



Bazille, Jean-Frédéric (1841-1870)

by Linda Rapp

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A member of the circle of young painters that included such luminaries of Impressionism as Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir, Jean-Frédéric Bazille is remembered as an artist of great talent whose full potential was never realized because of his early death. His work includes *plein-air* scenes, portraits, and multi-figure compositions. Among his best-known paintings is a bucolic (and homoerotic) scene of male bathers, *Scène d'été* (*Summer Scene*, 1869).

Bazille, who was born on December 6, 1841, came from a well-to-do Protestant family in Montpellier, France. His father, Gaston Bazille, was a city councillor and president of the Society of Agriculture. As a youth Frédéric enjoyed the outdoor life at the family's country house and was an avid duck-hunter.

The Bazille family and their circle had an interest in art, and young Frédéric became familiar with the work of painters such as Courbet and Delacroix. He also began studying painting himself.

In 1860 he took up the study of medicine in accordance with his father's wishes. Two years later he moved to Paris to pursue his medical education but also continued his study of art. It was not long before he abandoned medicine to devote himself to painting, a decision his father reluctantly accepted.

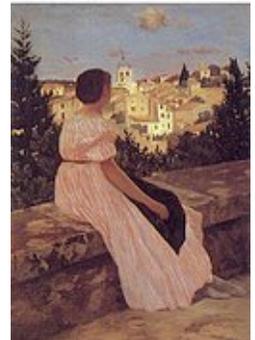
In November 1862 Bazille began studying at the studio of Swiss artist Charles Gleyre, where he met and became friends with Monet, Renoir, and Alfred Sisley. In 1863, when the studio temporarily closed because of Gleyre's health problems, Bazille and his friends went to Chailly near Fontainebleau to paint from nature.

The next year Bazille and Monet, along with Eugène Boudin and Johan Barthold Jongkind, spent the summer in Normandy, again painting in the outdoors. In 1865 Bazille returned to Chailly, where he painted a landscape, *Paysage à Chailly*, and posed for Monet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

The young artists often worked side by side and also served as models for each other. Monet painted Bazille and his cousin Camille des Hours-Farel as *The Strollers* (*Les promeneurs*) in 1865, and Renoir did a portrait of *Bazille at His Easel* (*Bazille peignant à son chevalet*) in 1867.

Bazille depicted Monet in *The Improvised Sickbed* (*L'Ambulance improvisée*) in 1865 after the latter suffered a leg injury. In 1867 he painted portraits of Sisley and Renoir.

The friends shared housing and studio space in Paris as well. Bazille was more fortunate than some of the others since he enjoyed the support of his prosperous family. Indeed, Bazille was able to help the financially-struggling Monet by buying his *Femmes au jardin* (*Women in the Garden*, 1867) for a generous sum.



Two paintings by Jean-Frédéric Bazille.

Top: Self portrait.

Above: *La Robe Rose*.

Bazille submitted two paintings to each of the annual Paris salons from 1866 to 1870. In every year except 1867, one was accepted.

Bazille could have avoided military service since his father had paid for a substitute for him, but he volunteered for the army in 1870. Sent to the front lines of the Franco-Prussian War, he died in battle at Beaune-la-Rolande on November 28 of the same year at the age of twenty-eight.

The question of Bazille's homosexuality remains somewhat speculative. Todd Porterfield points to the "urbane homosociality of [Bazille's] Paris milieu," where he associated with writers and musicians including Charles Baudelaire, Émile Zola, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Edmond Maître, some of whom he painted.

Other commentators discuss evidence from the paintings themselves, in particular two, *Scène d'été* (*Summer Scene*, 1869) and *Pêcheur à l'épervier* (*Fisherman with a Net*, 1868). The former, which may have inspired some of Thomas Eakins' better known nude bathing scenes, shows eight young men in and around a pond, variously swimming, lounging, wrestling, and disrobing.

The figures wear bathing suits in the painting, but most are nude in the preparatory sketches, and Kermit S. Champa has expressed the opinion that the suits were added as "late retouches." Champa refers to the all-male group of bathers in a naturalistic setting as "personal fantasy purporting to be external fact."

The same might be said of *Pêcheur à l'épervier*, a curious picture of a nude man, viewed from the back as he prepares to cast a net into a pond in a wooded area. In the near background his companion is in the final stage of undressing. Farther away but still clearly visible is a large country house.

The central figure is caught in a pose reminiscent of classical Greek statuary, yet he is obviously modern. The cast-off clothing of his friend and the architecture of the distant building also establish the contemporaneity of the scene.

Bazille had high hopes for the acceptance of this painting at the Paris salon, writing about it "Mes amis ont été fort contents de mes études, surtout de mon homme nu. J'en suis bien aise parce que c'est la toile que je préférais." ("My friends have been very happy with my studies, especially of my nude man. I am delighted because it is the canvas that I preferred.") Its rejection was a great disappointment to him.

Karen Wilkin notes that Bazille was "better at the male nude than the female." Among Bazille's female nude subjects was *La toilette* (1870), in which an unclad white woman is attended by a black female servant wearing only a skirt of foreign design and a turban. The mistress's hand rests lightly on the servant's shoulder.

To their side another female servant, this one white and in modern dress, holds a shawl. Her presence situates an otherwise exotic scene in contemporary culture. Porterfield sees in this composition "a concentration of Orientalist clichés that connoted a lesbian encounter."

Because Bazille's career was so short and since he did not leave a large body of work--some sixty-five oil paintings dating from 1862 to 1870--it is somewhat difficult to assess his place in art history. Wilkin describes him as "a serious man . . . struggl[ing] to find an individual voice and method when possibilities were enlarging."

His work shows the influence of painters from the past, in particular the Venetian Old Masters, Delacroix, and Courbet, but also shares characteristics with the work of his contemporaries such as Monet and Renoir. He is generally considered a pre-Impressionist or early Impressionist and is remembered as a talented participant in the inner circle of the nascent movement.

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