

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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exhibition review of

Frederic Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2017)

Citation: Corrinne Chong, exhibition review of *Frederic Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2017), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2017.16.2.11>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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Frédéric Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism

Montpellier, Musée Fabre

June 25, 2016 – October 16, 2016

Paris, Musée d'Orsay

November 15, 2016 – March 5, 2017

Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art

April 9, 2017 – July 9 2017

Catalogue:

Frédéric Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism.

Edited by Michel Hilaire and Paul Perrin.

Essays by Michel Hilaire, Kimberly A. Jones, Paul Perrin, Stanislas Colodiet, Philippe Mariot, François-Bernard Michel, and Jean-Claude Yon.

Paris: Flammarion, 2016 (English edition).

334 pp.; 250 color illus.; chronology; bibliography; family trees; maps; index.

\$49.95 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-2080202857

Echoing the general verdict on his friend Henri Fantin-Latour's ambiguous historiographical position, "the oeuvre of Frédéric Bazille is unclassifiable."^[1] This conclusion, drawn from the exhibition catalogue for *Frédéric Bazille: Prophet of Impressionism*, similarly summarizes the painter's status in art historical periodization. Killed in combat at Beaune-la-Rolande during the Franco-Prussian war, the career of the twenty-eight year old artist who had assuredly declared, "As for myself, I'm sure not to get killed, I have too many things to do in this life," would never reach maturity (19). The brevity of his life and hence, a truncated body of work, largely accounts for his relatively obscure name. The retrospective *Frédéric Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism*, which closed on July 9, 2017 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, aspired to resolve this.

Organized in partnership with the Musée Fabre and the Musée d'Orsay, the exhibition drew together the world's three largest collections of the artist's paintings: no other exhibition of this scale and depth had been mounted in the United States since the Brooklyn Museum's retrospective nearly a quarter of a century ago. Although Bazille was often relegated to the periphery as a dilettante and occasional benefactor to his artist friends, the co-curators Michel Hilaire (Musée Fabre), Paul Perrin (Musée d'Orsay), and Kimberly A. Jones (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) cast him as a central actor in the genesis of Impressionism. Forty-six of his paintings were thematically organized to underscore his active engagement with the modern ideals and aesthetic issues of the avant-garde. The juxtaposition of his works with those of his contemporaries such as Gustave Courbet, Claude Monet, and Auguste Renoir among others, illuminated their affinities and divergences across a multiplicity of genres. Above all, considered groupings between comparable pieces highlighted the distinguishing elements of Bazille's pictorial vocabulary and technical methods. Eugène Delacroix, Camille Corot, and Théodore Rousseau were also represented to pay homage to the masters who influenced his early artistic formation. Collectively, the

breadth of works in the retrospective showcased a glittering panorama of some of the most canonical figures in nineteenth-century art and in the case of Bazille, one of the most promising.

Frédéric Bazille was born in Montpellier to a prosperous Protestant family of goldsmiths, merchants, and landowners. His father Gaston abandoned the law for the vineyard, excelled in agronomy, presided over the Société d'Agriculture de l'Hérault, and became second deputy to the major Jules Pagézy in 1867. His mother, Camille Vialars, descended from a similar social class and led a well-respected salon in addition to her extensive charitable work (20). In 1859, the young Bazille completed his bachelor's degree in science and enrolled in medical school, but in 1862, his artistic ambitions drove him to Paris. To appease his parents, he half-heartedly persisted with his medical studies at the Faculté de Médecine while taking classes at Charles Gleyre's prestigious atelier. In his correspondence, we learn of his love of opera, his thespian aspirations, his sartorial flair, and his indulgence in quince candies, but moreover, his struggle in balancing the dual demands of his medical and art training. Finally, in 1864, he failed his medical exams—a blessing in disguise that convinced his exasperated parents that their son was not destined to become a respectable provincial doctor. With their long overdue consent, Bazille quit school and plunged headlong into painting. As Monet, his closest comrade at the time, advised: "You really have to knuckle down to some serious work now that your family has given up on your studying medicine" (27).

The exhibition covered the span of the artist's eight-year career across seven thematic rooms. At the entrance, a massive silkscreen reproduction of *The Family Gathering* on the exterior wall welcomed visitors into Bazille's sun-filled world (fig. 1). The image captures an idyllic afternoon on the terrace of the family's summer residence at Méric and dazzles in its treatment of the blindingly intense light, jewel-toned sky, and dappled shadows cast by the chestnut tree's majestic canopy. Here, and at the family's Saint-Saveur estate, Bazille and his younger brother Marc savored languorous summer days. Both sites would inspire nearly half of the subjects in his repertoire, a testament to the allure of the south.^[2] With its vibrant colors, verdant scenery and evocation of holiday bliss, *The Family Gathering* joyously set the stage for what curator Jones compared to a "celebration" of Bazille's accomplishments.^[3] The positive tenor of the exhibition resonated in the curatorial statement: "His work bears the hallmark of youth: it is ambitious, inventive and rebellious, and each new painting represents a challenge, a triumph or a failure."^[4] This emphasis on "youth," (*jeunesse*) which lies at the heart of the exhibition's French title, *Frédéric Bazille (1841–1879) et la jeunesse de l'impressionnisme*, signaled the start of something momentous: a radically new kind of plein-air painting at which Bazille stood at the threshold.



