

Introduction

“WE are each of us celebrating some funeral,” Charles Baudelaire wrote in his “Salon of 1846,” in the oft-cited section “On the Heroism of Modern Life.” The poet and critic was referring to the “uniform livery of affliction” that made nineteenth-century men homogeneously distinct: the black frock coat, a sober reaction to the flamboyance of eighteenth-century male dress, was a symbol of universal equality, a great leveler and “an expression of the public soul.”¹ In order to be modern, Baudelaire claimed, artists had to represent this colorless garb and draw out its beauty. They also had to contend with the new social relations it marked.

If modern men were “celebrating some funeral”—of whom or of what Baudelaire does not say—then the modern artist’s task was to represent that ritual, however plain. But as Baudelaire knew, the bourgeois male uniform of black coat and tie obscured social relations as well as embodied them. The critic describes the suited masses awaiting their monumentalization in art as “an immense cortège of undertaker’s mutes (mutes in love, political mutes, bourgeois mutes),” barely differentiated by “slight nuances” in the cut of their clothes and unable to voice the vague grief of their “suffering age.”² In order to make modern life’s heroism appear, artists had to do more than paint contemporary dress. They also had to help people to see what the funeral was for.

We can presume the funeral alludes to the sputtering demise of an old social order, to the death of kings and the pomp and circumstance of the *ancien régime*. But Baudelaire suggests another possibility in the penultimate section of his text, right before “On the Heroism of Modern Life.” In a section titled “Of Schools and Workers” (*Des écoles et des ouvriers*), he laments the loss of collectivity in modern art, specifically, the loss of artistic associations:

The present state of painting is the result of an anarchic freedom that glorifies the individual, however feeble he may be, to the detriment of associations—that is to say, of schools.

In schools, which are nothing else but organizations of inventive force, those individuals who are truly worthy of the name absorb the weak. And that is justice, for an abundant production is only a mind equipped with the power of a thousand arms.

This glorification of the individual has necessitated the infinite division of the territory of art. The absolute and divergent liberty of each man, the division of effort and the disjunction of the human will, have led to this weakness, this doubt and this poverty of invention. A few sublime and long-suffering eccentrics are a poor compensation for this swarming chaos of mediocrity.³

Condemning individualism for suffocating art's "inventive force," Baudelaire characterizes the contemporary art world as an atomized mass of mediocrity in which every artist fancies himself an anarchist and is in thrall only to himself. He continues: "Individuality—that little *place of one's own*—has devoured collective originality. . . . It is the painter that has killed the art of painting."⁴ For Baudelaire, "collective originality" was already a thing of the past in 1846, a remote artistic ideal that would ring hollow in most ears. He mourns the loss of association in the art world as a death—the death of painting and creativity as a result of the death of association—and he characterizes that death as a murder perpetrated by painters themselves. In their quest for originality, painters had destroyed the communities out of which originality springs.

But Baudelaire's language, as usual, is laced with irony and contradiction. If artistic associations are "nothing else but organizations of inventive force," are they so important? If a collective consists of a few strong individuals who "absorb the weak," is it collective at all? And how does a school support individual invention without prescribing it through a chain of command? Note that the individual is a figure of weakness in the beginning of the passage—this is the individual without a school—and then becomes a figure of strength when part of an association in the following sentence. By the final paragraph, the individual is once again a "divergent" and "disjunctive" force, generating weakness, doubt, and creative stagnation. Baudelaire implies that an individual cannot be an individual without an association to distinguish himself within.

Baudelaire's belief in collectivity—both artistic and political—was strongest during the revolutionary period of 1846–51.⁵ His "Salon of 1859" continues his rant against egoism, describing the modern artist (with rare exception) as a "spoiled child,"⁶ but he makes no mention of association as a possible cure. By the time of his obituary essay on the life and work of Eugène Delacroix (1863), he believed in the solitary genius, or, as he wrote earlier, the "sublime and long suffering eccentric"—a category in which he likely included himself. Baudelaire's Delacroix was a brilliant conversationalist with impeccable social skills, but he was also a dandy who fiercely guarded his privacy and preferred solitary work.⁷ Likewise, Baudelaire's characterization of the artist in "The Painter of Modern Life" (also published in 1863, although written in 1859–60) emphasizes

singularity and distinction, not networks and bonds.⁸ This is true in his analysis of the painter's subjects as well. Baudelaire names the dandy with his "cult of the self" as one of the modern painter's favorite subjects, and his description of the dandy and the painter overlap: both share a love of solitude; both observe the masses from an isolated, superior position; and both are driven by a self-conscious impulse of originality. But even Baudelaire's definition of the dandy in "The Painter of Modern Life" takes on a collective dimension:

Whether these men are nicknamed *exquisites*, *incroyables*, *beaux*, lions or dandies, they all spring from the same womb; they all partake of the same characteristic quality of opposition and revolt; they are all representatives of what is finest in human pride, of that compelling need, alas only too rare today, of combating and destroying triviality. It is from this that the dandies obtain that haughty exclusiveness, provocative in its very coldness.⁹

