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book review of

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

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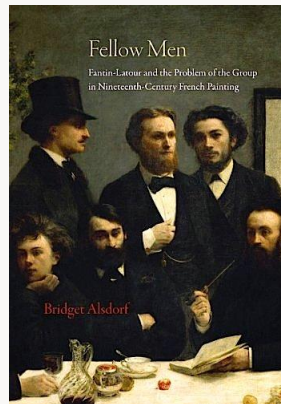
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Bridget Alsdorf,
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In her compelling study, *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting*, Bridget Alsdorf explores the difficulties of group portraiture in the early decades of modernism. Specifically focusing on the tensions between individuality and collective support, Alsdorf argues that these group portraits reveal “the precarious position of both individual and group in nineteenth-century life” (4). Anchored around five large group portraits painted by Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904) between 1864–85, the author insists on analyzing these works as paintings, rather than simply documentary portraits as they are often seen, and highlights the uneasy tensions between bourgeois respectability and bohemian rebellion inherent in the paintings (4). Fantin is the primary focus of the book because of his repeated interest in, and prolonged dedication to, the topic of group portraiture. However, part of the strength of the book lies in Alsdorf’s comparison of themes in Fantin’s work to those of his contemporaries, including Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Frédéric Bazille, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Alsdorf’s research adds to the scholarship on artist groups, group portraiture and particularly Fantin-Latour’s contribution and legacy. Alain Bonnet’s 2007 book analyzing the group portraits of artists and artistic associations in the nineteenth century and the recent publication of Fantin’s letters with his German artist friend Otto Scholderer attest to new interest in these themes. [1] Alsdorf builds on this earlier work, but her careful investigation and close readings of the paintings deliver a fresh analysis of Fantin’s group portraits and calls for a renewed look at group portraits by his contemporaries in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. From the 1860s onward, she asserts, group portraiture was reinvented partly as a way to express the anxiety created through incompatible desires to be a part of a cohesive group or withdraw to the seclusion of the studio. Individuality is defined only in relation to others,

making group associations necessary and yet always fraught with rifts and uncertainty. The collective unity of the group was often more imaginary than real, as is repeatedly demonstrated in Alsdorf's research. The fact that Fantin began painting these groups precisely at the moment of his own self-imposed withdrawal from them, along with his repeated desire to insert himself (through literal self-portraiture or through surrogate figures or studio spaces) into his group portraits, calls attention to Fantin's vacillating need for group approval and independent isolation.

Her first chapter, "The Self in Group Portraiture," revolves around Fantin's *Homage to Delacroix* (1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), initially exhibited at the Salon of 1864, and the artist's first attempt to reconcile individualism with collective identity. Fantin's interest in group portraiture was perhaps driven by his own recognition of the limits of self-portraiture (which had obsessed him in earlier years), the occurrence of Eugène Delacroix's death in August of 1863, and the Salon des Refusés of the same year. Fantin painted a group of artists, united less in style than in their admiration for the earlier revolutionary spirit of Delacroix, gathered around an image of the artist. He struggled to produce a painting that was a homage to Delacroix, but also honored his contemporary brotherhood of artists and writers; in the end, many critics thought it did neither. The artists, featuring James McNeill Whistler, Champfleury, and a self-portrait of Fantin prominently, but also Manet, Félix Bracquemond, Charles Baudelaire, among other lesser-known figures, face the viewer rather than the framed image of Delacroix in the background. Their lack of interaction with each other resulted in a composition that seemed stilted, awkward, and more of a collection of portraits rather than a unified whole. Alsdorf's key argument here is that these elements are central to Fantin's project and rather than see the strain and disconnect between the figures as a failure, they represent broader concerns about reconciling individualism with an avant-garde collective and demonstrate the "fragile nature of their collective life" (12). Fantin's conflicting needs to find validation within an artistic group, but also assert his own individuality, emerge repeatedly in the decades of his group portraits. It can clearly be seen in the attention he draws to his own image in *Homage to Delacroix*. His white shirt is a stark contrast to the somber bourgeois clothing of his fellow artists; he stands out among his peers, and as the actual creator of the painting, he is the individual mastermind behind this group production. Critics quickly perceived this to be self-promotional and accurately assessed the true focus of the work as the artist himself and the other artists he admired, rather than Delacroix.