Fig. 1, View of the entrance wall featuring a silkscreen reproduction of Frédéric Bazille's *Portraits of the *** Family*, called *The Family Gathering*. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Moderately lit to enhance the reddish terracotta color of the walls, the room devoted to the theme, “Montpellier to Paris,” evoked the intimate atmosphere of the salon interior. Upon entering the space, visitors came vis-à-vis with Bazille’s self-assured *Self Portrait with Palette* (1865, Art Institute of Chicago) (figs. 2, 3). The wall that featured the exhibition’s curatorial statement incorporated maps of Bazille’s numerous studios and a provocative quote by the artist that invoked all the conviction of a manifesto: “The subject matter is unimportant, provided what I have done is interesting as a painting. I chose the modern era because it is the one I understand best; I find it more alive for people who are alive” (fig. 4) (35). Consistent with the format throughout the gallery, the theme was summarized under a short wall title (fig. 5). Two key paintings in the room effectively marked Bazille’s trajectory from the bucolic serenity of the countryside to the bohemian buzz of the Batignolles. The first is Courbet’s *Portrait of Alfred Bruyas* or *Solution Painting* (1853, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) (fig. 6). An astute collector and champion of modern painting, Bruyas’ residence housed an eclectic assortment of important artworks including those by his friend Courbet, Delacroix, J.-A.-D. Ingres, Hippolyte Flandrin, and Théodore Géricault. The teenaged Bazille frequented his neighbor’s gallery where he first gained exposure to the latest artistic developments in Paris and mingled with the local intelligentsia. The second painting is the fascinating *Forty-Three Portraits by Painters at Charles Gleyre’s Studio* (1856–68, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris) (fig. 7). The ever-evolving work, which was painted by a succession of students, exudes the spirit of camaraderie. Given the curiosity of this group portrait, visitors might have enjoyed identifying the sitters had a reproduction of the inscribed names on the back been available. Of all the *rapins* (slang for painters) in Bazille’s social circle, only Alfred Sisley and Renoir are portrayed.



Fig. 2, View through the doorway into room one, "From Montpellier to Paris," with a clear sightline of *Self Portrait with Palette*, 1865. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 3, *Self Portrait with Palette*, 1865.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 4, Introductory didactic panel presenting the curatorial statement and maps of key destinations in the artist's life.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 5, Thematic wall text in room one, "From Montpellier to Paris," printed next to the *Little Italian Street Singer*, 1866.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view of corner in room one, “From Montpellier to Paris.”
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 7, Anonymous, *Forty Portraits by Painters at Charles Gleyre's Studio*, ca. 1856–68.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The adjoining room was conceived as an extension of the previous space and encompassed Bazille's still lifes and portraits. The one exception was his radiant *Reclining Nude* or *Nude Study* (1864, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) (figs. 8, 9). Displayed on its own wall, the painting was executed immediately after he left the Faculté de Médecine, and thus, symbolically inaugurated his vocation as an artist. Ambitious in both size and scale, Bazille confided to his father that never had he ever “undertaken anything quite so difficult” (221). Nearby, a glass case showcased his two sketchbooks (ca. 1863–66, ca. 1867–70, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) (fig. 10). The entirety of the second volume was shown page-by-page on a monitor, affording visitors an overarching glimpse into the artist's development from his juvenilia to ideas for future projects that would sadly remain unrealized. Across from the display case, a melancholic trio of Bazille's portraits foregrounded his skill in the genre and revealed a modern sensibility that foreshadowed Paul Cézanne's colorism, flattened forms, and sense of mass (fig. 11).^[5] Bazille's gleaming *Still Life with Fish* (1866, Detroit Institute of Arts) was indisputably the centerpiece on one of the two walls devoted to the genre (fig. 12). An exquisite study in mercurial silver, bronze, and vermillion, the highly accomplished painting confirmed his technical proficiency—a point emphasized by its placement next to Manet's *Eel and Red Mullet* (1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and substantiated by its acceptance at the Paris Salon (fig. 13).



Fig. 8, Installation view showing section two of room one. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 9, *Reclining Nude or Nude Study*, 1864.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 10, Display case containing Bazille's two sketchbooks with screen monitor.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 11, Installation view of portraits from left to right: *Young Woman with Lowered Eyes*, 1866–67. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 12, *Still Life with Fish*, 1866.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 13, Installation view from left to right:
Édouard Manet, *El and Red Mullet*, 1864.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The third exhibition room, “Bazille and Monet,” paid tribute to the artists’ close friendship. Luminous warm yellow walls provided a befitting backdrop that harmonized with the

sunny-hued landscapes and brightened the few overcast skies. Shortly after their meeting at Gleyre's studio in 1863, Monet and Bazille embarked on the first of several short sojourns to the forest of Fontainebleau and the Normandy coast. Of the two travel companions, Monet was the more seasoned painter and happily tutored his friend on the practice of plein-air painting. The only surviving work from Bazille's first trip to Normandy was his modest still life, *Soup Bowl Covers* (1864, Musée Fabre, Montpellier). According to Jones, the reason for his suspiciously limited output, despite claims of working from dawn to dusk, was simply "a crisis in confidence" (52). Included in the retrospective, however, was a work *inspired by* Normandy that was executed entirely off site in the studio: *The Beach at Sainte-Adresse* (1865, High Museum of Art, Atlanta). This canvas—the only extant seascape in Bazille's oeuvre—was framed by Monet's *The Beach at Honfleur* (1864, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and *Sainte-Adresse* (1865, High Museum of Art, Atlanta) (fig. 14). This well-thought out triptych unequivocally asserted Monet's influence on Bazille's incipient endeavours in landscape painting.[6] Aesthetically, this arrangement formed a striking continuous horizon line that grounded the room beautifully (fig. 15).



Fig.14, Installation view of central wall in room two, "Monet and Bazille."

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 15, Frontal view of the central wall in room two, "Monet and Bazille."