In their aggressive exclusion of the common and the trivial, the dandies were "a new kind of aristocracy." For Baudelaire, their pride was not snobbery but "the last spark of heroism amid decadence," and their collective effort, as individuals *par excellence*, was to resist the leveling effect of democracy's "rising tide."¹⁰ If the "Salon of 1846" denounced the glorification of the individual and the corresponding demise of association, "The Painter of Modern Life" reestablished individualism as the last hope for collective revolt. Baudelaire describes dandyism in the latter essay as a solitary and affectless state that "borders upon the spiritual and the social."¹¹ That is, the world of beliefs, emotions, and relationships is a territory the dandy explores without entering, feeding off its energy so as to have something to define his uniqueness against. As in the "Salon of 1846," terms of individuality and collectivity are so entangled that the distinction between them ultimately blurs. Baudelaire's sense of their ideal relationship changes between 1846 and 1863—as did his politics, shattered by the fall of the Second Republic—but at both points it is their fraught connection, and their interlacing meanings, from which he draws his idea of the avant-garde. An association of individuals, an army of dandies, a group distinguished by its exclusions and external appearance more than its internal bonds—these are the outlines of Baudelaire's elusive ideal. Perhaps "collective originality" is the most hopeful statement of what he imagined, but what would such an internally conflicted concept look like in practice?

This book is about the effort to visualize that idea in painting, and the broader problem of reconstructing and preserving social relations in art. Baudelaire's move from "association" and "collective originality" in 1846 to "aristocracy" and "provocative coldness" in 1863 is indicative of his political disillusionment, to be sure, but it also speaks to a larger problem that he witnessed in art: How could modern artists, liberated from traditional institutions like the *atelier* and the *Académie*, reconcile their independence and ambition with an enduring need for collective sup-

port? More tangibly, how could they *represent* that problem to the public and the institutions they held at arm's length? For several of them, group portraiture emerged as a possible answer, and became the genre through which they formed a visual model of the avant-garde. That model presented the artistic self as relational at root, a self no longer grounded in absolutes like Reason, Religion, Nature, or Soul, but rather emerging out of the social dynamics and contingencies of the group. The inevitable anxieties such a model of the artist produced—about the possibility of originality, individuality, and agency, and about the self's relationship to society, culture, and history—worked their way into the forms of modern group portraiture, and made it a practice very difficult to sustain. What these pictures reveal is the precarious position of both individual and group in nineteenth-century life.



What follows is a study of the representation of artist groups in the early decades of modernism, and the peculiar merger of bourgeois sobriety and bohemian rebellion that characterized their image. A series of monumental group portraits by Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904) anchors the book, crystallizing his generation's conflicted commitment to collectivity. However, I also show this commitment to be crucial to works by Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), Edouard Manet (1832–1883), Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Frédéric Bazille (1841–1870), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), not to mention to writers such as Charles Morice (1861–1919), Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), and the poets of *Le Parnasse contemporain*. As such, this account of Fantin-Latour and his cohort is an effort to reshape understandings of early avant-garde French art and culture around problems of relationality, homosociability, and homage, challenging the old but enduring myth of modernism as forged in spurts of individualistic rebellion and departing from newer models that root modernism's achievements and failures in institutions or broad social history. What I hope to show is that the problem of the group emerged as a defining one for modern artists, and that it did so most visibly and meaningfully in their art.

One of this book's underlying claims is that association was of paramount concern to nineteenth-century French artists and writers, who seized on the group as a form of reflection on the rise of the individual. Indeed, the large-scale group portraits Fantin-Latour painted for the Paris Salon between 1864 and 1885 constitute the most ambitious effort to represent collective affinities in modern painting (plates 1–5). In these works' forms and in their histories, the high stakes and competing demands of group affiliation come into focus, shedding light on a range of problems endemic to the formation of an avant-garde: the fractious nature of realism and impressionism as movements; the ambivalent position of artists in nineteenth-century society; the desire to withdraw into the seclusion of the studio, in tension with the continuing need to stake a claim to public respect; and the pressures that shifting definitions of

masculinity exerted on artistic circles, and on art itself. Ultimately, group portraiture was a means to tackle a central problem in modern painting and bourgeois life: the relationship between the individual and the group. This book investigates the ways in which artists used portraiture, composition, and painterly form to explore that relationship and make its tensions and significance concrete.

The range of artists relevant to this study is certainly broader than the preceding brief list. I have chosen to focus closely on a small group of painters, and on Fantin-Latour in particular, for reasons of economy and depth, concentrating on artists whose work best reveals the problems and potentials of the modern group. The fact that these painters knew each other's work and, in most cases, each other—in some cases very well—matters to the argument I develop. Their social circles and artistic allegiances overlapped, and a similar cast of characters appears in multiple works. These connections demonstrate an interest in group portraiture that was itself formed collectively, shaped and reshaped in a network of artists and writers, colleagues and friends. The practice of group portraiture was not typically harmonious, however. The coordination of multiple personalities, each with his own interests, desires, and opinions, and the pressures of public exposure in the very permanent form of painting, led to a range of small crises that affected the pictures' form. These interpersonal dramas were bound up with much larger ones having to do with the boundaries of the bourgeoisie—its rhetoric of egalitarianism on the one hand, and its exclusions and conformism on the other—and with artists' ambivalence about being or becoming bourgeois themselves.

