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## High Anxiety

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*Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in 19th-Century French Painting* by  
[Bridget Alsdorf](#)

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Thirty-four men, 20 of them standing, 14 sitting, spread across four paintings and 21 years. Almost all are sombrely dressed, in the black frock coat worn by bourgeois and artist alike in the France of their day; the least sartorial departure – a pair of light trousers, a coat of proletarian grey, a white painter's smock – startles. The spaces in which these men are depicted are matchingly sombre, narrow from front to back, airless, and claustrophobic: there is not a window in sight, and only in the final painting is a door indicated; otherwise, there seems no means of escape. There may be pictures on the wall, but not of the sort that offers any view outwards; darkly unreadable, they return us to the intense clusters of men. Occasionally, a slight relief comes in the form of flowers, or fruit, or a carafe of wine, and there is a red tablecloth, but even this is a murky red which does not break the dark tonality and funereal mood. And though each set of men has been gathered for a common purpose – to pay homage to a dead painter, to watch a living one wield his brush, to hear poetry read, to gather round a piano – none of them seems to be having any fun. There is not a laugh, not a smile to be had from the whole 34 of them (33, in fact, as one appears twice). Most give off a sense of gravity and high purpose, though quite a few appear distraught, lost in their own private world, even bored. Some are friends (two are lovers), most are allies, collaborators, members of a self-selecting elite or avant-garde; and yet there is very little interaction between them. None of the figures touches his neighbour; they may abut, overlap, hide behind one another, but there is no contact between them. It is almost as if they can't wait for the sitting (and the standing) to be over, so that they may return to their own studio, workshop, study, music-room.

These four paintings by Henri Fantin-Latour (there was a fifth, which he destroyed after it was critically trashed at the Salon) are all now in the Musée d'Orsay. I have seen them several

times in passing, and looked at reproductions in various books, but never realised before quite how peculiar they are, because – like most people, I imagine – I have never examined them as paintings. I have always treated them just as examples of collective portraiture, and as such they are of the highest quality: look, we say, here's Manet, and there's Baudelaire and Monet and Renoir and Whistler and Zola, all to the very life. And here, just here, where most people stop, at the far left of *Corner of a Table*, is the most famous section – the corner of a corner – of any of Fantin's four paintings, because it shows Rimbaud and Verlaine sitting side by side. Rimbaud, the beautiful boy amid the beards, chin cherubically in palm, gazes out past our left shoulder; Verlaine, prematurely balding, is in half-profile, and looks tense, his right hand grasping a glass of the wine into which he will all too soon disappear. Yet even this pair, closest and most notorious of the 34, are not looking at one another, let alone looking like bedmates. Inevitably, with such pictures, we concentrate on the famous names; it is virtually impossible for the contemporary viewer to give more than a brief, pitying glance at the likes of Louis Cordier, Zacharie Astruc, Otto Scholderer, Pierre-Elzéar Bonnier, Jean Aicard, Arthur Boisseau, Antoine Lascoux and so on. And our pity contains an admixture, not exactly of guilt, but of unease: we are the posterity that has consigned them to oblivion.

We look at these pictures – at first, anyway – as anecdotal, as documentary. It's the same with any group portrait, whether it is Ingres's *Apotheosis of Homer* or the latest colour-mag line-up of the Best of Young British Novelists. Who's new, who's hot, who's good, who's not going to cut the mustard? The critical triage starts immediately. I remember lining up with my fellow Young Novelists of 1983, and after we had left our images in Lord Snowdon's camera, one of our more sardonic members remarked: 'Well, they chose the best twenty from seven.' Few looked at the published photo to assess Snowdon's sense of composition, just as few pause aesthetically while the eye skates from nonentity to notable in a Fantin at the Musée d'Orsay. So Bridget Alsdorf's first achievement in *Fellow Men* is a simple but serious one: she has turned Fantin's paintings back into paintings – into works which begin with an idea and a hope, and proceed through drawings and stubbornly wrong ideas to possible solutions, and then to more drawings, and finally oil sketches, and then via last-minute problems of sitter-unavailability to a final image which will very soon be made available to the judgment of fashionable Salon-prancers, to critical misunderstanding and cartoonists' mockery.



