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Freedom and Form: French Impressionist Painter Frédéric Bazille at the National Gallery

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We are at a point in time when it is critical that we remind ourselves of the importance of art in human emancipation. Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism at the National Gallery of Art does that – offering a tantalizing retrospective of a brilliant and daring painter whose career spanned only eight years, ending when the twenty-eight year old was killed in the Franco-Prussian war, cut down in the Battle of Beaune-la-Roland.

The only difficulty with this otherwise exhilarating exhibition is the suggestion that **Frédéric Bazille** (1841-1870) was a French Impressionist painter. Whether he would he have become one had he lived can only remain an object of speculation; but the final paintings we have do not indicate that Bazille was moving in the direction of his friend **Claude Monet**, with whom relations had cooled. His work, in fact, owes a lot more to **Gustav Courbet** and **Édouard Manet**, than it does to the future figureheads of Impressionism.

Viewing Bazille as essentially a precursor to Impressionism, as is often done, misses the highly individualistic style this painter would develop, the sometimes unsettling psychological intensity of his portraits, and the strange composite quality of his work, which draws on Renaissance old masters even as it explores and experiments with the representation of natural light.

Bazille's family belonged to the Protestant bourgeoisie of Montpellier in southern France, and at twenty he ostensibly went to Paris to study medicine; in fact, he really went there to become a painter, and enrolled in the studio of Charles Gleyre, where he would befriend 'three other beginners': **Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir,** and **Alfred Sisley.**

The Improvised Field Hospital, 1865

The Improvised Field Hospital (1865) is rightly regarded as one of Bazille's most successful works. It depicts Monet as he lay bedridden with an injured leg, comfortably leaning against the pillows – while an 'improvised' burette, undoubtedly assembled by Bazille, the former medical student, provided a slow water drip. From the floral wall patterning and checkered mattress to the prominent grain of the wooden bed-frame and the smooth hexagonal terracotta tiles, we see Bazille's growing interest in the striking juxtaposition of pattern and texture. From the deep pockets of shadow to the overhanging drapery and the patient's white gown, swiftly and assuredly rendered with a few bold strokes, we see Bazille's individual aesthetic emerging, one which will be developed in the ambitious works that follow shortly thereafter.

The Family Gathering (1867) is arguably Bazille's masterpiece. A large-scale work, **Emile Zola** observed that the painting

> "bears witness to a strong love of truth… One sees that the painter loves his own time."

It appears that Bazille was the first of his generation to combine group portraiture with plein air painting; and while there is masterly attention to the shifting light as it dapples the ground, perhaps most noteworthy is Bazille's profound sensitivity to the individuality of each person present, which includes himself in the far left corner. Not only is each face rendered with great care, it is as if nothing escapes Bazille's notice – he loves the embroidered shawls and ribbons, the neckties, hats and bonnet: all are treated with distinctness, and finesse. It was accepted to the Paris Salon, and like the beautiful and mysterious View of the Village (1868), there is a clarity and fidelity to line and form that clearly sets Bazille apart from Monet: as well as a certain self-consciousness on the part of the subjects, which likely

reveals the influence of Manet.

The paintings from 1869 and 1870 must command our greatest attention: with these last works, Bazille finally comes into his own – having absorbed the lessons from his contemporaries and the old masters to create something which is quite new and unabashed in its embrace of a highly sublimated eroticism.

Summer Scene, 1869

Summer Scene (1869) is one of Bazille's most extraordinary achievements, and proved to be an important step in his career. The square-shaped canvas appeared at the Salon of 1870. The scene includes a group of young men variously relaxing, wrestling, and swimming along on the banks of the river Lez. In his letters, Bazille called it simply "the bathers" or "the nude men." The picture has, to be sure, a homoerotic element which we also find, arguably in Fisherman with a Net (1868), with its exquisitely realist rendering of the male form. Bazille's finished nudes are far removed from the expressionistic brushwork of Cézanne's bather in Le Baigneur au Rocher (c. 1860-66), which is included in this exhibit as well.

Bazille achieves a heightened sensuality in Summer Scene – not only through the athletic and fraternal relations of the young men, but through the trees, the grass, the water, and

the brilliant sunlight with which they interact. One youth leans upon a tree, a posture modeled after the martyr Saint Sebastian, who is traditionally pictured pierced by arrows. With his flushed face, this bather appears to be in a state of semi-religious ecstasy – a mixture of the rapturous and the erotic which lends the painting a somewhat discomfiting voyeuristic aspect – reminiscent of Italian baroque master Guido Cagnacci, whose Young Female Martyr (ca. 1640) Bazille is likely to have seen in Montpellier.

Ruth and Boaz, 1870

Ruth and Boaz (1870) is unlike anything else of Bazille's, not only in terms of its subject matter (it is the only religious theme that he painted), but also in terms of its overall mood and atmosphere. The painting was left incomplete ("half-done") at Bazille's death – painted in the summer a few days before his enlistment. Victor Hugo writes: "Ruth dreamed and Boaz slept." Bazille is true to Hugo: indeed, the painting itself has a poetic sensitivity and dreamlike quality that owes much to the magic of Bazille's moonlight and the acknowledgement of mystery with which his Ruth gazes up at the crescent 'delicate and clear'.

Bazille painted his own working studio on several occasions, and perhaps the most recognizable is the Studio on the rue La Condamine (1870) where the artist is present casually conversing with his friends. In the right foreground is the red-hot glow of the furnace – a feature which refers us to his much earlier Studio on the Rue De Furstenberg (1865). The furnace there radiates its warm glow in a room where no one is physically present: a palette is on the floor alongside brushes and a box of paints, presumably those that he used to paint the picture. For me, there is in his body of work no more poignant reminder that Bazille's art is, in large part, about the love of painting itself. His studio interiors are perhaps the most ready manifestation of this.

To frame Bazille's work in terms of the birth of Impressionism is not an approach that is likely to yield a fresh look at the painter in all his daring originality. Bazille died four years before the first Impressionist exhibition. What he does share with what will become "Impressionism" is the use of plein air painting driven by a fascination with the magical effects of daylight and a growing mastery of light, in all its fullness and power.

Right now, we have an administration that wants to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) – which currently receives 0.004 percent of the federal budget (approximately $150 million annually). The proposal to defund the NEA is not about efficient allocation of resources – as Eve L. Ewing recently observed in the New York Times: "It's about creating a society where propaganda reigns and dissent is silenced... In saving the arts we save ourselves from a society where creative production is permissible only insofar as it serves the instruments of power."

At the same time, our nation's capital is hosting a painter who was a champion of the fine arts in all its forms. His greatest works are a reminder of the radical potential of aesthetic form as such – radical in the sense that it opens a space for the possibility of a new sensibility. To appreciate what is most unique, disruptive, and liberating in an artist, we do well not to analyze his or her work in terms of well-worn and convenient categories that ultimately miss what is most significant – namely, the potential for emancipation.

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