Collectivity was a contentious idea in nineteenth-century France, a nation reeling from the epochal revolution of 1789 and its aftershocks in 1830, 1848, and 1871. Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity proved difficult to reconcile in day-to-day life. Republicans encouraged association as an antidote to individualist competition, favoring labor cooperatives and mutual-aid societies to promote and protect workers.¹² Many of the realists and impressionists (and some of their best critics) considered themselves republicans and saw these groups, with their rhetoric of "fraternity," as a model for revolutionary change.¹³ The beginnings of socialism produced various forms of collectivism as well: from the proto-communist "Conspiracy of Equals" that attempted (and failed) to overthrow the Directory in 1796; to the utopian philosophy of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), which urged interclass cooperation in the name of technological progress; to the even more utopian philosophy of Charles Fourier (1772–1837) centered on the organization of *phalanstères*—self-contained communities rooted in collaboration and productive rivalry that would be structured according to hierarchies of temperament; to the theory of "mutualism" developed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), which promoted voluntary association, collective ownership of property, and mutual aid; to the fruitless efforts of historian and politician Louis Blanc (1811–1882) to unionize French workers during the revolution of 1848; to the Paris Commune of 1871, a short-lived socialist government that

crumbled in a bloody civil war; to the writings of sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) on the complex relations between human egoism, social interaction, and “collective consciousness.”¹⁴

Driving much socialist thought was a reaction against the individualist underpinnings of the revolution and its Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), followed by the Napoleonic Code (1804), which privileged individualistic liberty over equality and fraternity.¹⁵ In the first known use of the term “individualism” in a conversation of 1820, the anti-Enlightenment philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) condemned as “absolute individualism” the “frightening division of minds” and the “infinite fragmentation of all doctrines” that he felt defined French society.¹⁶ Saint-Simonians used the word in a similarly negative sense, as a term of social atomization, egoism, and anarchy. In 1842, the novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) termed individualism “the most horrible of all evils.”¹⁷ But although nineteenth-century French uses of the word were primarily pejorative, they were not exclusively so. Fourier’s followers, for instance, tried to reconcile socialism and individualism, the latter signifying for them the autonomy and sacredness of the individual. (Balzac distinguished this notion as “individuality.”) Proudhon declared himself an individualist,¹⁸ and Blanc’s *History of the French Revolution* (published in twelve volumes from 1847 to 1870) qualified revolutionary individualism as courageous self-assertion, not selfishness, and acknowledged it was “a necessary transition” for the French state.¹⁹ For Durkheim, individualism and collectivism were intimately, even necessarily, related. The “cult of the individual” could emerge only out of the collective structure of society.²⁰ All of this is to say, in the most summary of terms, that the relationship between individualism and collectivity proved to be a defining problem of nineteenth-century French social thought. “Association,” which incorporated elements of both, emerged repeatedly as a solution.

But what did *association* mean in mid-nineteenth-century France? In 1851, the philosopher and historian Auguste Ott (1814–1903) declared it “the key word of the problem posed to modern civilization.”²¹ The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (6th ed., 1832–35) defined it as a “union of several people who join together for some common interest, enterprise, etc.”²² The definition suggests the purposeful nature of its social form, as well as its foundation in shared interests, mutual benefit, or both. An association is a more particularized group than “society” at large, and can also refer to the deliberate act of forming such a group.²³ That is, associations are not given or automatically imposed, the way one’s “society” or “community” usually seem to be; they are formed through collective will. Association in this sense is *voluntary*, the act of coming together for a common purpose. Because “association” can refer to a group as well as to the act of forming one, it bears a sense of possibility. The word suggests a certain freedom and spontaneity—the “free association” of ideas and individuals—while “society” carries connotations of established rules.²⁴ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term “association” acquired an element of class-consciousness (the fever for “associationism” launched

in Paris during the 1848 Revolution is a particularly strong and relevant example²⁵) as well as connotations of fellowship and intimacy. It is in all of these senses that I use the term throughout this book.

In a letter to Friedrich Engels of 20 June 1866, recounting a recent meeting of the International Council in London, Karl Marx sneered at the French fascination with association:

The representatives of “*jeune France*” (non-workers) . . . trotted out their view that any nationality and even nations are “*des préjugés surannés*” [antiquated forms of prejudice]. Proudhonized Stirnerianism. Everything to be broken down into small “*groupes*” or “*communes*,” which in turn form an “*association*” but not a state. Furthermore, this “*individualisation*” of mankind and the “*mutualisme*” it entails are to proceed by bringing history to a halt in every other country and the whole world waits until the French are ready to carry out a social revolution. Then they will demonstrate the experiment to us, and the rest of the world, being bowled over by the force of their example, will do the same. Just what Fourier expected from his *phalanstère modèle*.²⁶

Marx questioned the sincerity and universality of association as the French proposed it. He found ironic their insistence on association as a weapon against nationalism, noting that the French representatives gave their speeches in “a language which 9/10 of the audience did not understand,” and expected world history to march behind their example.²⁷ Marx’s reaction to the contradictions inherent in the French model points to a fundamental problem with association as a vehicle of sociability and political change: being an intermediary social form between the individual and the state, an association could fall prey to egoism and encourage conformity at the same time. Cultural elitism, rather than political emancipation, could be its goal.