Henri Fantin-Latour, 'Homage to Delacroix' (1864).

Those four surviving pictures are enormous: the smallest is 160 x 222 cm, the largest 204 x 273.5 cm. They are not quiet mementos for like-minded associates, but giant public statements, intended to insist, even bully. These are the coming men you should be paying attention to, the writers and painters we advise you to bone up on, though the final picture, *Around the Piano* (1885), is combative less on behalf of its individual participants than of the Wagnerism they all supported. For a painter previously and subsequently known only for self-portraits and flowers, these group portraits offered a huge technical challenge: how do you arrange a number of similarly-clad chaps in an interesting way, how do you make them evidently and distinctly themselves, while also representing the wider idea they are assembled to publicise? Each picture adopts a different structure. The first, *Homage to Delacroix* (1864), looks rather turgid: four seated figures with heads at the same level, six standing figures with heads at the same level, and, on the wall behind, his head a little higher than those of the standers, a portrait (in fact, rather complicatedly, a painting of a lithograph based on a photograph) of Delacroix. The second, *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter* (1870), is more innovative, with a diagonal, widening cascade of heads leading down to the canvas on which Manet is shown working. The third, *Corner of a Table* (1872), is the subtlest and also the least confrontational, both in title, in point of focus (an open book from which a poet has, probably, just been reading), and in structure: a curve of five sitters, closely backed by three standers, with the sides and front of the picture decorated with leaves and flowers and fruit. The fourth has a more conventional architecture, with an open score at its centre, and four black-clad men on either side of this creamy musical blaze.



'A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter' (1870).

But what sort of tribute, or manifesto, do these paintings deliver? Not at all a straightforward one. *Homage to Delacroix*, for instance, is fundamentally not a homage, simply because it is a painting by Fantin-Latour. In its realist mode, unflamboyant hues and rather tight-arsed structure, it is the very opposite of a Delacroix; while the fact that these homage-payers are all facing us, and thereby turning their backs on the image of the dead hero-painter, implies that they are certainly not going to carry on painting as he did. Hail and farewell, the painting implies. *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter* turns out not to be 'a studio in the Batignolles area', but rather a Studio Very Like Fantin's Own; the 'Batignolles School' of painters was more 'retrospective construction than reality' by the time Fantin memorialised it; while the man who had originally baptised it, Edmond Duranty, was left out of the picture because he had quarrelled with Manet (a falling-out for which he blamed Fantin).



'Around the Piano' (1885).

Such a backstory is perhaps not unusual: belonging to a group is often important for the younger artist (and writer), when mutual encouragement and a collective identification of the immediate enemy are vital; but soon, as the individual acquires more self-confidence, he or she frets at being labelled and grouped. So *Corner of a Table*, which might appear more homogeneous and harmonious, in that it features only writers (whereas the two previous group portraits mixed painters and writers), in fact shows a group as fissiparous as the preceding two. Rimbaud and Verlaine, by their public behaviour as much as their poetry, were to blow this little Parnassian world apart; and while the picture's softer greeny hues and the presence of fruit and flowers might suggest less austerity and more harmony, the large pot plant at the right-hand edge was forced on Fantin when Albert Mériat declined to appear with the pair of 'pimps and thieves' flaunting themselves in the picture's opposite corner.





'Corner of a Table' (1872).

