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Bridget Alsdorf

Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting

Princeton: [Princeton University Press](#), 2012. 368 pp.; 42 color ills.; 122 b/w ills. Cloth \$45.00 (9780691153674)



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Near the end of her new study on the group portraits of Henri Fantin-Latour, Bridget Alsdorf notes: “The history of nineteenth-century French art is a field fascinated by movements and collective politics, yet still dominated by accounts of singular artists and oeuvres. Although we depend on groups to give structure to history, as artists depended on them to provide camaraderie and support, it has proved difficult to imagine the artistic self as formed fundamentally by way of others” (227). Her book *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* goes a long way toward rectifying this scholarly imbalance. As her subtitle indicates, Alsdorf treats the group as a problem in more than one sense: she approaches it both from the perspective of representation, through a series of close readings of multi-figure portraits by Fantin and his contemporaries, and as a social, and indeed gender, issue relating to the dynamics of male interaction in the mid-nineteenth century. At the heart of her argument is a meditation on the necessary tensions generated by the conflicting pressures of mutuality and individualism—by the opposing needs for progressive artists to assert a group identity in the face of an indifferent or hostile public while at the same time cultivating the distinct creative personality increasingly demanded in the cultural marketplace. Alsdorf reveals traces of these tensions in the visual structures of the works she so persuasively explores, and gestures toward a broader analysis of their centrality in shaping individuals and groups within the artistic community, and among bourgeois males of the period more generally.

Alsdorf focuses upon a corpus of portraits by Fantin that features artists, critics, writers, and musicians, brought together in groupings that suggest sympathy or solidarity even as the paintings’ formal language undercuts such associations through their disjunctive structures and unrelentingly mournful tone. Alsdorf concentrates on four canvases by Fantin: the 1864 *Homage to Delacroix*; the lost painting *The Toast! Homage to Truth* (destroyed by the artist after a hostile reception at the 1865 Salon); *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter*, exhibited in 1870; and *Corner of a Table*, shown at the 1872 Salon (the only work treated at length here that features poets, rather than painters, as its main subject). Around these key images, Alsdorf elaborates a constellation of contemporary portrait groups by artists such as Gustave Courbet, Frédéric Bazille, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas, a set of comparanda that extends and enriches her detailed treatment of Fantin’s work. Moving from the portentous gloom of Fantin’s Paris studio to the sundrenched banks of the Seine in Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880–81), her argument traces the tensions, evasions, and contradictions necessitated by the need to negotiate the antithetical pressures associated with individualism and mutuality that artists faced in the waning years of the Second Empire and the early days of the Third Republic.

Alsdorf focuses most attention on detailed analysis of the genesis and formal structure of Fantin's group portraits. These curiously compelling works, populated by a cast of stiff, affectless males suspended in a state of melancholic introversion, offer up multiple layers of complex meaning thanks to Alsdorf's patiently penetrating and sympathetic gaze. Her nuanced vision and supple style draw the reader into the minutiae of Fantin's creative process as he worries over his choice of protagonists, the possible use of allegory or ancillary works of art, the placement of figures, and the setting in which they will be displayed. Alsdorf's almost forensic treatment of the creative process risks wearying the reader through force of repetition—Fantin's corpus of preparatory drawings looms large and allows her to retrace her steps in fastidious detail. Alsdorf's subtlety and steady focus on the broader argument turn this potential problem into a strength, however, and allow her to reconstruct the works' evolution in ways that vividly suggest the dilemmas confronted by the artist.

Alsdorf emphasizes Fantin's personal difficulty in reconciling the different layers of individual and group identity—and their appropriate visual projections—that she explores in this book. With both the *Homage to Delacroix* and *The Toast!*, critics reprimanded the artist for his presumptuous self-presentation as the paintings' visual pivot, and by extension the implicit impresario of the collective identities they sought to project. Alsdorf argues persuasively that Fantin's effacement of his own presence from *The Studio* and subsequent canvases was part of a strategy to achieve “the integration of the individual into the collective spirit of the group” (125). She provides a particularly ingenious discussion of the placement of Renoir in this work, brooding in front of a large gilt frame enclosing an impenetrable blank space (possibly a mirror), proposing that the young artist emblemizes unresolved tensions between the two poles of separateness and collectivity, even plausibly serving as an allusion to the absent Fantin himself. Here, and elsewhere, Alsdorf interprets pictorial details in ways that some will find strained, and this is an issue that she herself raises in questioning her necessarily “intuitive” readings of Fantin's early self portraits (32). Such reflexivity, also evident in her discussion of gender (233), underlines Alsdorf's alertness to the pitfalls of over-interpretation and intellectual cliché, and is consistent with the care with which she approaches the paintings that structure her argument.