In *Democracy in America* (1835–40), Alexis de Tocqueville argued that Frenchmen of his time, in contrast to Americans, lacked “the art of association.” In his view, nineteenth-century French society was fundamentally unsociable, and despite its claims to the contrary, still valued hierarchy over equality.²⁸ For Tocqueville, the prevailing antisocial tendencies in French culture were an inevitable outgrowth of democracy. Equality (paradoxically) engendered the breakdown of communal ties, predisposing people to separate themselves from society and turn inward in order to cultivate a self-sufficient existence free of feudal structures of interdependence. Democracy’s great triumph, *égalité*, was thus also the root of its greatest danger, *individualisme*. The atomization of society into isolated, self-interested individuals left these individuals, and thus democratic society as a whole, vulnerable to the centralized power of the state. The only answer to this problem, in Tocqueville’s view, was association—voluntary, independent, and focused on common goals. In addition to its personal and practical benefits, association was a means for citizens to create structures of support that could serve as a mediating force between the self and

the state. It is association that Tocqueville believed made American democracy thrive, serving as the glue that held the new civilization together.

Tocqueville was right that association faced real challenges in France. Although postrevolutionary France trumpeted democratic principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, association remained an embattled principle in French culture throughout the nineteenth century, subject to systematic regulation and surveillance and outlawed entirely in periods of political turmoil. In 1849, Prince-President Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and his largely conservative assembly (which, ironically, included Tocqueville) clamped down on the associationism that had flourished during the 1848 Revolution. Any association composed of twenty or more members had to register with the Prefect of Police, charged with verifying that the group did not pose any threat to the government. Even the most innocuous leisure societies had to swear their association had no ulterior motives.²⁹ What the government feared was the power of groups to cultivate and organize political critique. According to historian Carol Harrison, “deep suspicion of voluntary associations and of their tendency to foster a critical public remained a constant theme in the tumultuous politics of nineteenth-century France,” especially after 1848.³⁰ Trade unions were not legalized until 1884, and it was not until 1901 that associations could form without preliminary authorization, on condition that they were not religious and did not “attack the integrity of the national territory.”³¹ This is the political climate in which Fantin and his cohort came of age.

Tocqueville’s view of the “unsociable Frenchman” inaugurated a long tradition in the social sciences of seeing French society as fundamentally resistant to association.³² But as historians like Harrison have shown, association flourished in nineteenth-century French culture.³³ From billiard clubs and *sociétés savantes*, to Freemason lodges and religious organizations, to political clubs and other civic groups, voluntary association was the dominant form of bourgeois male sociability in the period. Because of his social position as an aristocrat in Paris, Tocqueville was simply unable to see it.³⁴

Groups have been a blind spot for art historians as well. Isolation, alienation, narcissism, and *anomie* are tropes deeply entrenched in the literature on modernism, much more present than collectivism, collaboration, and relational dynamics. Although a widespread interest in an “aesthetic of the inter-human” has characterized a great deal of artistic production since the 1990s, and there is a growing body of literature on community and collective agency as tropes in contemporary art, collectivism’s importance to modernism remains underexplored.³⁵ Art historians have long been fascinated by movements and collective politics, and the march of “-isms” structures the narrative of modern art, in particular, yet interpretations of modern works nonetheless tend to revolve around singular individuals and *œuvres*. The poetics of individual expression and style trump group endeavor, or an artist’s work is set against a broad social context that bypasses small networks and groups.

In recent years, scholars have begun focusing on collaborating or competing *pairs* of artists with increasing intensity, challenging the mono-

graphic model of artistic development.³⁶ These texts offer valuable insights on the relationality of artistic creativity and identity, and make the need for study of group dynamics all the more apparent. The recent publication of Alain Bonnet's *Artistes en groupe: la représentation de la communauté des artistes dans la peinture du XIX siècle* (2007) marked a significant contribution to this gap. A wide-ranging study of the various ways artistic groups appeared in nineteenth-century painting, Bonnet's book focuses on artists' need to forge a new professional identity in an era of dramatic institutional and social change. His overarching argument is that paintings of painters and sculptors were means of social and especially professional legitimation, and thus depended on a public presentation of unity, coherence, and strength.³⁷ This book offers a different view, focused more tightly on a particular artistic group. I believe that what most interested Fantin and his circle—who led the resurgence of group portraiture as a modern genre—was the problem of painting the group's changeable, tenuous structure. Incoherence, fragmentation, and defiant withdrawal from society provide a strong undertow to these works' grasping after social and professional legitimacy. The *look* of Fantin's group portraits, and of works by Courbet, Manet, Degas, Bazille, and Renoir, bear out this conflict, and for this reason I devote a great deal of space to describing them closely. Although I agree with Bonnet that anxieties surrounding social status mark virtually all representations of artist groups, I am unconvinced that legitimation was their primary goal, or that such a goal can explain their peculiar forms, especially since these works' immediate effect on the artists' reputations was often quite the reverse. Essentially, I wish to suggest, via a more microhistorical and visual approach, that the group appears in nineteenth-century painting as an intractable problem rather than a solution.