Bridget Alsdorf's external evidence persuades that all is not as solid as it seems in these monumental mementos. But her internal evidence – scholarly, exact and closely argued – is clinching. When the critics of the day examined these non-touching, non-connecting, non-smiling assemblages of uncollegiate colleagues, what they mostly complained about – beyond Fantin's egotism and the group's self-promotion – was the pictures' lack of formal unity. Alsdorf convincingly argues that this lack of interaction between the figures, far from being a formal failing, is the very subject of the painting. What Fantin is interested in, and what he represents in paint, is the individual's internal negotiation with the group. The apparent awkwardness is intended: the participants are trying to work out how to protect and retain their individuality in the presence of brothers and colleagues who may also be competitors and swampers. Some of Fantin's preliminary drawings show animated exchanges between the different artists and writers, but these are eliminated as the image moves towards its final form. One of Alsdorf's most fruitful comparisons is with *Studio on the rue la Condamine* (1870) by the middle-ranking pre-Impressionist Frédéric Bazille (who himself features in *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter*). Bazille gives us a high, airy, open space, with a tall studio window, pictures of healthy nudes on the walls, and artistic activity going on in three separate places: to the right, someone is thumping the piano; to the left, two men (one halfway up a staircase) are in lively, doubtless aesthetic discussion; in the centre, Bazille himself stands beside his easel, showing a finished picture to two fellow painters (one is certainly Manet, the other probably Monet). Art may still be only for blokes, but this is a light, bright, cheerful scene – it looks as it might if the breadliners of *La Bohème* had struck lucky

and moved upmarket to grander quarters, with Mimi, restored to health, about to arrive with an enormous packed lunch. It is also, compared to Fantin's *Studio*, banal, both in conception and execution. Bazille's picture says: this is what it looks like to be an artist. Fantin's says: this is what it is really like to be an artist.

The life of such an artist is one of high anxiety and self-doubt, combined with ceaseless work which sometimes leads to nothing. These exact traits are typified by Fantin's second picture in his sequence, the one he destroyed on its return from the Salon (he kept only three portrait heads – of himself, Whistler and Antoine Vollon). Alsdorf describes it as the 'most ambitious and disastrous of Fantin's group portraits'. It was called *The Toast! Homage to Truth*. If *Homage to Delacroix* was in part a protest against the quick public forgetting of its subject (Delacroix's funeral was poorly attended, and press coverage minimal), *The Toast!* (1865) was intended to make a noisier and more general claim for art – and for Fantin himself. Critics had been irritated by what they deemed his self-promotion in *Homage to Delacroix* – he not only stood out in his brilliant white smock against a room of black frock-coats, he conspicuously animated the picture by holding his palette out towards us, while the bunch of flowers lying in front of the dead *Maître* was Fantin's signature subject. *The Toast!* would prove a greater provocation still.

Alsdorf's intense discussion of the preliminary stages of *The Toast!* – which portrays Truth as a naked female figure holding a mirror amid a studioful of male artists – shows what effort Fantin expended to try to make his concept work. As it develops, it swerves between a pseudo-classical allegory (with other arts personified) and a more realistic Nude with Group Portrait; the supporting cast of artists constantly shifts shape and character; but the main and insoluble problems arise from the painting's central interaction between the figure of Fantin and the mythological figure of Truth. Painters had, over the centuries, frequently included themselves in multi-figure pictures, though usually stationing themselves at the edge, looking on with a slightly knowing expression, displaying an ostentatious modesty. But putting yourself centrally into a picture was a formal challenge as well as a critical hazard. Fantin's immediate point of reference would have been Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*, that massive, Promethean gesture which implicitly showed God as creator being supplanted by the Artist as creator. But Courbet's ego was armour-plated compared to Fantin's; and Courbet depicted himself calmly painting the world (and being admired), whereas Fantin was trying to present himself in a complex engagement with a mirror-wielding allegorical nude. At first she is seen from behind, holding her mirror high, with an artist responding by holding up a big sign announcing VERITE. This is obviously crude. Next she is shown picking out the palette-wielding artist who responds with his other hand with a 'who, me?' gesture (which makes for a kind of blasphemous Annunciation). Gradually, Fantin worked his way towards the picture's final form (evidenced by a late oil sketch), in which naked Truth with her

now-lowered mirror stands facing us from the centre back; all the artists (as in *Homage to Delacroix*) also face outwards – except for Fantin himself, who, while keeping one eye on us, reaches out an arm and points to Truth. As he put it in a letter to his English dealer Edwin Edwards, 'I am the only one who will see her.' Fantin was thus laying himself open even more to the charge of vanity; worse, the presence of a naked woman surrounded by clothed men was to revive the hysteria set off at the Salon two years earlier by Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Fantin was rightly worried that the public would view his picture as 'a painters' orgy'.

