

Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting. By Bridget Alsdorf. 368 pp. incl. 42 col. + 122 b. & w. ills. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013), \$45. ISBN 978-0-691-15367-4.

Reviewed by RACHEL SLOAN

HENRI FANTIN-LATOIR (1836–1904) has always occupied an ambiguous position in histories of the Paris avant-garde. His style and his affiliations have long seen him characterised as a figure with one foot in the camp of Realism and the other in Impressionism, although his attitude to both groups was marked by scepticism, unease and eventual retreat; the difficulty in slotting his work into any neat categories has condemned it to a sort of limbo, neither truly obscure nor actually given full credit for its historical importance. The last major monographic exhibition was mounted more than thirty years ago, and while scholarly attention has sporadically been devoted to various facets of his *œuvre* since, no other monograph of the same magnitude or import has appeared.¹ The Musée d'Orsay's equivocal attitude toward his most ambitious works, the four dour monumental group portraits of fellow artists, writers and musicians that he painted between 1864 and 1885, encapsulates the conundrum faced – and posed – by his paintings: over the last two decades, the portraits have been shuffled between a corridor connecting the galleries housing Courbet's and Manet's most controversial and innovative canvases and the rooms devoted to the origins of Impressionism.

Bridget Alsdorf's study of Fantin's group portraits – the portion of his *œuvre* that could justifiably be said to have been hiding in plain sight – is therefore especially welcome, as well as long overdue. It is not a monograph in the strictest sense of the word. Rather, Alsdorf offers close readings of the four surviving group portraits, as well as a lost work, situating them firmly within their historical context and relating them to works by contemporaries including Manet, Courbet, Degas, Renoir and Bazille, as well as exploring the problems posed by the concept of the group portrait in concurrent literary and philosophical debates. In refreshing contrast to the hackneyed trope of the artist as isolated, tortured genius that has long dominated the discourse of modernism, *Fellow Men* argues for the centrality of association and homosociability to the formation of artistic identity in the nineteenth century, as well as stressing the challenges posed by the inevitable conflict between collectivity and individualism. Fantin, an artist whose work and writings bear witness to a personality that swung between contradictory desires for sociability and withdrawal, would appear to exemplify this paradox.

The book is divided into five chapters, each of the first four a meticulously researched case study of a single work: *Homage to Delacroix* (1864), *The toast! Homage to truth*

(1865), *A studio in the Batignolles Quarter* (1870) and *Corner of a table* (1872). In each case, Alsdorf reconstructs the development of the portrait through astute use of the extant body of preparatory studies and other related works, at the same time relating the finished painting to contemporary works by colleagues as well as historical antecedents (Rembrandt's *Anatomy lesson of Dr Tulp* in the case of *Corner of a table*; *Las Meninas*, predictably perhaps but unavoidably, in the case of *A studio in the Batignolles Quarter*) and unpacking their critical reception, charting the ways in which both written critiques and caricatures reveal misunderstandings of or – more intriguingly – deep discomfort with Fantin's brand of group portraiture. Her discussion of *Corner of a table* rescues from historical obscurity the five now largely forgotten poets posed with Verlaine and Rimbaud, while also providing much useful background on the impact of the recent defeat in the Franco-Prussian War on attitudes toward male homosexuality; the exploration of the poets' positions within the Paris literary world; and the poets' prickly relationships with each other. All of this proves vital to elucidating what is arguably the most enigmatic of Fantin's group portraits. One of the most refreshing aspects of Alsdorf's approach is that it compels us, once again, to view the portraits as works of art rather than as historical documents, a state to which they have been consigned by countless studies of Impressionism in which they have been treated, more or less uncritically, as little more than group photographs merely offering evidence of associations that existed at decisive moments.

One particularly compelling example of the value of Alsdorf's approach is to be found in her discussion of *The toast!*, the painting whose disastrous reception at the 1865 Salon led Fantin to destroy it (only three fragments – a self-portrait and the heads of James McNeill Whistler and Antoine Vollon – survive). This loss has, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to its neglect in the literature on Fantin; Alsdorf, however, makes a cogent argument for its significance both in Fantin's *œuvre* and in contemporary discourse by painstakingly reconstructing the painting through descriptions in Salon reviews, a caricature by Bertall, the surviving fragments and the twelve known preparatory drawings. In so doing, she restores to our understanding of Fantin's project his most ambitious – albeit his least successful – attempt to integrate realism and allegory into the same work; it was to be the last time he did so. Thereafter he drew a firm line between these two facets of his art that both the avant-garde and the establishment considered incompatible.

The last chapter, which moves beyond Fantin's portraits to address their afterlife in the work of Degas and Renoir, is the only slightly disappointing aspect of this book. Although the attempt to broaden the focus is pertinent and admirable – the section on Renoir's *The artist's studio, rue St-Georges*, in particular – this chapter feels somewhat tacked

on and in need of expansion (it is only half the length of the preceding chapters); the material in it is interesting in its own right and might have been more happily developed at greater length in a separate article.

This is a minor quibble, however, in a book that is, in many ways, an invaluable addition to the literature not only on Fantin-Latour but on the subject of group portraiture. Perhaps the most effective service it performs for Fantin's group portraits is to force us to look at them anew and see them in all their complexity, awkwardness and discomfort, to tease out the many contradictions at their heart.

¹ M. Hoog and D. Druick: exh. cat. *Fantin-Latour*, Paris (Grand Palais) and Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada) 1982. It was reviewed by Ronald Pickvance in this Magazine, 125 (1982), pp.115–17.

Woolwich: Survey of London, volume 48. Edited by Andrew Saint and Peter Guillery. 516 pp. incl. 353 col. + 114 b. & w. ills. (Yale University Press on behalf of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, for English Heritage, London and New Haven, 2012), £75. ISBN 978-0-300-187229.

Reviewed by VAUGHAN HART

IF LONDON'S DISTRICTS were compared to hats, then Kensington would be represented by the fedora, the City by the now largely disappeared bowler, and Woolwich by the cap. Woolwich has always been a down-to-earth sort of place, dishevelled yet dignified with its dockers and soldiers. In the modern era it has been somewhat overshadowed by its better-off neighbour, Greenwich, which absorbed its civic administration in creating the Royal Borough in 1965 and appropriated its polytechnic in forming Greenwich University in 1993. Unlike West Ham or Tottenham, Woolwich lost its football team long ago and thereby suffered a further blow to its identity (Arsenal FC moved to Highbury in 1913). The 'Gunners' were once part of Woolwich's important association with military institutions, represented by the Arsenal, Academy and Artillery barracks. The abandonment of these at the end of the last century, as well as the decline in the docks, has left significant voids in terms of economic well-being and civic character.

Woolwich has been neglected too by architectural historians. This beautifully illustrated and well-researched book, edited by Peter Guillery, sets out to put this right. Taken as a whole it is a biography of Woolwich, from its beginning in pre-Roman times up to today. It is volume 48 of the monumental series of studies that set out to survey the parishes of London, launched at the turn of the last century (and more recently edited as a series by Andrew Saint for English Heritage). The series started with Bromley-by-Bow in 1900