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Motivated by their mutual appreciation for the Barbizon masters, the two companions revisited Fontainebleau in the spring of 1865 where they stayed at the picturesque village of Chailly. Unlike the previous year's lack of productivity, this trip yielded four paintings, two of which were landscapes. While Bazille reverentially invoked the dark tonalities, mossy green-brown palette, and dense brushwork of the Barbizon school in the *Forest of Fontainebleau* (1865, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), his sharp contrasts of light and shade, vivid hues, and rhythmic brushstrokes in the *Landscape at Chailly* (1865, Art Institute of Chicago) presaged the stark luminous painting of his unique *peinture claire* aesthetic (figs. 16, 17). Théodore Rousseau's *The Pool* (ca. 1850, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) was displayed on the same wall, diagonally across from Monet's *Promenade: Road to the Farm of Saint-Siméon* (1864, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo) (fig. 18). Altogether, this complex assemblage affirmed the Barbizon's influence on the pre-Impressionist generation. A bit of humor was tucked in the corner where Bazille's *The Impoverished Field Hospital* (1865, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) faced Monet's study for the *Luncheon on the Grass*, *Bazille and Camille* (1865, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). In the former painting, a bedridden Monet clad in his nightgown, nurses his injured leg in the company of a makeshift bucket contraption (fig. 19).

The gruff expression was partly due to his friend's tardy arrival in Chailly to serve as the default male model for the *Luncheon*. In the study, the dapper Bazille is shown out and about, sporting a stylish cravat, with a pipe in hand, in the company of Monet's mistress (fig. 20). For the rest of the summer, he remained in Chailly to pose for countless studies that would culminate in Monet's monumental "manifesto of plein-airisme" (30).



Fig. 16, *Forest of Fontainebleau*, 1865.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 17, *Landscape at Chailly*, 1865.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 18, Installation view of corner in room two, "Monet and Bazille," featuring landscapes of Fontainebleau by Bazille, Monet, and Théodore Rousseau.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 19, *The Improvised Field Hospital*, 1865.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 20, Installation view of corner in room two, “Monet and Bazille.”
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The fourth room, “Studio Friendships,” was one of the most intelligently realized in terms of the compelling dialogue that Jones orchestrated between individual works. The theme explored the studio’s fundamental role in the formation of Bazille’s professional identity and collegial relationships. Between 1863 and 1870, he occupied six different studios. Three of these were painted and included in the exhibition. As clarified by Jones in her consistently perspicacious analyses in the accompanying catalogue, this genre “should not be read as simple transcriptions of nature, but understood as biographically informed meditations on the practice of painting itself” (164). At the core of this practice was the spirit of camaraderie and collaboration—one that particularly resonated in the *Studio on the Rue de la Condamine* (1869–70, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) (figs. 21, 22). Flooded in natural light and with ample space to accommodate increasingly ambitious projects, the studio’s location in the Batignolles quarter brought Bazille geographically closer to Manet and to one of the most vigorous intellectual hotspots of the avant-garde, the Café Guerbois. Pictured next to his easel, Bazille is surrounded by his entourage whose identities are indicated on the didactic panel. The *Studio on the Rue la Condamine* is especially engaging because all four of the artist’s paintings portrayed in the work were featured in the show. In contrast, his earlier *The Artist’s Studio on the Rue de Furstenberg* (1865, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) chiefly showcased the paintings of Monet (figs. 23, 24). The theme of collaboration was further elaborated by an alignment of three paintings on the adjacent wall: Sisley’s *Heron with Spread Wings* (1867, Musée d’Orsay, Paris on long-term loan at Musée Fabre, Montpellier), Renoir’s *Frédéric Bazille* (1867, Musée d’Orsay, Paris on long-term loan at Musée Fabre, Montpellier), and Bazille’s *Still life with Heron* (1867, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) (figs. 25, 26). The two still lifes depict the actual bird that was shared amongst the three friends, while the portrait captures Bazille in the act of painting it. Akin to a set of variations in grey, these works attractively complemented the room, which was painted in the same cool, crisp, luminous grey that appears in the *Studio on the Rue de la Condamine*. The remaining wall of the gallery displayed portraits of Bazille’s friends including the *mélomane-dilettante* (music lover) *Edmond Maître* (1869, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), whose passion for music and commendable piano skills were matched by Bazille’s own (fig. 27).



Fig. 21, *Studio or The Studio on the Rue La Condamine*, 1869–70.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 22, Installation view of main wall in room four, "Studio Friendships."
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 23, *The Artist's Studio on the Rue de Furstenberg*, 1865. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

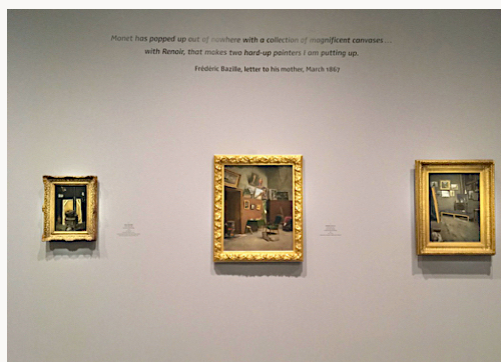


Fig. 24, Installation of wall featuring studio views. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 25, Installation view of interrelated still lifes in room four.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 26, Installation view displaying transition between rooms three and four.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 27, *Edmond Maître*, 1869.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

It was only befitting that some of Bazille's most accomplished paintings were highlighted in the grandest space in the exhibition (fig. 28). The straightforward title of the room, "Figures in Sunlight," encapsulated the most inimitable attribute of Bazille's oeuvre—his talent in integrating figures into the open landscape. This challenge had been a continuing preoccupation with the pre-Impressionists who sought to convincingly fuse figure, ground, and the ephemeral optics of light and atmosphere. However, as Musée d'Orsay curator Perrin observed in his discussion of *Summer Scene* (featured in the following room), "Monet or Renoir stays at the surface of things."^[7] In contrast, Bazille's figures are organically grounded in the landscape. In looking at his portrait of his cousin Thérèse de Hours, *The Pink Dress* (1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), this relatively early piece already attests to his considerable skill in depicting modern figures outdoors (fig. 29). Executed during his annual pilgrimage back to Méric during the summer months, the young girl is seated on the parapet overlooking the village; the articulation of her body is slightly flat, but this flaw is compensated by the glorious rose-gold light that pervades the scene.



