

Bruno Delarue

Do you know

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Frédéric Bazille

1841 - 1870

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Do you know



Let us be clear right away, there are no masterpieces signed by Frédéric Bazille for two simple reasons: the first is the fact that he died at the age of 29, cut down in his first battle against the Germans on 28 November 1870, therefore he did not have time to produce a work worthy of such a title; the second is the fact that Bazille, and we cannot really blame him for this, did not become a genius at an early age, as some other leading names in the world of art history, such as Richard Parkes Bonington who, at the age of 20, already showed an irreproachable technique.

Writing about a painter does not require the author to present a blissfully happy eulogy. When faced with a work by Bazille, which some attempt to idealise, certainly for honourable reasons on the pretext that he shared his personal life with Renoir and, above all, with Monet even before the term Impressionism appeared, it is extremely important not to let sentimentalism take precedence over lucidity. Especially since his interests were, essentially, not the same as those of his young friends with whom he shared a studio.

Understanding the limits of his painting does not prevent us from being happy to see that he has emerged from shadows and that glowing tributes have been paid to his work. Of course, it is tempting to speculate about the place that Bazille might have occupied in art history if he had survived the war against the Prussians. It is reasonable to assume that he would have held a prime position

«FOR ME, COROT IS THE
LEADING LANDSCAPE
ARTISTS OF THE PAST AND
THE PRESENT AND ONE
OF THE LEADING FRENCH
PAINTERS.»



«I REGRET ONE THING,
THAT I WASTED SO MUCH
TIME THAT I COULD HAVE
USED ON PAINTING ON
STUDIES THAT I NEVER
USED.»

LETTER TO HIS FATHER,

3 MARCH 1864

in view of his promising start even if only because he chose the right side, that of revolt rather than institution, which completed his fierce desire to paint modernity. (“I chose the modern period because it is what I understand best”). But since we cannot prove anything, we will avoid such a pointless debate.

THE MAN AND THE PAINTER

“Tall and slim. Very distinguished. An air of Jesus about him, but virile, although blonde. Black eyes. A very beautiful boy. With particularly stunning eyes... A haughty air, terrifying when angry, but usually very nice, very gentle. A slightly large nose. Long, wavy hair. A beard slightly darker than his hair, very light, very silky, ending in a point. In radiant good health, very pale but becoming more colourful in the heat of the action... All the noble qualities of youth, a believer, loyal, delicate.” This is how Zola described Frédéric Bazille in his Notes. This portrait corresponds well to other descriptions by his friends.

The son of a good family from southern France, Bazille continued to be influenced as much by the light of his native Languedoc as by his upbringing as a child of a wealthy family. He constantly took advantage of his family’s money showing an astonishing level of immaturity, nagging his father for extra money, often rather

shamefully through the intermediary of his mother. Such facilities in his life certainly contributed to his falling behind the tireless Monet, who was already several steps ahead of him and who was genuinely putting himself in danger. With a strong tendency to dilettantism (Monet used to call past every morning to wake him up), his father did not hesitate to scold him: "I regret your separation with Monet who, it appears, was a hard worker who, many times, must have made you blush at your laziness, and, when you are alone, I fear that many mornings and even days will be spent lazing around something that will not help you to progress on your paintings for the Exposition."

The one who Pissarro kindly spoke of as "being one of the most gifted of us" had a real vocation for painting, a career which he had to fight to impose on his father who had prepared a future for him as a doctor. He had a deep aversion to his studies in this field, even experiencing total disgust when he had to partake in sordid anatomy lessons on dismembered bodies which were shown very little respect.

Protestants of note from Montpellier, his parents, in addition to the family home in the town, owned a holiday home in Méric, a beautiful residence dating from the end of the 16th century on the upper reaches of the village of Castelnaud-le-Lez, where they spent

«I WOULD LIKE TO GIVE
BACK TO EACH OBJECT
ITS WEIGHT AND VOLUME
AND NOT ONLY PAINT THE
APPEARANCE OF THINGS.»