What Fantin didn't try, in all his adjustments, was making Fantin less central: putting himself, say, at the traditional edge of events. Alsdorf cites Félix Vallotton's (equally massive, and rather enigmatic) group portrait of the Nabis (1902-03); here, the painter makes himself slightly smaller than the others, and a little off to the back, rather like a head waiter watching over a lively gestural discussion. Fantin never considered this. Nor did he try an even more radical solution: lose the muse. Akseli Gallen-Kallela's *Symposium* (1894) is a Munchishly hallucinatory group portrait set at the Kämp Hotel in Helsinki after much drink has been taken. On the right sit Sibelius and his composer friend Robert Kajanus, in red-eyed, stupefied half-profile, cigarettes burning; next to them is the unconscious figure of the composer-critic Oskar Merikanto; standing to the left, and looking at us, is the artist himself. He is half-shadowed by what Sibelius and Kajanus are staring at – a pair of deep red raptor's wings: the Mystery of Art has just called in on them but is now flying away, we are invited to conclude. It is a melodramatic image which verges on the preposterous, but would certainly have seemed more so if Gallen-Kallela had stuck to one of his original ideas: no departing wings, but instead a naked, symbolic woman lying atop the tablecloth. Now that really would have looked like 'a painters' orgy'.

Even before he completed *The Toast!*, Fantin had major doubts, fearing that his subject matter was 'truly absurd'. The picture was indeed accused of absurdity, pretension and vulgarity. One critic diagnosed 'a crisis of pride'; another dismissed the picture as one of 'these beer-mug paradises where the artist claims the role of God and Father, with his little friends as apostles'. Like much of the criticism Alsdorf quotes, such remarks are malicious, smug, largely wrong yet just right enough to curdle any self-doubt the painter might have felt. By destroying *The Toast!* Fantin admitted the picture's failure, and also the personal charge of egotism. Thereafter, he absented himself from his group portraits, and began a slow withdrawal from collegiality. He had been a passionate republican in early manhood, but was never a painter who went down into the street much; his way of representing the politics of the day was to represent those who were more active in them than he was (*Corner of a Table* was nicknamed 'The Communards' Meal'). So it was not a disaster – given the nature of his talent – that he chose increasingly to retreat to the Louvre, and to his own studio. In 1875, he wrote to the German painter Otto Scholderer (who stands to the left of Manet in *A Studio in*



*the Batignolles Quarter*): 'You're right about Artist gatherings; nothing measures up to one's interior.' In November 1876, he told Scholderer of his desire 'to go and live alone, away from all artists, as I don't feel I am like them.'

Coincidentally, that very same month he also got married, to Victoria Dubourg, a painter he met when they were both copying in the Louvre. Two years later he produced *The Dubourg Family* (1878), a group consisting of his wife, her sister Charlotte, and their parents. Anyone suspecting an apparent incompatibility between wanting 'to live alone' and getting married should examine this painting: it must be one of the most sombrely alarming depictions of in-laws in artistic and marital history. Four black-clad figures – the parents seated, the daughters standing – inhabit a narrow space in front of a dun wall bearing the corner of a picture which itself offers no relieving lightness; to the left is a door which looks as if it might be screwed shut. The feeling of dense and deadening domestic enclosure makes you think of early Mauriac novels; or of Chekhov's remark that 'If you are afraid of loneliness, don't marry.' In a further surprise, Fantin also formally privileges Charlotte over Victoria: from this, and other portraits of the sisters, you can't help wondering whether Fantin wasn't himself wondering if he might have married the wrong sister. At least, and for a change, this group portrait does contain one figure who actually manages to touch another: Fantin's wife lays a gentle hand on her mother's shoulder. It is a strangeness of Fantin's considerable talent that his human portraits have the eerie, funereal look of still lifes; while his still lifes, the flower paintings by which he made his money (and also his name in this country) display all the vigour and life and colour of which he was inherently aware.

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