Fig. 28, Installation view of wall in room five, "Figures in Sunlight," featuring at the center: Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, 1866. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 29, *The Pink Dress*, 1864.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Four years later, he finished another full-length portrait of a young girl in *View of the Village* (1868, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) (fig. 30). Compositionally, this work is a mirror image of its predecessor; technically, it is a tremendous improvement. The stark contrasts are even more powerful, the colors more vibrant, the areas of flattened relief even bolder. Furthermore, there is an irrepressible sense of tension; the sitter is firmly grounded in her surroundings, but her gaze is directed towards the beholder. Monet's *Women in the Garden* (1866, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) was placed front and center between the two portraits (see fig. 28). Undoubtedly, this impressive work, which Bazille greatly admired and purchased for 2500 francs, was a catalyst that sparked his own investigations into pleinairisme. *The Family Gathering* (1867–68, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) was more than likely a response to Monet's painting (figs. 31, 32, 33). In contrast, his sun-parched *Landscape on the Banks of the Lez* (1870, Minneapolis Institute of Art), which directly faced the Monet on the opposite wall, could be construed as a counterpoint (fig. 34). With its arresting clarity of light and solidity of form, Bazille's painting signalled the crystallization of his own voice. As he poignantly expressed in a letter to his father in 1864, "I do hope, that if I ever do anything, at least to have the merit of not copying anyone" (13).



Fig. 30, *View of the Village*, 1868.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 31, Installation view of *Portraits of the *** Family*, called *The Family Gathering*, 1867–68. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 32, Alternate view of *Portraits of the Family, called The Family Gathering*.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

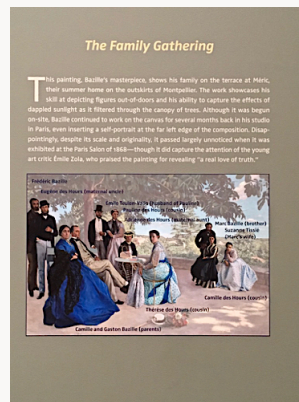


Fig. 33, Didactic panel for *Portraits of the Family, called The Family Gathering*.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 34, *Landscape on the Banks of the Lez*, 1870. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

“The Modern Nude” continued the theme elucidated in the previous room (fig. 35). These paintings established Bazille’s attachment to the native landscape of Languedoc and further showcased his skill in rendering the figure en-plein-air. His *Summer Scene (Bathers)* (1869–70, Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA) and *Fisherman with a Net*, (1868, Arp Museum, Bahnhof Rolandseck, Germany) epitomized these aspects of his aesthetic (fig. 36). A sub-theme that emerged through the provocative groupings was the obligation to boldly uphold the ideals of the avant-garde while covertly appealing to the conservatism of the Salon. As with all young ambitious artists, Bazille’s goal was to gain the Academy’s official recognition despite its outdated dictates. The inclusion of Renoir’s and Cézanne’s classically-informed but manifestly modern nudes exemplified this underlying dichotomy (fig. 37). In observing Bazille’s two paintings, the static formality of his nudes alludes to Ingres’ brand of academic classicism while the silent stillness of the landscapes echo those of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain. However, the contrasting planes of glaring sunlight and dense shade, as well as the severe legibility of form, drastically differ from the vague transient pictorial effects typified by Monet, the artist whom he is most often compared to in the literature. Habitually defined (and inevitably diminished) by his relationships with his contemporaries,

both curators were asked to articulate the most distinctive characteristic of Bazille's art during their interviews. For Perrin, "there is always something very static, a sort of gravity that freezes everything and attaches the figures to the ground."^[8] Comparably, Jones underscored the signature "weightiness" of Bazille's figures and the attention to "the solid and physical" qualities that may be rooted in his early drawing lessons with the sculptor Auguste Baussan in Montpellier or to his anatomy lessons. Moreover, Jones enthused over Bazille's brilliant "eye for pattern" in the way that he was able to harmonize the most discordant patterns as seen in *The Impoverished Field Hospital* and *La Toilette* (1870, Musée Fabre, Montpellier).^[9]



Fig. 35, The thematic text panel in room six, "The Modern Nude."