Unlike social histories of artistic movements, this book argues for the importance of the group as a *subject* and *structure*—rather than simply a context—for early avant-garde French painting, and thus for the foundational importance of collectivity in modern art. Instead of treating artists' social and intellectual affiliations as anecdotal background to their work, it investigates a range of pictures that reimagine affiliation in representation. The affiliation at issue was not without qualification and rank. Harrison describes bourgeois association in the nineteenth century as an intermediary form between the old society of feudal orders and a purely democratic society of isolated individuals, "a flexible institution in which to improvise social positions and hierarchies."³⁸ With its inherent exclusions and inevitable internal divisions—however submerged within a rhetoric of democracy—association was the principle activity through which the bourgeoisie forged a new social order in the nineteenth century.³⁹

This social order, it hardly needs repeating, was coded as male. Although sociability was the province of both men and women, emulation and association were "distinctly male preserves,"⁴⁰ and the art world was no exception. As Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan have shown, artistic brotherhoods emerged in Europe after the French revolution and

appeared in various forms throughout the nineteenth century. Their feminine counterparts, however, were exceedingly rare.⁴¹ These brotherhoods had to navigate changing notions of masculinity and artistic identity, and helped shape them in turn. Although the French invented the term “masculinité” in the mid-eighteenth century when association was key to its meaning, the concept would continually change.⁴² Fraternal bonds took on distinctly utopian meanings during and after the revolution, only to be questioned in the nineteenth century as concerns about national “virility” and the “feminizing” effects of modernity pushed definitions of masculinity toward a less homosocial, more paternal and physical ideal.⁴³

Thomas Crow’s *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (1995) brought to light the central importance of masculine sociability, creative collaboration, and, especially, mentorship and emulation to the trajectory of Neoclassical French painting. Focusing on the work of Jacques-Louis David and his students, Crow gave rich context to “the increasing masculinization of advanced art” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴⁴ My approach to the masculinity and intersubjectivity of modern group portraiture builds on Crow’s illumination of *fraternité* as a complicated revolutionary ideal driving artistic innovation and change, and on his exposition of the sensitive inner workings of an artistic community and its coded representation in painting. Crow interpreted the studio culture of David through the metaphor of the family, casting the emotionally charged relationships between David and his pupils as substitutions for lost relationships between fathers and sons. He described the competition between David and his students in Freudian terms, and framed the struggles between the students as a version of sibling rivalry.⁴⁵ The culture of Fantin’s milieu, although similarly homosocial, is decidedly different. Although emulation and rivalry continue to animate art in the avant-garde circles of the mid- to late nineteenth century, and emotions often run high, there is an effort to replace the model of master and student with models of brotherhood and collaboration.⁴⁶ Emulation is increasingly in tension with artistic individualism; hierarchy is eschewed for a more egalitarian notion of brotherhood; and the charged emotion and sensual presentation of the Davidians’ filial dramas are strictly suppressed for an image of association in which each figure appears willfully aloof from the larger group.

The divisions and differences that animate a group portrait in the form of color, gesture, or pose often encode intersubjective tensions and the fundamental desire to distinguish each individual from the next. The artistic impulse to mark these differences—in some cases to emphasize them to the point of virtually dissolving the pictorial union—cannot be separated from a central strain of bourgeois culture: the strong desire for distinction within the security of a basically homogeneous group. How can one form a sociable collective while preserving an ideal of autonomous individual identity? In nineteenth-century France, this was a bourgeois dilemma as well as an artistic one. Revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were clashing with modern ideals of privacy and interiority,

and it was in group portraiture that the friction between these values took visible form.



Not much has been written on the representation of the group in modern art. In 1902, the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl proposed an answer as to why: modern audiences, he believed, find group portraits boring. Riegl writes: “The lack of action in the juxtaposition of the figures, relieved at most by awkward gestures frozen in midair, strikes the modern viewer . . . as dull or even jarring.”⁴⁷ Riegl was not describing modern painting when he wrote this, instead referring to Dutch group portraiture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But his impression of the modern response to group portraiture endures. In Riegl’s view, modern viewers cannot understand Dutch group portraiture’s artistic language—its power to pictorialize a culture’s approach to human relations—because their conception of those relations is so different from the Dutch. He begins his landmark study of *The Group Portraiture of Holland* with the preceding words of warning to his readers, cautioning them that group portraiture is difficult and may not appeal to “modern tastes.” He then justifies his investigation by pointing to the significance of this distaste: group portraiture is “the most important . . . form of Dutch painting precisely because it diverges so radically from modern art.”⁴⁸

The proliferation of the group in nineteenth-century French painting challenges Riegl’s view, and the controversy surrounding many of these works suggests modern viewers found them anything but dull. In a period spanning the 1850s to the 1880s (and continuing, with lesser frequency, until Riegl’s death in 1905), a number of French painters reimagined the group as a subject for art, representing their friends and colleagues as communities with shared artistic aims. By the 1860s, association had become a powerful, even urgent subject for the avant-garde, pushing painters to reexamine the relationship between their artistic and social philosophies. Often, the two did not easily merge, for however committed these artists were to strengthening their collective ties by painting them, they were also prickly insurgents in the cult of the individual increasingly driving the production and reception of art. They recognized that collectivity was under enormous pressure in the modern world, and turned to a genre identified with bourgeois democracy to scrutinize its forms.

