

Frédéric Bazille

Montpellier, 1841 - Beaune-la-Rolande, 1870

• • •

Bazille was born in Montpellier at 11, Grand'rue to an upper middle-class Protestant family. In 1858, he set out to study medicine, continuing in Paris in 1862 where he joined the studio of painter Charles Gleyre. From 1862 to 1870, he spent his life continually between Paris and Montpellier, taking his models from his close circle of family and friends.

In Paris Bazille worked in various studios, sometimes recording them for posterity. During the winter of 1865-66 he painted the *Studio on the Rue de Furstenberg** which he shared with Monet, above that formerly occupied by Delacroix. While he himself is absent from the scene, his emblems (box of paints, palette and brushes in the foreground) are indeed clearly visible. He depicts his daily world with great economy of means. The glowing cast-iron stove is reminiscent of that in Delacroix's painting of his own studio (1835, Paris, Musée du Louvre). The work also pays subtle tribute to Claude Monet whose Honfleur landscapes painted in 1864 adorn the walls.

Room Bazille

• • •

Modernity
from 1850 to 1914

• • •

39

A Capital Role in the Dawn of Impressionism

With the financial support of his family, Bazille came to the assistance of his painter friends – Renoir, Sisley and Monet – whom he had met in various studios. From Monet he purchased *Women in the Garden* (fig.1).

The artists would often work together, sometimes on the same subject. This gave rise to the series of three paintings on the theme of the heron created in the studio on rue Visconti. In 1867 Renoir painted a portrait of his friend Bazille at work, in front of a snowscape by Monet, in the style of *Still Life with Heron**. This portrait, which belonged to Edouard Manet, should be compared to Sisley's work, *Heron with Spread Wings**. Both still lifes, in a clear reference to their owner Edouard Manet, are rendered with identical simplicity in their choice of similar shades of beige, brown, grey and white.



fig.1- Claude Monet
Women in the Garden
Paris, musée d'Orsay
RMN / © Hervé Lewandovski

They also acted as models for each other, experimenting with another genre – the portrait. Monet painted a backlit *Portrait of Frédéric Bazille**, evidence of his pursuit of the light/shade relationship. In 1867, Bazille made a *Portrait of Renoir** which the Musée d'Orsay has generously agreed to loan to the Musée Fabre on its reopening. The naturalness and boldness of the pose emphasizes the complicity between the two still fledgling artists. The familiar nature of the subject is combined with a very free technique of brushwork, applied in wide flat tints of grey, blue-grey, beige-grey and black.

Open-Air Painting

It was Monet who urged Bazille to work before the motif. Monet was beside him in the Forest of Fontainebleau with Renoir and Sisley from 1863 or at Honfleur in 1865. Every summer, Bazille continued to experiment in the rustic setting of Méric (the family home), near to Montpellier, where he attempted on several occasions to overcome the problems inherent in painting people outdoors. His most ambitious composition in this register is the *Family Reunion*, 1867, Paris, Musée d'Orsay (fig.2) for which he brought together eleven of his close relations. Lacking any interaction between



fig.2- Frédéric Bazille
Family Reunion
Paris, musée d'Orsay
All rights reserved

them, all the figures are posed and all look oddly towards the viewers. The artist makes daring use of flat tints, paying particular attention to the fabric of the dresses. Similar features are to be found in the *View of the Village** (1869 Salon) which represents Bazille at the height of his experimentation in the register of open-air painting. Staring at the viewer as she sits below a pine tree, the daughter of one of his parents' employees poses in the woods of Bel Air. In the sun-drenched landscape flows the River Lez overhung by the village of Castelnaud. Bazille abandons aerial perspective here, arranging the landscape in tiered planes height-wise. Neither a portrait nor a landscape, the work is rather the interpretation of a figure in harmony with the nature surrounding it.

Landscapes of the Languedoc

During each of his trips to Méric (fig.3), Bazille focussed on one landscape of his native region. In May 1867 he painted *Aigues-Mortes**, the fortifications and expanses of water surrounding the town. The treatment of perspective in successive layers made up of the earth, water, the stone of the fortifications and the sky lends a certain rhythm to the composition. The contrasts of light and shade also play an essential role in the harmony of the work.

*Studies for a Grape Harvest** of 1868 provides another example. Here the painter is concerned with the hillsides bordering the Launac plain to a backdrop of the La Gardiole peak. Two canvasses of identical format set within the same frame appear as a single composition. The landscape is organised and arranged using areas of colour in a clear unity of tone.



fig.3- Photograph of the house at Méric, Montpellier

Figure Studies

In Montpellier, Bazille saw paintings in the Musée Fabre and discovered works at the home of his neighbour, the collector Alfred Bruyas, which were to play a key role in his evolution. *Nude Studies** (1864) testifies to his preference for schematized forms. The warm tones and pink shades soften the mottled effect of the flesh. An oriental slipper casually placed recalls Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment** (Room 32) ; Bazille would have seen both versions of this work – the one in the Musée du Louvre (1834) and the version purchased by Alfred Bruyas in 1849 (Montpellier, Musée Fabre).

When he goes back to the theme of the female nude in 1870, he uses an everyday orientalist setting as in *Toilet** (1870), an ambitious composition intended for the Salon, in which he demonstrates his expertise acquired in rendering materials and his skilful use of colour.

*African Woman with Peonies** (1870) was painted in the last year of his short life. Against a neutral deep black ground stand out a luxuriant bouquet and the figure of a young African woman absorbed in arranging the flowers. The sensual nature of the materials, the boldness of the colours and the effective composition are evocative of Manet, particularly *Olympia* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

Frédéric Bazille's untimely death happened at the age of twenty-eight, killed in battle at Beaune-la-Rolande on 28 November 1870. He left behind some sixty paintings before his talents had had a chance to mature fully. Only long after his death was his work revealed to the general public. Two of his canvases were displayed at the Exhibition of 1900 and a retrospective was organised in 1910, on the occasion of which Apollinaire wrote : "Three retrospective exhibitions are to be held at the Salon d'Automne this year. The largest and most significant among them is that of the works of Frédéric Bazille..."