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 36, From left to right: *Summer Scene* (*Bathers*), 1869–70.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

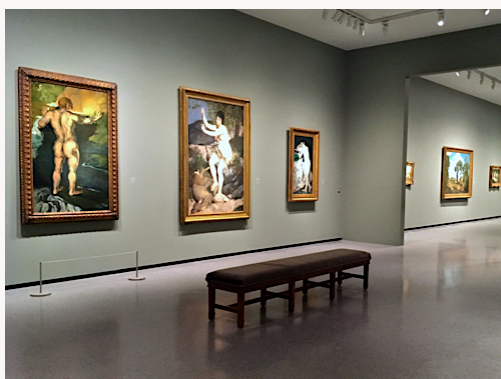


Fig. 37, Installation view of main wall in room six highlighting comparative paintings by Cézanne, Renoir, and Bazille.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The following room, "Flowers," was simply opulent (fig. 38). It was painted in the same color as the first thematic section to evoke the studio interior, and the vases, bouquets, and baskets brimming with blooms set the space aglow. Contributions by Monet, Renoir, Courbet, and Fantin-Latour not only added variety, but also prompted comparative analyses (fig. 39). Bazille, like his peers, painted flowers and other still-life subjects because these were more affordable than hiring a model. At the time, there was also a burgeoning commercial market

for this genre, particularly in England. However, having grown up in the countryside with a father who cultivated his early interest in botany, ornithology and butterflies, the artist appreciated nature from the very start (82). Devoid of symbolism or any form of emblematic program, it is evident that Bazille relished depicting the riot of colors and plethora of textures. His technical virtuosity particularly shines in his two versions of *Young Woman with Peonies* (fig. 40). Comparable to his figures en-plein-air, Bazille's African model (a choice inspired by Manet's *Olympia*) is physically integrated with the subject and psychologically absorbed in her task: selling flowers in one, arranging them in the other. Incontestably, the showstopper in the room was his resplendent *Vase of Flowers on a Console* (1867–70, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble, France) (fig. 41), an homage to Delacroix's *Vase of Flowers on a Console* (1825–50, Musée Ingres, Montauban).



Fig. 38, The thematic text panel in room seven, "Flowers." [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

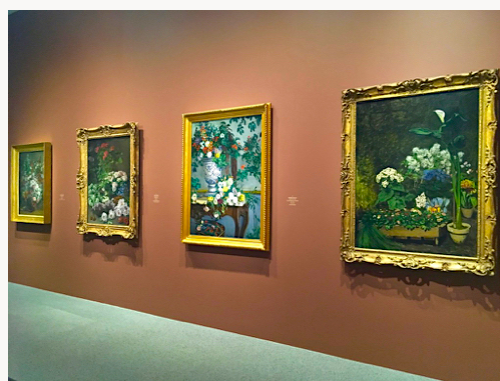


Fig. 39, One of the most attractive groupings in the exhibition with still lifes by Courbet, Monet, Bazille, and Renoir. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

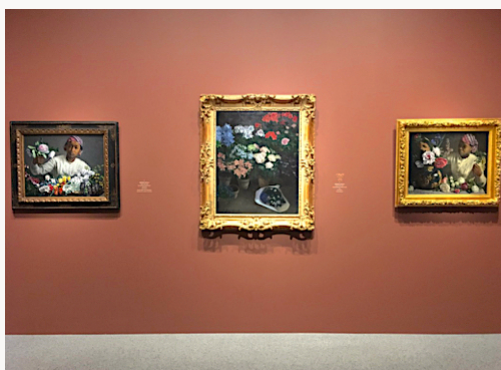


Fig. 40, Installation view from left to right: *Young Woman with Peonies*, spring 1870. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 41, *Vase of Flowers on a Console*, 1867–68. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The final room of the exhibit, "Aigues-Mortes / Ruth and Boaz," was a conflation of two unrelated themes, each identified by a different wall color: yellow and grey. The first presented three of Bazille's most accomplished landscapes in juxtaposition with his *Studies for a Grape Harvest* (1868, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) and a landscape by a fellow southerner,

Paul Guigou (fig. 42). Located on a marshland near Montpellier, Aigues-Mortes was an old medieval fortress that once served as a protestant prison. Bazille arrived in April of 1867 before the onset of the torrid heat and fever-inducing southeasterly wind known as *le marin* (118). As a departure from his usual methods, he quickly set out for the lagoon to begin painting the ramparts *in-situ* with only minor adjustments in the studio. As a result, a sense of immediacy and spontaneity suffuses these landscapes as seen in the gold and cerulean-hued painting, *The Western Ramparts at Aigues-Mortes* (1867, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) (fig. 43).

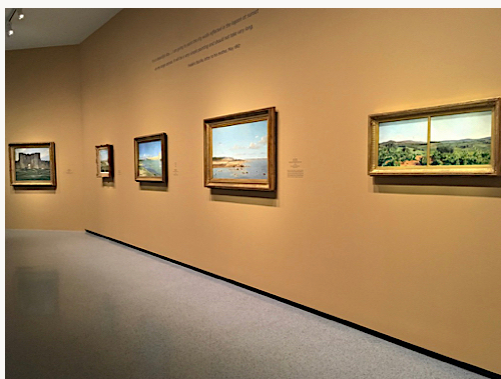


Fig. 42, Installation view of main wall in room eight, “Aigues-Mortes/ Ruth and Boaz.” [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 43, *The Western Ramparts at Aigues-Mortes*, 1867. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The second theme was solely dedicated to perhaps the most stylistically and iconographically incongruous work in the exhibit: Bazille’s enigmatic and unfinished *Ruth and Boaz* (1870, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) (fig. 44). Eerily surreal in mood with its crescent moon, somnolent protagonists, and mystical undertones, this canvas represents the only known religious subject in the artist’s oeuvre. However, as noted in the didactic wall panel and in Michel Hilaire’s insightful catalogue essay, Bazille’s direct inspiration was more likely to have been Victor Hugo’s poem *Boaz endormi* (Boaz sleeping) than the bible. Regarding the painting’s visual sources, Alexandre Cabanel’s own *Ruth and Boaz* (ca. 1868, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) and Pierre Puvis de Chavanne’s sketch for *Sleep* (ca. 1867, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) were only included in the Musée Fabre and Musée d’Orsay showings along with Bazille’s preparatory studies. These supplementary works would have given more presence to the section on *Ruth and Boaz*, which like the *non-finito* state of the painting, felt incomplete and oddly out of place across from the Aigues-Mortes landscapes. Given the amount of empty space where the detailed chronological timeline was presented, a partition wall could have been mounted to create a separate room (fig. 45). This addition would have facilitated the display of two other paintings, *Landscape on the Banks of the Lez* and *Study for a Young Male Nude*, which are not only chronologically related, but also visually and atmospherically similar (see figs. 34, 35). The former canvas not only mirrors the empty dry landscape in its nocturnal counterpart, *Ruth and Boaz*, but also shares the same dimensions.^[10] Concerning the latter painting, the languorous male nude might have even modeled for the biblical scene as implied by Perrin in his extensive caption notes (255). In light of these intriguing correlations, a grouping between the three paintings—a collective swan song—would have provided a more impactful and provocative finale to the exhibition.



