminck in *La Presse*

---

*L'interview d'écrivain: figures bibliques d'autorité*, Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2004, 29–48

<sup>30</sup> Florent Fels, *Propos d'artistes*, Paris: Renaissance du livre, 1925.

<sup>31</sup> Guenne, *Portraits d'artistes*, 1927.

<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to find the manuscripts of Guenne's interviews in order to compare them with the published texts both in the journal and the book, and thus examine the stages of editing.

<sup>33</sup> Gabriel-Joseph Gros, 'Les Arts: Portraits d'artistes', *Paris-Midi*, 29 November 1927, 2; Maurice Brillant, "'Portraits d'artistes' ou quelques profitables leçons sur l'art d'aujourd'hui', *Les nouvelles littéraires*, 31 December 1927, 1, 4; Raymond Escholier, 'Les livres nouveaux: Portraits d'artistes par Jacques Guenne', *Le Petit journal*, 10 January 1928, 4.

(20 November 1927), of Chagall in *Paris-Soir* (20 December 1927) and of de Segonzac in the same newspaper (18 July 1928).

Apart from the publication of the book, another event that was intended to promote the aesthetic preferences of Guenne and his art journal was an exhibition which was held at the gallery of Pigalle Theatre in 1930. According to Guenne, the exhibition represented the two great trends of French painting and sculpture, namely the artists 'who are attracted by the rich tradition of realism [and those who] are captivated by style and measure'.<sup>34</sup> The 40 participants included all the artists who had been interviewed by Guenne except Guérin and Segonzac. This was a high-profile exhibition with much exposure in the press; in fact, it was considered the most important exhibition of that year.<sup>35</sup>

### **An interactive media game**

There is no doubt that Guenne's interview project benefited both the interviewees and the interviewer. Belonging to the network of an influential art journal that reached a relatively wide audience thanks to its more popular character and its rather low price (2.50 francs),<sup>36</sup> being promoted by it, as well as having one's interview reprinted in other journals and newspapers, helped especially the young and/or foreign artists increase their visibility and reputation in the Parisian art world, and so did the exhibition at the gallery of Pigalle Theatre. As for the established artists, the interviews allowed them to further cultivate and manage their public image, as they were given a fine opportunity to defend their recent production – either themselves through their responses or via Guenne's words – and enhance their symbolic capital. For instance, that was the case with Matisse, Chagall and Lhote. At a time when Matisse had received negative criticism for his odalisques and the oriental style that he had developed, Guenne argues that his work had now reached its fulfilment and perfection, defending the quality of the colour and light in the artist's paintings that others had criticized as superficial. He also denounces the French museums for not having appreciated enough his work and for not purchasing his paintings while collectors and museums abroad filled their collections with them. In a similar spirit, Guenne defends the art dealer Ambroise Vollard against criticism for his decision to choose Chagall, a Russian, for the illustration of the classic French text *La Fontaine's Fables*. Standing in opposition to this conservative and xenophobic criticism, Guenne explains in detail why the unique imagination of Chagall perfectly suits the text and consequently why he finds his illustration of it successful. Finally, in his interview with Lhote, Guenne

<sup>34</sup> 'qui poussent les uns vers la riche tradition du réalisme tandis que d'autres s'éprennent de style et de mesure'. Jacques Guenne, 'L'exposition de l'art vivant au théâtre Pigalle', *L'art vivant*, 130, 15 May 1930, 385.

<sup>35</sup> 'Exposition de l'art vivant porte un vif succès', *Comœdia*, 18 May 1930, 3; Gabriel-Joseph Gros, 'La semaine artistique', *Paris-Midi*, 24 May 1930, 2.

<sup>36</sup> It would be interesting to know the exact social makeup and geographic distribution of the readership of the journal, but unfortunately I have been unable to find information on this subject. Our assumption is based on the content and price of the journal.

gives him room to defend himself against those who accused him of doing abstract art.

As for Guenne himself, maintaining personal contacts with and interviewing artists confirmed and reinforced his professional status as an important mediator in the art world. In this, he must have followed in a way in the footsteps of his friend Lefèvre, who managed through his interviews to become an important figure of the literary world and build a career in it, even though he did not have any relevant background.<sup>37</sup> There is no information about Guenne's involvement with art prior to the establishment of *L'art vivant*, and if there was one it does not seem to have left any traces. Robert Rey who wrote a review of Guenne's book of interviews describes him as a cultured person who shows great activity.<sup>38</sup> Besides, by sketching the artists' portraits and discussing their art, Guenne confirmed the validity of and thus promoted his own aesthetic ideas, eventually drawing his own personal aesthetic portrait. Furthermore, since his personal views on art coincided with those of the journal that he managed, we may in fact speak of a triangle of cultural actors who exchanged symbolic capital towards promotion of their shared aesthetic ideal of a moderate modernism: Guenne, the artists and *L'art vivant*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, scholarship has treated Guenne's interviews as a useful and rare source that provides direct information, from the artists themselves, about their lives and artistic production, but also throws light on important aspects of the artistic and ideological discourse of the 1920s. However, these interviews should also be examined as media events that shaped, promoted and legitimized the public image of the artists involved. One of them, Guérin, remarked in his interview with Guenne: 'The public tends today to attach more importance to the legend of an artist than to his work proper'.<sup>39</sup> Artists were aware of the benefits of their mediatization, which allowed them to create or revise their public image, provide a retrospective narrative and interpretation of their past seen through the prism of the present, promote and interpret their art, give insights into the artistic process and appeal to potential buyers. As a consequence, they readily participated in the fictionalization of their words and lives via interviews, a modern product of the industrialization and commercialization of culture.

At the same time interviews should be examined as mediation events. Artists need mediators in the media game. In this respect, the importance of the mediating role of the interviewers should not be overlooked. Guenne's interviews exemplify mediation as an act which creates the credible fiction of private exchanges made public, thus contributing to the building of the artists' public image, or legend. Rather than being passive or neutral intermediaries between artists and the

<sup>37</sup> On the case of Frédéric Lefèvre see Catherine Helbert, 'Frédéric Lefèvre et *Les Nouvelles littéraires*', in *Fabula / Les colloques: Les Nouvelles littéraires: une idée de littérature?*, URL : <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document1455.php> (accessed: 3 September 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Rey, 'Les arts. Un livre de M. Jacques Guenne: "Portraits d'artistes"', *L'Europe nouvelle*, 14 January 1928, 43.

<sup>39</sup> 'Le public a la tendance, aujourd'hui, à attacher plus d'importance à la légende d'un artiste qu'à son œuvre elle-même'. Guenne, *Portraits d'artistes*, 131.

Poppy Sfakianaki From 'Portraits d'artistes' to the interviewer's portrait ...

public, interviewers play an active role both by guiding the artists' narration through their questions, thus creating a form of 'mediated autobiography',<sup>40</sup> and by editing the printed versions of the interviews. At the same time, interviewers such as Guenne use their own narratives and questions to promote their personal taste and views on art as well as foster their interests and status in the cultural field.

**Poppy Sfakianaki** is a PhD holder in Art History at the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Crete. Her dissertation on 'Tériade, art critic and publisher (1926-1975)' has received funding from The Panayotis and Effie Michelis Foundation. Her research interests and published articles concern the art press of the twentieth century and mediators in the art world.

popsfakianaki@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

<sup>40</sup> See Philippe Lejeune's analysis of autobiography: Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.