Seventeenth-century group portraits by Rembrandt and Frans Hals were often their inspiration. Dutch painting was very much in vogue in nineteenth-century France, and critics admired the group portraits in particular as images of egalitarian politics instructive for modern times. Dutch group portraiture is absent from the Louvre and other French collections, but the opening of the Municipal Museum of Haarlem in 1862 and an increase in tourism to Holland throughout the nineteenth century made the corporation pictures of Rembrandt, Hals, and Bartholomeus van der Helst much more widely known. Copies and reproductions had an even greater impact on artistic practice, and were frequently published

in *Le Magasin pittoresque*, *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and *L'Artiste* alongside articles praising Dutch painting by Charles Blanc, Théophile Thoré (pseud. William Bürger), Arsène Houssaye, and others.⁴⁹ (Fantin did not see an original Dutch group portrait until 1875, after four of his five group portraits had already been painted, but he was familiar with the genre in reproduction long before.⁵⁰) The austere authority of Dutch group portraits gripped all of the artists in this book. They saw their group pictures as modern French remakes of seventeenth-century prototypes, hailed as images of egalitarianism and collective harmony by nineteenth-century critics. Rembrandt, in particular, was seen to embody prerepublican sentiments especially dear to French artists and writers. Blanc described him as “[belonging] entirely to modern art,” and other critics characterized him as a painter of democracy, liberty, and individualism.⁵¹

This book investigates how modern French artists adapted the Dutch model of the group, how and why they reinvented group portraiture to more personal, even self-serving ends, and whether their pictures succeeded in representing the fragile nature of their collective life. Whether successes or failures—and both propel my argument—the group portraits produced by these “painters of modern life” were loaded with anxieties and ambitions that, once exposed, offer a new understanding of artistic identity in a crucial period of art history. The flowering of realism and impressionism in the Salons and studios of Paris went hand-in-hand with the reevaluation of a moribund genre—a genre that shaped the image of this avant-garde. Because the group has received little serious attention as a modern subject—Fantin’s pictures, in particular, are usually treated like documentary photographs rather than paintings—its radical proposal of relationality is missing from the narrative of modern art.



My inquiry turns on the formal representation not only of individuals and their proximate interrelationships, but also of particular spaces, most notably the artist’s studio—the site where group bonds were often forged and, just as often, dissolved.⁵² Portraits of artists and their spaces are always expressions of social character, even if that character is antisocial in nature. Studio group portraits are especially equipped to comment on the artist’s social character, marking off a privileged space of community and conversation. Not only can they explore the interrelations of an artistic group, but they can also speak to the relationship between that group and the larger society outside the frame.

In 1798, Louis Léopold Boilly painted *A Meeting of Artists in Isabey’s Studio*, an important precedent for the studio group portraits of the nineteenth century (figure I.1). Although a small painting, it made a grand statement about the artist as a public figure with an intimate community of support.⁵³ Horace Vernet’s much larger *Studio* of ca. 1820 countered Boilly’s image of genteel elegance with a raucous crowd of men and animals, representing a different register of homosocial interaction and studio life (figure I.2). But both paintings, in their crowdedness and choreo-



graphed performance of *fraternité*, staked a claim for the studio as part of—or at least directly linked to—a public social sphere. In both cases, the painter is subordinated to a larger community of artists; the élan of the group overwhelms individual identities. But the recognition of key figures—including the modest figure of Boilly in front of the center-right pilaster (he has his arm around the shoulder of a friend), or the dashing figure of Vernet acting out a painters' duel—is ultimately no less important. These paintings are about self-promotion, as well as (indeed, *through*) solidarity, affiliation, and lineage,⁵⁴ and envision the studio as central to the painter's public, and not just private, life. Indeed, Boilly's painting seems to have abandoned almost all sense of the studio as a private place. His figures form a frieze as if posing on a shallow stage, and Vernet's militaristic image playfully links the life of the artist to the life of the soldier. Vernet also chose to exhibit his painting *in* his studio, which he opened to the public, in defiance of his rejection by the official Salon.⁵⁵

The uncertainty surrounding the studio's status as private or public was dramatized by Gustave Courbet in his massive painting of 1855, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life* (plate 6). In this work, Courbet reconceived the studio as a space in which the outside world could be brought in and restaged. The wider world of culture, politics, sociability, and social problems is represented as a "real allegory" in the painter's studio, filtered through Courbet's autobiographical vision. Courbet's painting strives to be as allegorically expansive as it is idiosyncratically individual, a statement of the artist's power to paint "the world" in his personal space.⁵⁶ By bringing society

I.1.

Louis Léopold Boilly,
*A Meeting of Artists in
Isabey's Studio*, 1798, oil
on canvas, 71 × 110 cm,
Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Photo ©Réunion des
Musées Nationaux / Art
Resource, NY.



I.2.
Horace Vernet, *The Studio*, ca. 1820, oil on canvas, 52 × 64 cm, private collection.

into his studio, Courbet departed from his monumental *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849–50 (plate 7), a painting more evidently inspired by the group portrait tradition with its long, lateral rows and broad swathes of black. *A Burial* represents members of Courbet's hometown—including his own family members and friends—gathered in a landscape to mourn an unnamed individual. The ostensible focus of their solemn ritual is not only unnamed but also invisible, indicated only by the

empty grave in the center foreground and the draped coffin carried in at left. The group twists and curves around an empty center, while the painting as a whole seems to flaunt its lack of emotional and compositional focus. The historical power of Courbet's subject—the rural bourgeoisie as a rising social and political force—depends on a certain universality that transcends the particularities of portraiture. The dynamic between the specificity of individual faces, on the one hand, and the overall processional movement and tonal rhythms of the whole, on the other, is essential to the work's meaning as a study of social class—its assimilation of difference into an “immense cortège of undertakers' mutes.”⁵⁷