Fantin continued his attempts to balance the self versus the collective in his next group portraits. Chapter two, perhaps the most ambitious of the book, attempts to recreate the development and history of *The Toast! Homage to Truth* (1865), a painting Fantin-Latour later destroyed. Envisioned as an allegorical statement of his philosophy of art, it was a bold undertaking and one that ultimately failed to please the critics or the artist. Alsdorf meticulously follows the evolution of this project through close analysis of existing sketches, Fantin's own comments about the work, and thirty-five Salon reviews of the piece. Admittedly, the reader may find this chapter challenging due to the absence of the final image, but the publication of numerous sketches aid immensely in understanding the trajectory of this project from genesis to destruction. Fantin's primary difficulty revolved around including a female nude allegorical figure surrounded by contemporary male figures. Relevant comparisons to Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* and particularly Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* suggest that Fantin's interests were parallel with, and influenced by, his contemporaries. His nude female represented Truth and initially stood in the foreground of the sketches while the

artists enthusiastically raise a toast to her. Hypnotized both by her promise of truth as well as her physical body, the artists are unified by her presence, but she also disrupts the bonds of their male community. Troubled by this fracture, Fantin ultimately pushed her to the back and turned the attention of the male artists away from her and toward the viewer. Among the artists, Fantin is given critical importance as he gazes at the viewer and points towards the figure of Truth, literally and metaphorically guiding the viewer toward enlightenment. Although initially conceived to honor the idea of truth, it ends up pointing back to Fantin, resulting in accusations of egotism and pride. The sharp negative criticism of the work forced the painter to conclude it was a “truly absurd” project and a failure (101). Fantin cut it up after its exhibition at the Salon of 1865, keeping only three individual portrait fragments (of Whistler, Antoine Vollon, and his own self-portrait), which are now scattered in various collections.

Fantin’s third group portrait and his first critical success at the Salon was *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter* (1870, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), the focus of chapter three. Learning from his earlier mistakes, Fantin does not include a self-portrait in this work and instead focuses the painting around Manet and his canvas. This work is also the first to shift attention to space and place, as illustrated in the title, rather than specific individuals or ideas. The space itself, resembling Fantin’s own studio space rather than Manet’s, is “aloof, airless, and deliberately closed to the outside world” (149). Distancing himself from the celebratory feel of *The Toast!*, Fantin emphasizes “the dignity and decorum of studio sociability” (118). This group is a loose artistic association whose relationships are tenuous and fragile, further demonstrated by the absence of Edmond Duranty whose feud with Manet prevented his appearance. These are somber, formal artists who take their work seriously; here, there is no amicable socializing as evident in Bazille’s informal, spacious *Studio on the rue la Condamine* of the same year. Manet, Renoir, Claude Monet, Émile Zola, Zacharie Astruc, Bazille, and others, all regular visitors of the Café Guerbois, here stand in isolation, neither looking at each other nor touching. Their isolation one from another, despite their claustrophobic clustering, highlights the tensions inherent within a group dynamic. Rather than interpret this as Fantin’s inability to paint coherent scenes, Alsdorf asserts that the “friction of its figural arrangement is not a failure to achieve pictorial ‘coherence,’ but a serious effort to represent the dilemma of the nineteenth-century group” (150). Fantin’s group portraits master the art of male artistic association, but it is an art that makes visible the secret emerging tensions (153).

In chapter four, Alsdorf analyzes *Corner of a Table* (1872, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) a group portrait composed of literary figures gathered together listening to the recitation of a poem. The painting shares the themes of artistic association, masculine unity, and relational identity evident in Fantin’s earlier works, but shifts the subject matter from painters to avant-garde poets, allowing the artist to be an observer rather than an active participant. Originally conceived as a homage to the recently deceased Baudelaire, early sketches included a portrait of Baudelaire in the background, following the compositional organization of Fantin’s *Homage to Delacroix*. Eventually, Fantin removed the explicit reference to Baudelaire and focused on eight poets, seated and standing around the eponymous table. The poets were writers associated with *Le Parnasse contemporain*, a journal dedicated to emerging poets breaking away from the traditions of the French academy, and they often had social evening gatherings that Fantin attended (167). These writers were committed to revolution in their writing, but also in their politics. Indeed, several were outspoken in their sympathy of the Commune or had been active Communards. This history was still fresh when the painting was displayed at the Salon

of 1872 and some critics immediately recognized the radical political associations of the figures; Charles Blanc labeled the work “The Commune’s Meal” (184). Alsdorf surmises that this nickname probably horrified Fantin, whose politics were moderate and not radical enough to support the Commune.