1868

PAGE 5
Le Pont au change, 1864
aquarelle
17,8 x 25,4 cm
Paris © Piasa



their summers, as well as a farm in Saint-Sauveur where Gaston Bazille, his father, tried his hand at animal breeding, which earned him first prize at the Agricultural Fair in 1868. In Montpellier, the neighbour of the Bazille family was Alfred Bruyas, a major collector of art by modern painters, such as Corot, Millet, Delacroix and, above all, Courbet, who depicted him in the famous painting *Bonjour M. Courbet*, a meeting between a fortune and a genius. It was a magical place into which the young Frédéric was introduced and where he met the painters Charles Matet (a local celebrity), Auguste-Barthelemy Glaize and, above all, Alexandre Cabanel (a national academic celebrity), and where he was able to marvel at *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Delacroix. This incredible collection enriched the works of the Fabre Museum in 1868 and then in 1876.

In 1862, Bazille obtained his father's permission to settle in Paris, where he signed up for classes at Gleyre's studio on condition that he continued to study medicine. There, he met Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Lepic. Monet quickly became his closest friend and, in 1863, they set out to spend a week painting in Chailly Forest, following in the footsteps of their Barbizon elders, staying at the Auberge du Cheval Blanc for 3 francs 75 a day, producing still rather clumsy pictures influenced by Corot. The presentation of Manet's paintings at the Martinet Gallery was a huge shock, as much for Bazille as for Monet, and when they saw *Le Déjeuner du l'herbe* at

CI-CONTRE
La Robe rose, 1864
huile sur toile
145 x 110 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay © awesome art

DOUBLE PAGE SUIVANTE
Marine à Sainte-Adresse, 1865
huile sur toile
60 x 140 cm
Atlanta, The High Museum of Art © awesome art





J. Bazille. 1865

the Salon des Refusés, their enthusiasm was without limit. It was Bazille's uncle, Major Lejosne, who organised the famous banquet in Manet's honour. At this relation's house, he met distinguished painters and writers, as well as Edmond Maître, who became his best friend, and with whom he spent entire nights playing duets on the piano.

In 1864 Bazille really entered into the world of painting and made several uncompromising decisions: moving into a studio with the painter Villa, abandoning Charles Gleyre's classes in order to fend for himself, and giving up on his medical studies ("My dear father, I fear that you disapprove of me devoting myself entirely to painting, but I would like you to give me your formal opinion on this matter", Letter to his father on 30 March 1864.)

We might wonder if Bazille was right to abandon a studio so quickly where the priority was on drawing when we see the problems that his lack of skills in this technique caused for him during his short life, only being acquired through patient work. Indeed, it is possible that the stiff appearance of his figures, which some historians admired, was precisely a result of Bazille's difficulty in depicting movement. However, his wish to paint everyday or simply modern life rather than historical scenes, and above all, his taste for painting over the subject, were not in line with the conventional ideas

CI-CONTRE
L'Ambulance improvisée, 1865
huile sur toile
47 x 62 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay © awesome art

PAGE 13
La Terrasse de Méric, 1866
huile sur toile
97 x 128 cm
Genève, Musée du Petit Palais © Alq images



of Gleyre, who did not hesitate to write: "Landscapes are good for young people who have not completed their first communion or for old people who no longer have enough imagination to invent subjects and paint figures." A statement which was as stupid as it was unpleasant.

He brought back very few paintings from a stay in Honfleur with Monet in June, after a box of pastels accidentally opened in the box containing the newly painted pictures on the return journey. However, there is a view of Sainte-Adresse beach (p 4-5) beneath a dark sky, the Normandy grey in which he was unable to find his roots, which he finished at his studio, as he did with all the paintings he started outdoors.

LOOKING FOR HIS OWN STYLE

In summer 1864, Bazille painted his first truly personal canvas which was hugely promising: *La Robe rose* (p 9). The model was his cousin, Thérèse des Hours, who is depicted sitting on a wall of the estate that dominates the village drenched in the light of southern France. By placing the

«I'VE COMPLETELY FINISHED THE PAINTING OF MÉRIC; I PAINTED MYSELF IN THE CORNER, IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ME, BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER FOR THE EXPOSITION, ESPECIALLY IF IT IS TO BE TURNED DOWN.»

