

Fantin-Latour: Independent Artist, Friend of the Impressionists

European Art
1840–1900

A close friend of Édouard Manet and James McNeil Whistler, Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904) exhibited with the Impressionists but never shared their passion for outdoor painting.

The museum has four paintings by Fantin-Latour in its collections. The earliest, *Marie-Yolande de Fitz-James*, is a small portrait of 1867 that belongs to a series of family portraits commissioned by the sitter's father, the Duke of Fitz-James. Fantin-Latour's method of presenting the Duke's 12-year-old daughter against a neutral background is reminiscent of the old master paintings the artist copied on visits to the Louvre.

Fifteen years later, Fantin-Latour painted his portrait of Madeleine Lerolle, the 26-year-old wife of a fellow artist. Madame Lerolle and her husband were active in cultural circles in Paris and frequently entertained artists and musicians at their home. The portrait presents her in a dignified, formal pose, standing behind a table adorned by a vase of flowers, the perfect complement to her youthful beauty and grace. The contrast between the flowers in the vase and those lying on the table reminds viewers of the fleeting nature of life and beauty.



Henri Fantin-Latour. *Madame Lerolle*, 1882. Oil on fabric. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund and the Fanny Tewksbury King Collection by exchange 1969.54



Henri Fantin-Latour. *Marie-Yolande de Fitz-James*, 1867. Oil on fabric. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Lewis C. Williams 1982.256



Madeleine Lerolle, about 1875. Photograph. Private Collection, Paris

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Madeleine Lerolle also appears in a painting by Albert Besnard in a nearby gallery. Unlike the studied formality of Fantin-Latour's portrait, Besnard presented Madeleine Lerolle in the intimate setting of her husband's studio, sitting at his easel and accompanied by their eldest daughter, Yvonne. Both portraits were exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1882.

Fantin-Latour was particularly renowned for his still-life and flower paintings. His highly controlled style of delicate, meticulously rendered detail is evident in *Still Life of Roses in a Vase* of 1878 (currently not on view). He often spent his summers painting floral still lifes with his wife, Victoria Dubourg, also an artist. Fantin-Latour reportedly produced more than 800 flower paintings in response to the tremendous demand for such works in France and Britain.

A lesser-known aspect of Fantin-Latour's art is his fascination with literary and theatrical subjects. His painting *Tannhäuser* of 1886 (currently not on view) was inspired by Richard Wagner's opera of the same title. It depicts the opera's principal character, a deeply religious singer named Tannhäuser, shown in the lower left being seduced by Venus, the goddess of love. Derived from a medieval morality play, this Wagnerian opera was both immensely popular and controversial in 19th-century France.



Albert Besnard. *Madeleine Lerolle and Her Daughter Yvonne*, 1879–80. Oil on fabric. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Noah L. Butkin 1977.120



top: Henri Fantin-Latour. *Still Life of Roses in a Vase*, 1878. Oil on fabric. The Cleveland Museum of Art, For Winifred Brown Kendrick, Gift of George S. Kendrick 1979.137.



bottom: Henri Fantin-Latour. *Tannhäuser*, 1886. Oil on fabric. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Wade 1916.1038.