Political associations are not the only controversial or unexpected elements of the painting, however. The far right side of the table is composed of a still life, and its inclusion may not initially be surprising, since this was the genre for which Fantin was widely known and celebrated. In this case, however, the still-life masks the empty place of Albert Méral, who refused to pose with “pimps and thieves,” a veiled reference to the “deviant” relationship between Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, seated together at the opposite end of the table (156). Fantin gives special attention to Rimbaud, shown as a young rebel who turns his back from the other poets towards Verlaine. There are always certain figures within Fantin’s group portraits that seek to retreat or visually turn away from the crowd. Rimbaud as well as the figure of Camille Pelletan, who pins the viewer in a stare and whom Alsdorf suggests is a surrogate for Fantin, both draw the viewers attention due to their disconnect from the figures around them. They represent the desire to keep one’s individuality intact while simultaneously seeking public recognition and collective support. At the end of this chapter, one is convinced that contemplative calm of this poets’ gathering is illusory; often these meetings were energetic and combative, sometimes ending in physical brawls. Fantin himself recognized that the togetherness and unity of these images was a fantasy, as is suggested by his reworking of this painting the following year. His later *Corner of a Table* (1873, Art Institute of Chicago) depicts the same table and room, but now the figures have all disappeared. Fantin retreated into a beautiful, but less emotionally fraught, still-life.

Alsdorf’s final chapter shifts the focus from Fantin to group portraits produced by Degas and Renoir. Like Fantin, both artists began their foray into group portraiture in the 1860s and returned periodically in the following decades. The author identifies similar individual-group dilemmas emerging in their multi-figure portraits. For example, Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880–81, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC) represents a light-hearted excursion of social harmony, but was painted when the Impressionist group was divided and collapsing (213), or Degas’s portrait of three Franco-Prussian veterans *Jeantaud, Linet, and Lainé* (1871, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) in which the artist explored sameness and difference through physical features and personality (218). These examples, and others by Maurice Denis and Félix Vallotton discussed in her conclusion, reinforce the sense of competition and potential anxiety between the individual and the collective, and underscore the need for further scholarship on group portraiture.

Alsdorf concludes with Fantin’s fifth and final group portrait *Around the Piano* (1885, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), produced after a hiatus of group portraiture fifteen years. Fantin had long been a Wagner aficionado, and he began work on the piece shortly after the musician’s death in 1885.^[2] Composer Emmanuel Chabrier performs at the piano and seven other men lean or turn toward the piano. Considering the depth of the earlier chapters, the discussion of this piece seems surprisingly brief. Of all of Fantin’s group portraits, this is the most devoid of the artist’s own presence, Alsdorf argues, and because of that, it lacks the tension of his earlier paintings and seems empty of energy or life. One wonders if Fantin’s interest in the troubled dynamics of group association had waned or if he somehow didn’t quite have access to the

chords of disunion that might have threatened this group of musicians. In any case, Alsdorf's research piques one's interest in Fantin's work and other artists who visualized group portraiture in the nineteenth century.

Fellow Men challenges earlier perceptions of Fantin's work and convincingly argues that his group portraits have often been misinterpreted and misunderstood. Alsdorf's reevaluates Fantin's perceived weaknesses and failures by arguing that they were actually his greatest achievements. Fantin's contribution is to make the fractures and rifts in these artistic groups visible and call attention to the fragility of their associations, while still emphasizing their individual need for cohesion, support, and public recognition. This is an invaluable resource on Fantin-Latour and his contemporaries, inviting us to understand masculine association and group dynamics against the desires of the individual in a new, nuanced way.

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Notes

[1] Alain Bonnet, *Artistes en groupe: La représentation de la communauté des artistes dans la peinture du XIX^e siècle* (Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007); Mathilde Arnoux, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, and Anne Tempelaere-Panzani, eds., *Correspondance entre Henri Fantin-Latour et Otto Scholderer (1858–1902)* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2011).

[2] At the Salon of 1864, along with *Homage to Delacroix*, Fantin also exhibited a scene from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, demonstrating his dual interest in artistic group portraits as well as music. For more on Fantin's imagery of music and musicians, see Valérie Bajou, "Fantin-Latour et ses musiciens" *Revue de Musicologie* 76, no. 1 (1990): 45–76.