All of this is in stark contrast to the emphatically *self*-centered vision Courbet constructs in *The Painter's Studio*, where the group gravitates around his charismatic self-portrait. A group without a center versus a group where the center is the self—this was a comparison the painter encouraged in 1855 when he hung the two paintings directly across from each other in his “Pavilion of Realism” near the Universal Exhibition. Indeed, they have hung in close proximity at the Musée d'Orsay for so long that one of them feels incomplete without the other. Did Courbet consider them a pair? Their similar size, format, and abundance of figures suggest it. He painted *A Burial* in his studio in Ornans; perhaps the steady stream of townspeople who volunteered to model sparked his idea to paint “the world coming to be painted *chez moi*.”⁵⁸ In any case, the dialogue that these two paintings staged in 1855 raised a question that artists of the 1860s and after would take up: whether group portraits were meaningful mainly to the artist and his subjects, or whether they could have broader historical significance for the public. Were these history paintings, in a fragile nineteenth-century sense—ambitious works of historical report-

age that made grand public statements—or personal manifestos? The early reception of *A Burial at Ornans* supports its status as a modern history painting, a subversion of the noble genre by devoting it to contemporary class tensions and the “ugly” banalities of rural French life.⁵⁹ But Courbet’s models were all personal contacts, most of them posing as themselves, and the painting originally included a prominent signature in red (subsequently removed after a caricature mocked it as self-aggrandizing).⁶⁰ The enigmatic meaning of *The Painter’s Studio* is historical in its allegorical allusions to contemporary politics,⁶¹ yet declaredly dictated by the artist, whose “artistic and moral life” is the source and interpretive lens for everyone gathered around him. Perhaps the artist’s studio was the only place where such a fantasy of society could take form, yet even here the relationship between artistic whim and social commentary is perplexing at best.

In the work and writings of romantic artists like Delacroix, the studio is portrayed as a private, even secret space where the artist works alone. Delacroix saw his studio as a space of individual creation and heterosexual conquest, not sociability or fraternity.⁶² This was very different from the homosocial studio culture fostered by David, which evolved from the workshop model established in the Renaissance. Courbet’s painting tried to merge these prior conceptions of the studio—private and public, heterosexual and homosocial, romantically individualist and collective—and it was his mystifying conflation of these polarities to which artists responded. The rightmost third of the work’s tripartite composition constitutes a groundbreaking group portrait of the painter’s friends and associates, especially when considered in dialogue with the painting’s other two parts: Courbet’s self-portrait in the center of the studio, and his allegory of world politics and social problems in the typological figures at left. The work’s sheer size—almost twelve feet high and over nineteen feet wide—staked a claim for self-portraiture, group portraiture, and studio depictions as highly ambitious and intersecting genres. Courbet’s painting also solidified the studio as a privileged space of association for the generation to come.

The studio became a prime locus for group portraits of the artist’s friends and colleagues after *The Painter’s Studio*, when a younger generation of artists redefined association as something stilted, deeply desired yet elusive, perhaps even on the verge of vanishing. Almost invariably in this period, the grouping of artists, writers, and musicians appears in sequestered interior spaces where the relationship between individual and group is compressed by shallow space. Courbet’s wildly individualist image of collectivity compelled a more sober response from the next generation. For these men (and they were all men, for reasons this book will explain), the challenge was how to represent the brittle force of the modern group, and how to negotiate anxieties—their own and those of their subjects—about collectivity as a social and pictorial project. By the book’s end, readers will see that their vision of association was predicated on exclusion and an impossible insistence on the boundaries of the individual. This model would go on to define the avant-garde.



A note on photography, and its absence from the main arguments of the book: The importance of photography to modern group portraits—especially Fantin’s and Degas’s—is often assumed. Because the revival of group portraiture in France roughly coincided with the early development of photography and the *carte-de-visite*, it is tempting to attribute the seemingly awkward arrangements and stilted expressions of the figures in painted group portraiture to photography’s influence. In fact, the influence was primarily the other way around.⁶³ Although the tight precision of Fantin’s and Degas’s early realist technique may look “photographic” to present-day viewers, there is no evidence that either of them were looking at photographs when composing their group pictures; there is, however, considerable evidence that they were emulating the style and compositional strategies of seventeenth-century Dutch painting.⁶⁴ Courbet and Manet may have used photographs to help them capture individual likenesses in the absence of models, and both of them were interested enough in photography to have had multigure compositions in their collections, but again, there is no evidence that any of their group portraits were inspired or significantly shaped by photographs, while there is evidence that paintings from the near and distant past were significant reference points for their work in this genre.