Fig. 44, *Ruth and Boaz*, 1870.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 45, Installation view of *Ruth and Boaz*.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The most fascinating aspect of *Ruth and Boaz*, however, is the astounding re-discovery of the long-lost *Young Woman at the Piano* beneath its surface through x-radiography. This revelation was the impetus for the most thorough technical examination of Bazille's paintings to date. Thus far, the Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France and the laboratories at the National Gallery uncovered eleven hidden compositions. Certainly, the re-use of canvases was common practice, but the implications for the continuing scholarship are profound. These dramatic discoveries shed new insight into the artist's process, working methods and more importantly, expand the corpus of Bazille's extant work. To quote Jones: "these new findings give us a new perspective on how prolific he really was" (158). Some of these preliminary results are examined in her essay, "Practice and Process in the Work of Frédéric Bazille" and were featured in an interactive display situated close to the painting. On the monitor's screen, images of the relevant paintings were superimposed with their corresponding x-rays (fig. 46). Finally, after walking past the chronological timeline, visitors encountered another enormous mural, but this time of the *Studio on La Rue Condamine* (figs. 47, 48). In a letter written to his father, Bazille effusively recounted: "I've been having so much fun so far painting the interior with my friends. Manet did me himself . . ." (165). In the company of his most intimate friends and surrounded by art as music wafted throughout the airy studio, Bazille certainly could not have been more content. And with this final image in mind, the visitor, too, left on a joyous note.



Fig. 46, Display monitor showcasing paintings with hidden compositions revealed by x-radiography, including *Ruth and Boaz*, under which one of Bazille's most famous long lost paintings was uncovered:

Young Woman at the Piano.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 47, Installation view of the chronological timeline leading towards the exit. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

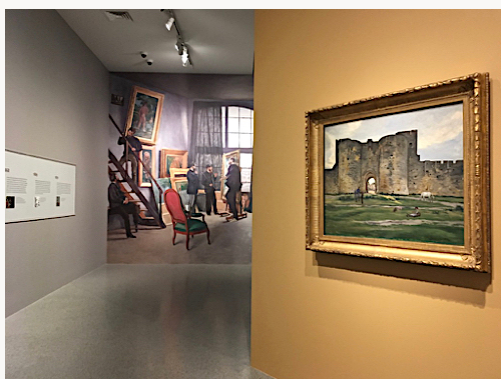


Fig. 48, Installation view of *The Studio on the Rue La Condamine* mural near the exit of the gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

All in all, the monographic retrospective was a labor of love that admirably achieved its objective. From the inclusion of documentary facsimiles in the timeline to the laudably research-driven and superbly designed catalogue, every detail was thoughtfully considered to present the most complete portrait of an artist who had been unjustifiably overshadowed by his famous friends and side-lined by art historians. To quote Jones, the exhibition venue was envisioned as a “big national stage” with the objective of “shining a spotlight on him [Bazille] in a grand way that is long overdue.”^[1] In the end, not only was Bazille convincingly promoted as an originator of Impressionism, but also his wide artistic milieu was vividly conveyed by a supporting cast of nineteenth-century luminaries who effectively enriched the artist's own narrative. Concerning the next phase in the future of the scholarship, Perrin's hope is that art historians approach Bazille's art as an “*oeuvre de jeunesse*.” In other words, “to really see these paintings as they really are by recognizing that they constitute a

nascent body of work marked by invention, freshness, sometimes failures, rebellion, high ambition, and emulation.”^[12] By adopting this outlook—one that should also apply to other artists afflicted with short careers—the focus shifts from the speculative ‘what ifs’ to what really matters: Bazille’s achievements *there and then*. Jones’s hope is for the research to remain active, to ensure that he is “written back into history versus fading away.”^[13] Given the ground-breaking and exciting materialization of either lost or hidden works, the latter outcome is unforeseeable. The scholarship will unquestionably undergo a period of revitalization as scholars and conservators continue to reassess the extent of his oeuvre with the aid of x-radiography and infrared technology. To paraphrase the scholar Gabriel Sarraute who once declared that “Frédéric Bazille’s fame has only just begun” (203), some of the most exciting and revelatory research on the artist has likewise just begun.

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Notes

[1] Aleth Jourdan, Jean-Patrice Marandel, Dianne W. Pitman, et al., *Frédéric Bazille: Prophet of Impressionism*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1992), 15. The 1993 retrospective in Boston originated from the 1992 exhibition *Frédéric Bazille et ses amis impressionnistes* at the Musée Fabre and terminated at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis. In the catalogue for the Fantin-Latour retrospective, the preface opens with “the work of Fantin-Latour is unclassifiable.” See, Laure Dalon, Xavier Rey, Brigit Alsdorf, et al., *Fantin-Latour: A fleur de peau*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2016), 11.

