

Louis Valtat, *Les Couturieres (The Dressmakers)*
Dieppe 1869 – 1952 Paris

oil on canvas, 1918
32 by 26 inches (81.3 by 66 cm)
signed at the lower left: 'L Valtat'

provenance: Private collection, France;
Private collection, New York (1970 – 2017)

literature: Jean Valtat, *Louis Valtat: Catalogue de l'Oeuvre Peint, 1869-1952*, Paris, 1977, vol. I, p. 153, no. 1371.

note: Louis Valtat (fig. 1a) was an artist who over a long career worked in several styles and knew most of the significant masters of his time, including the older Impressionists such as Renoir, who even did his portrait (fig. 1b). Born in Dieppe into a well off family and raised in Versailles not far from Paris, Valtat was encouraged by his father, an amateur landscape painter, to pursue art. So in 1887 he moved to Paris to attend the École des Beaux-Arts and had a very traditional training with the esteemed master Gustave Moreau. Then he studied at the more liberal Académie Julian and became acquainted with the young Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, and Eduard Vuillard who were to become the core of a group known as the “Nabis” (prophets). Like them, he developed at the time a style of simple forms and bright colors, applied in bold patterns. In 1894 he collaborated on theatrical designs with Toulouse-Lautrec. Establishing himself as an independent artist in 1890, Valtat began exhibiting at the Salon des Indépendants in 1893. His *Landscape with Figure and Boat* of 1899 (fig. 2a) shows him working in an Impressionist manner with bright dabs of pure color.

Valtat suffered from tuberculosis and to stay healthy spent many fall and winter seasons on the Mediterranean coast. It was there in 1900 that he became friendly with Renoir. That same year he signed a contract (which lasted until 1912) with the canny dealer Ambroise Vollard, who said prophetically: “Have patience. One day Valtat will be perceived as a great painter.”¹ At about the same time he also met in Saint-Tropez Paul Signac, who had been one of the chief Pointillists and was now working in a vivid, free manner. It was also then that Valtat became what has been called “a proto-Fauve,” intensifying his use of strong color for both his figure studies (fig. 2b) and landscapes. In the 1905 Salon he, in fact, exhibited with the painters who were from that moment to be labeled as “Fauves” (wild beasts) for the violence of their brilliant, undiluted use of color. Although some authorities such as Renée Huyghe have not included Valtat as a Fauve,² others such as Françoise Cachin assert that Valtat was and always remained a Fauve.³ However, unlike such fellow Fauves as Matisse and Derain, Valtat despite the power of his color, did not pursue an aggressive course, but tempered his approach with influences from many sources including Puvis de Chavannes, van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and the Nabis. He preferred to be independent, or as Raymond Cogniat (the most sensitive writer on Valtat) observed “detached,”⁴ producing his many interior scenes and flower compositions. Valtat continued in this manner as a prolific painter and print maker until failing eyesight forced him to cease working in 1948.

It is perhaps best to see Valtat, as has been suggested by several writers, as “an intermediary”⁵ between the Nabis and the Fauves, and he certainly found inspiration for the subject matter of the present painting in the works of Vuillard (figs. 3a -f), whose mother was a corset and dressmaker

and ran her business out of her home. Valtat followed his example and made depictions of women sewing one of his favorite themes. From as early in his career as 1896⁶ onward, gentle, intimate scenes of women, often his older sister or his wife, Suzanne Noël, whom he married in 1900, were to be frequently seen stitching, knitting, or embroidering, (figs. 4a-i), usually in interiors but even at the beach.⁷

Shortly after 1915 when Valtat and his family moved into an apartment at 32 avenue Wagram in Paris, which was across from a dress making shop, scenes evoking the workaday atmosphere of this atelier became frequent in his paintings until about 1926. This series of works are almost a photographic documentation of the gestures and activities of the dress makers. In this example of 1918 rendered in bright, direct colors the two women are not actually engaged in the act of sewing but are examining the quality of the material held between them. In graphic fashion the figures are outlined in black with little attempt to give them individuality. Rather, set in a constricted cozy space, with the areas of luminous color recalling the effect of stained glass, this is a work about the relationship of forms and, as in his contemporary still lifes (fig. 4), the lively, sinuous patterns, which Valtat balances with consummate mastery. As Cogniat summed it up: “Coming at a period that often delighted in confusion, Valtat’s art is an admirable example of integrity suffused with the joy of life.”⁸

¹ Quoted in *Louis Valtat*, Musée Galliera, Paris, 1956, p. 3.

² Renée Huyghe, *Les Contemporains*, Paris, 1939.

³ Françoise Cachin, “Des XXe à l’Europe,” *Art de France*, 1963.

⁴ Raymond Cogniat, *Louis Valtat*, Paris, 1963, p. 26.

⁵ See Georges Peillex in *Louis Valtat: Rétrospective centenaire: Supplément au catalogue*, Petit Palais, Geneva, 1969.

⁶ Jean Valtat, *Louis Valtat*, Paris, 1977, p. 15, no. 135.

⁷ See the example of 1915 reproduced in *Louis Valtat*, Geneva, 1969, fig. 46.

⁸ Cogniat, 1963, p. 31.