This is not to say that the stiffness of contemporary portrait photography bore no relation to the relational tensions in painted group portraits. Nineteenth-century photographers were looking at painting—they were often former painters themselves—and even the most technophobic of painters could not have been unaware of the burgeoning industry of portrait photography, nor of the widespread criticism of its aesthetic qualities.⁶⁵ A leading concern of *both* painters and photographers when composing group pictures in the nineteenth century was achieving the difficult balance between individual distinction and collective cohesion. Henri de la Blanchère’s treatise *L’Art du photographe* (1859) and A.A.E. Disdéri’s *L’Art de la photographie* (1862) both encourage the careful variation of individual figures within a group, borrowing the principle of variety within unity from past treatises on painting.⁶⁶ Disdéri described group portrait photography as a tremendous challenge:

It is in this genre that [photographers] have reached extremes of ugliness and *invraisemblance*. . . . Everyone has his own particular character, his own individuality, which should suggest special choices of pose, light and expression. The painter can still produce a certain unity with all of these heterogeneous elements, through calculations of color and the more or less profound modifications of form possible in his art—and yet even the most skillful masters have often failed—but the photographer, placed face-to-face with reality, will more often than not run into problems that the most ingenious and complicated combinations will not be able to conquer.⁶⁷

Disdéri argued that photography could not compete with painting especially in the category of group portraiture; its deficiencies got worse the greater the number of figures involved.⁶⁸ The only way to unify a group of people in a photograph was to give them an action to perform together—playing a game or looking at an album of drawings, for example—and then the goal of taking a portrait and capturing distinct likenesses was in danger of ceding to the compositional protocols of a genre scene. The unifying action had to be simple and subtle, and photographers were advised to look to painting for guidance.⁶⁹ Ultimately, Disdéri acknowledged that group portraiture was virtually impossible to do well in photography—photographers simply did not have the resources of technique and tradition that painters did—and it remained a rare genre until the end of the nineteenth century.

The problem of individuality versus collectivity that photography and painting shared in the nineteenth century is more significant than the direction of influence between the two media, and it is in paintings—and in the histories behind them—that the stakes of the individual-group problem are most clearly expressed. Although nineteenth-century photography can help track changing ideas about what constitutes a group and how a group can be pictured, its technical limitations in this area were severe. For this reason, the representation of groups in nineteenth-century photography followed a different chronological course than the representation of groups in painting. Until dry plates were invented and exposures became reasonably quick, group photography was prohibitively difficult, sometimes approximated with montage.⁷⁰ True group photographs before the 1880s are therefore quite rare, and those that exist are primarily family groups. The motivation and reception of nineteenth-century group photographs were also distinctly different: primarily commemorative and less meditated than paintings, they were usually made as private keepsakes rather than manifesto-like statements for public view. Their histories, therefore, are often impossible to recover.

My focus on painting, then, is based on the conviction that the tensions surrounding nineteenth-century ideals of individuality and collectivity emerged first, and most powerfully, in images conceived and executed as works of art, works that developed over extended periods of time, often through documented sequences of trial and error in preparatory studies, when the artist could reimagine and rework the social dynamics he chose to represent. Significantly, none of the artists in this book ever attempted to arrange a group photograph of their friends and colleagues, despite their ties to major studio photographers like Nadar and Étienne Carjat. They needed a medium that allowed for more manipulation, flexibility, and control, and one that matched the ambition of their collective ideal.



The text proceeds by clustered case studies, with works by two to three artists anchoring each of the five chapters. Throughout, I devote the most sustained attention to Fantin-Latour, as no other artist pursued group

portraiture more doggedly, passionately, and thoughtfully than he. But although it is in Fantin's pictures that my key arguments find their root, what makes his case so rich and exemplary is his close relationship to a broader network of artists whose work investigates the same problems. In examining Fantin's work in dialogue with projects by Courbet, Manet, Degas, Bazille, and Renoir, I faced a problem not unlike the one faced by Fantin himself: how can one combine in-depth studies of individual artists into a coherent whole? Like many of the group portraits I analyze, my shifts from one artist to another can at times be sharp, but this approach allows connections and contrasts to emerge through detailed analysis, without predated arguments that establish relationships from the start. Ultimately, these textual juxtapositions aim to build a broad account of a group that shared a deep concern with association, but whose approaches to the problem were distinct and, at times, opposed.

Last, a definition of "group portraiture" is in order: I define group portraiture as the representation of distinct, recognizable individuals whose association with each other, as it is represented in the picture, is a statement of solidarity, collective interest, or purpose. In general, a group requires at least three (and usually more) in order for it to have the look of willful and not haphazard assembly. But it should not include so many that the group becomes an inarticulate *mass*, a crowd whose collectivity has turned anonymous or dissolute by the sheer force of numbers. Like Riegl, I also draw a distinction between group portraits and family portraits. Group portraits represent an association that is voluntary, assembled under the aegis of collective will. Family portraits represent an association that is *involuntary* in the most fundamental sense, not to mention inherently hierarchical. Furthermore, family portraits are most often commissions, favors, or gifts, rather than dreamed up by the artist for personal interest or public display. A group, as the artists in this book conceived it, is a fundamentally flexible social form whose members and image are not preestablished but must be formed and represented, and are always subject to change. In some cases, it is only in representation that a cluster of people becomes a group at all; and even when the group represented is a historical reality in some way, group portraits can never be reduced to the social structures they represent. They are paintings, not documents, reimagining or responding to social dynamics rather than simply reflecting them. Indeed, a chief reason why nineteenth-century group portraits demand our attention is that they materialize a set of concerns about modern life rooted in the uniquely provisional, fragile nature of their subject. It is for this reason, I believe, that they became a powerful vehicle of expression for modern artists who were trying to find a form for their changing social world and the place of the individual within it.