[2] Jean Patrice-Marandel, “Frédéric Bazille and Early Impressionism,” in *Frédéric Bazille and Early Impressionism*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago), 11–20 (17).

[3] Kimberly A. Jones, curator, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, interviewed by the author, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, May 18, 2017.

[4] This quote is from the wall text featured in the Washington, DC, exhibition but variants can be found in the press releases issued by the Musée d’Orsay and Musée Fabre.

[5] Bazille and Cézanne met in 1863. Their brief friendship was rooted in their mutual admiration for Delacroix. See Jean-Patrice Marandel, “Frédéric Bazille: The Lure of Exoticism,” in *Frédéric Bazille: Prophet of Impressionism*, 67–75 (73).

[6] For a succinct comparative analysis of Bazille’s and Monet’s respective Sainte-Adresse seascapes, see Dianne W. Pitman, “Overlapping Frames,” in *Monet and Bazille: A Collaboration*, ed. David A. Brennema et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 19–65 (19–30).

[7] Paul Perrin, curator, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, interviewed by the author via email June 2, 2017.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Jones interview, May 18, 2017.

[10] In the catalogue, *Landscape on the Banks of the Lez* and *Ruth and Boaz* are printed side-by-side (184–85).

[11] Jones interview, May 18, 2017.

[12] Perrin interview, June 2, 2017.

[13] Jones interview, May 18, 2017.

Illustrations

All photographs by the author unless otherwise noted. All paintings by Bazille unless otherwise noted.



Fig. 1, View of the entrance wall featuring a silk-screen reproduction of Frédéric Bazille's *Portraits of the *** Family*, called *The Family Gathering*. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, View through the doorway into room one, “From Montpellier to Paris,” with a clear sightline of *Self Portrait with Palette*, 1865. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, *Self Portrait with Palette*, 1865. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago. © National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Introductory didactic panel presenting the curatorial statement and maps of key destinations in the artist’s life. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Thematic wall text in room one, “From Montpellier to Paris,” printed next to the *Little Italian Street Singer*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view of corner in room one, "From Montpellier to Paris." From left to right: Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of Alfred Bruyas*, also called *Solution Painting*, 1853. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier; Bazille, *Self Portrait with Detachable Collar*, ca. 1865–67. Oil on canvas. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Anonymous, *Forty Portraits by Painters at Charles Gleyre's Studio*, ca. 1856–68. Oil on canvas. Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Installation view showing section two of room one. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, *Reclining Nude* or *Nude Study*, 1864. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Display case containing Bazille's two sketchbooks with screen monitor. Both volumes are reproduced in their entirety in the exhibition catalogue. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Installation view of portraits from left to right: *Young Woman with Lowered Eyes*, 1866–67. Oil on canvas. Private collection; *Portrait of Alphonse Tissie in Cavalryman's Uniform*, 1868–69. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier; *The Fortune-Teller*, ca. 1869–70. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

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Fig. 12, *Still Life with Fish*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, Installation view from left to right: Édouard Manet, *Eel and Red Mullet*, 1864. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Bazille, *Still Life with Fish*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit; Bazille *Two Herrings*, ca. 1866. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig.14, Installation view of central wall in room two, "Monet and Bazille." From left to right: Claude Monet, *Sainte-Adresse*, 1867. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Bazille, *The Beach at Sainte-Adresse*, 1865. Oil on canvas. High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Claude Monet, *The Beach at Honfleur*, 1864. Oil on canvas. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, Frontal view of the central wall in room two, "Monet and Bazille." Note the continuous horizon line formed by the three seascapes. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 16, *Forest of Fontainebleau*, 1865. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 17, *Landscape at Chailly*, 1865. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 18, Installation view of corner in room two, “Monet and Bazille,” featuring landscapes of Fontainebleau by Bazille, Monet, and Théodore Rousseau. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 19, *The Improvised Field Hospital*, 1865. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 20, Installation view of corner in room two, “Monet and Bazille.” From left to right: *The Improvised Field Hospital*; Claude Monet, *Bazille and Camille* (Study for *Luncheon on the Grass*), 1865. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 21, *Studio or The Studio on the Rue La Condamine*, 1869–70. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 22, Installation view of main wall in room four, “Studio Friendships.” From left to right: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *The Artist's Studio*, ca. 1868. Oil on wood. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Bazille, *Studio or The Studio on the Rue La Condamine*, 1869–70. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; attributed to Eugène Delacroix, *Corner of the Studio*, 1825 and 1850. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 23, *The Artist's Studio on the Rue de Furstenberg*, 1865. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier.
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 24, Installation of wall featuring studio views. Left to right: Paul Cézanne, *The Stove in the Studio*, ca. 1865. Oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London; Bazille, *The Artist's Studio on the Rue de Furstenberg*, 1865. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier; Bazille, *A Studio on the Rue Visconti*, 1867. Oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 25, Installation view of interrelated still lifes in room four. From left to right: Alfred Sisley, *Heron with Spread Wings*, 1867. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, on long-term loan at Musée Fabre, Montpellier; Auguste Renoir, *Frédéric Bazille*, 1867. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, on long-term loan at Musée Fabre, Montpellier; Bazille *Still Life with Heron*, 1867. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 26, Installation view displaying transition between rooms three and four. The color grey beautifully unifies both spaces. In the foreground, Bazille's *Still Life with Heron*. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 27, *Edmond Maître*, 1869. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 28, Installation view of wall in room five, “Figures in Sunlight,” featuring at the center: Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. © National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 29, *The Pink Dress*, 1864. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 30, *View of the Village*, 1868. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 31, Installation view of *Portraits of the *** Family*, called *The Family Gathering*, 1867–68. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © National Gallery of Art Washington, DC. Photo highlights the grandeur of the painting. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 32, Alternate view of *Portraits of the *** Family*, called *The Family Gathering*. A number of Bazille's most iconic paintings throughout the exhibition are accompanied by a quote from his correspondence: the most important primary source in the scholarship. [\[return to text\]](#)