Overall, *Fellow Men* treats pictorial evidence through close readings that recall the tradition of Alois Riegl's discussion of Dutch portrait groups and Michael Fried's more recent analysis of great swathes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French art, including Fantin's work (Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, Los Angeles: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999 [original edition 1902]; and Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Extracting meaning from form by carefully exploring significant elements in sketches and finished works, Alsdorf elucidates the ways in which Fantin's groups raise broader issues central to an understanding of artists' status in nineteenth-century France. This strength, however, is also a source of weakness to the extent that Alsdorf's focus often prevents her from moving away from individual works to insert them within the wider social and historical matrix on which the “problem of the group” depends. She quite explicitly distinguishes her approach at the outset by arguing that, “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” (9; emphasis in original). This is fair enough, in so far as it goes, but implies a necessary methodological choice that eliminates (or at least sidelines) what is slightly classified as “context.” Why such a choice must be made remains unclear; indeed, some of the finest social historians of art, such as T. J. Clark and Robert Herbert, demonstrate that the sort of searching visual analysis in which Alsdorf excels is enhanced by a greater investment in “contextual” research. Indeed, such an approach largely invalidates the distinction between artwork and context as it is suggested here.

The recent publication of a series of essays on the *Homage to Delacroix* (Christophe Leribault, ed., *Fantin-Latour, Manet, Baudelaire. L'Homage à Delacroix*, Paris: Le Passage, 2011), which was clearly in production before Alsdorf's work appeared, points to some of the ways in which a more contextual reading of artists' groups might have enriched Alsdorf's study, though Leribault's volume certainly fails to match the analytical sophistication of *Fellow Men*. The contribution by Marie-Pierre Salé, for example, draws attention to Fantin's involvement in a short-lived mutual-aid group with his close friend James McNeill Whistler and Alphonse Legros, both of whom appear in the *Homage*. The “Société des trois,” mentioned only in passing by Alsdorf, perfectly illustrates the tensions central to the argument of *Fellow Men*. In a letter to Fantin, probably written in July 1863, Whistler declares: “for each of us to support the two others is to support oneself—we are all selfish, and all pretty perverted” (“soutenir chacun, les deux autres, c'est se soutenir soi-même—nous sommes tous égoïstes, et tous pas mal perversi [sic]” [*L'Homage à Delacroix*, 22; my translation]). Fantin's rejoinder to his two friends provides a virtual epigram to Alsdorf's study: “we know that we want to resist the stupid masses, though each of us

separately very free. . . . I will not drop you while you do things that please me" ("nous savons que nous voulons résister contre la masse bête, mais chacun séparément très libre. . . . je ne vous lâcherai pas tant que vous ferez des choses qui me plaisent" [*L'Hommage à Delacroix*, 22; my translation]).

Both Salé and Leribault consider the nature of the group assembled by Fantin to commemorate Delacroix. They highlight the ambivalent attitude toward the recently deceased painter expressed by several of the company, the personal and professional divisions that cut across their apparent unity of purpose, and the generational implications of their identification with a previously contentious artistic personality. Leribault extends Alsdorf's analysis of the portrait's indebtedness to Courbet by exploring more fully the significance of the group's rallying around the figure of Delacroix. In so doing, he poses—perhaps even more pointedly than *Fellow Men*—the question as to what might have constituted the identity fabricated around the collective statement represented by Fantin's homage. Here, and in later canvases such as *The Toast!* and *The Studio*, it is imperative to ask what sorts of strategic identities were being mapped out in Fantin's imagined communities, for whom they might have worked, to what practical ends, and at what costs. Fantin himself seems an oddly conflicted, even misanthropic, figure to have emerged as an impresario of the avant-garde, however symbolically. Writing to Whistler in 1867, he affects a tone every bit as mournful and disabused as the paintings themselves: "I'm only in contact with people whose painting I like or who are likable or useful. I don't believe in friendship" ("Je suis seulement en relation avec des gens dont j'aime la peinture ou bien qui sont aimables ou utiles. Je ne crois pas à l'amitié" [*L'Hommage à Delacroix*, 25; my translation]).

Alsdorf is sensitive to the ways in which Fantin's growing disenchantment over the ideal of artistic community encouraged him to retreat into this more private realm, dominated by flower paintings and Wagnerian fantasies. Disillusionment, she argues, occurs remarkably early in his career: already in the fall of 1864, while struggling to find a successful formula for *The Toast!*, Fantin bemoaned the lack of solidarity that he felt was undermining the successful pursuit of a shared artistic project. Looking back at the previous year's Salon des Refusés, the twenty-eight-year-old painter expresses nostalgia for a moment of common struggle that had resulted in victory: "We banded together, we shouted, we worked, we grew in number, and they let us pass" (103). Yet unity had proved fleeting, the sense of purpose had soon dissipated, and left Fantin with a sour taste of anomie and regret: "That is what I loved so much, that moment back then! I thought that it could last. That was my error" (103). The groups assembled in *The Toast!* and *The Studio* represent an ambiguous effort to restore this sense of plenitude, though as Alsdorf so ably demonstrates, Fantin's conflicted temper stifles any hint of celebration. In this regard, *The Studio* serves as much as an elegy as a manifesto. It is the great virtue of Alsdorf's study that she is able to penetrate the mysterious solemnity of such a work, and to demonstrate how Fantin's group portraits, for all their apparent dignity and restraint, are riven by conflicts that help to sharpen an understanding of artistic identity and bourgeois masculinity in the formative decades of cultural modernity.

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