The Family Gathering

This painting, Bazille's masterpiece, shows his family on the terrace at Méric, their summer home on the outskirts of Montpellier. The work showcases his skill at depicting figures out-of-doors and his ability to capture the effects of dappled sunlight as it filtered through the canopy of trees. Although it was begun on-site, Bazille continued to work on the canvas for several months back in his studio in Paris, even inserting a self-portrait at the far left edge of the composition. Disappointingly, despite its scale and originality, it passed largely unnoticed when it was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1868—though it did capture the attention of the young art critic Émile Zola, who praised the painting for revealing "a real love of truth."



Fig. 33, Didactic panel for *Portraits of the *** Family*, called *The Family Gathering*. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 34, *Landscape on the Banks of the Lez*, 1870. Oil on canvas. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis.

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Fig. 35, The thematic text panel in room six, “The Modern Nude.” *Study for a Young Male Nude*, 1870, underlying composition ca. 1867. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. A reproduction of the X-ray photograph revealing the partially hidden composition is displayed next to the painting.

[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 36, From left to right: *Summer Scene (Bathers)*, 1869–70. Oil on canvas. Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA; *Fisherman with a Net*, 1868. Oil on canvas. Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 37, Installation view of main wall in room six highlighting comparative paintings by Cézanne, Renoir, and Bazille. The soft sage green of the walls links it to the previous room, which similarly focused on the figure. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 38, The thematic text panel in room seven, “Flowers.” Henri Fantin-Latour, *Pansies*, 1874. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)

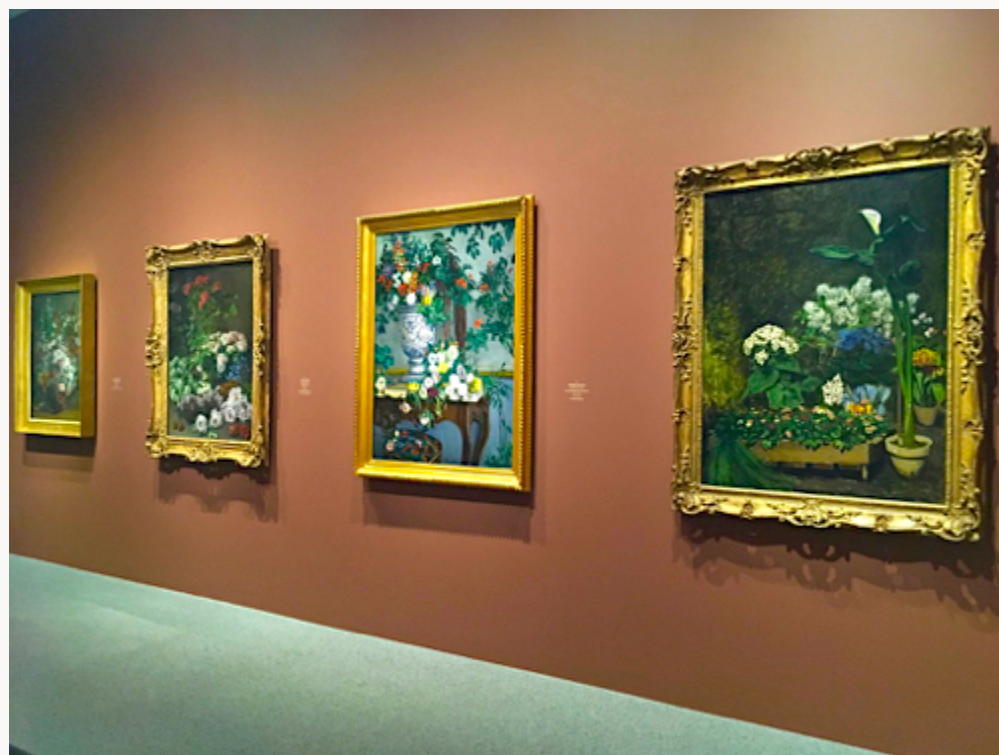


Fig. 39, One of the most attractive groupings in the exhibition with still lifes by Courbet, Monet, Bazille, and Renoir. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 40, Installation view from left to right: *Young Woman with Peonies*, spring 1870. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; *Potted Flowers or Flower Study*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Private collection; *Young Woman with Peonies*, 1870. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 41, *Vase of Flowers on a Console*, 1867–68. Oil on canvas. Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble.
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 42, Installation view of main wall in room eight, “Aigues-Mortes/ Ruth and Boaz.” [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 43, *The Western Ramparts at Aigues-Mortes*, 1867. Oil on canvas. © National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 44, *Ruth and Boaz*, 1870. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. © National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 45, Installation view of *Ruth and Boaz*. In the background, visitors interact with the display monitor. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 46, Display monitor showcasing paintings with hidden compositions revealed by x-radiography, including *Ruth and Boaz*, under which one of Bazille's most famous long lost paintings was uncovered: *Young Woman at the Piano*. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 47, Installation view of the chronological timeline leading towards the exit. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 48, Installation view of *The Studio on the Rue La Condamine* mural near the exit of the gallery. In the foreground: *Porte de la Reine at Aigues-Mortes*, 1867. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [\[return to text\]](#)