The term avant-garde simultaneously conjures images of renegade individuals and cooperative groups. As an adjective, it usually designates something experimental and ground-breaking, often describing the work of a singular, exceptional mind; while as a noun it refers to a zealous association, formed around a set of innovative ideas and techniques.

In the mid-late nineteenth century, when the concept and term avant-garde emerged, many artists faced a dilemma that is the historical root of this conceptual confusion: newly liberated from traditional institutions like the workshop and the Academy, how could they reconcile their independence and ambition with an enduring need for collective support? Furthermore, how could they represent that problem to the public and the institutions they now held at arm’s length? For several French painters, group portraiture emerged as a possible answer, and became the genre through which they formed a visual model of the avant-garde. This model presented the artistic self as relational at root, a self no longer grounded in absolutes like Reason, Religion, Nature or Soul, but rather emerging out of the social dynamics and contingencies of the group. The inevitable anxieties such a model of the artist produced – about the possibility of originality, individuality and agency, and about the self’s relationship to society, culture and history – worked
their way into the forms of modern group portraiture, and made it a practice very difficult to sustain. What we see in the first modern group portraits is the precarious position of both individual and group in nineteenth-century life.

The focus in my recent book, Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting, is the representation of artist groups in the early decades of modernism, and the peculiar merger of bourgeois sobriety and bohemian rebellion that characterized their image. A series of monumental paintings by Fantin-Latour anchors the book, crystallizing his generation’s conflicted commitment to the group, but I also show this commitment to be crucial to works by Courbet, Manet, Degas, Bazille and Renoir. By examining Fantin-Latour and his cohort, I wanted to re-shape understandings of early avant-garde French art and culture around problems of relationality, homosociability and homage, challenging the old but enduring myth of modernism as forged in spurts of individualistic rebellion as well as newer models that root modernism’s achievements and failures in institutions or broad sociopolitical history. The problem of individual vs. group emerged as a defining one for these modern artists, and it did so most visibly and meaningfully in their art.

Part of my motivation in writing the book is that groups have been something of a blind spot for art historians. Isolation, alienation, narcissism and anomie are tropes deeply entrenched in the literature on modernism, much more present than collectivism, collaboration and relational dynamics. Although a widespread interest in an “aesthetic of the inter-human” has characterized a great deal of artistic practice since the 1990s, and there is a growing body of literature on community and collective agency as tropes in contemporary art, collectivism’s importance to modernism (here defined as advanced artistic production from the mid-late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century) remains underexplored. Art historians have long been fascinated by movements and collective politics, and the march of –isms structures the narrative of modern art, in particular, yet interpretations of modern works nonetheless tend to revolve around singular individuals and œuvres. The poetics of individual expression and style trump group endeavor, or an artist’s work is set against a broad social context that bypasses small networks and groups. I argue for the importance of the group as a subject and structure – rather than simply a context – for early avant-garde French painting, and thus for the foundational importance of collectivity in modern art. Instead of treating artists’ social and intellectual affiliations as anecdotal background to their work, I investigate a range of pictures that re-imagine affiliation in representation.
Group portraiture is the representation of distinct, recognizable individuals whose association with each other, as it is represented in the picture, is a statement of solidarity, collective interest, or purpose. In general, a group requires at least three, and usually more, in order for it to have the look of willful and not haphazard assembly. But it should not include so many that the group becomes an inarticulate mass, a crowd whose collectivity has turned anonymous or dissolute by the sheer force of numbers. Group portraits must also be distinguished from family portraits. They represent an association that is voluntary, assembled under the aegis of collective will, while family portraits represent an association that is involuntary in the most fundamental sense, not to mention inherently hierarchical. Furthermore, family portraits are most often commissions, favors or gifts, rather than dreamed up by the artist for personal interest or public display. A group, as the artists that I examine conceived it, is a fundamentally flexible social form whose members and image are not pre-established but must be formed and represented, and are always subject to change. In some cases, it is only in representation that a cluster of people becomes a group at all; and even when the group represented is a historical reality in some way, group portraits can never be reduced to the social structures they represent. They are paintings, not documents, re-imagining or responding to social dynamics rather than simply reflecting them. Indeed, a chief reason why nineteenth-century group portraiture begs our attention is that it materializes a set of concerns about modern life rooted in the uniquely provisional, fragile nature of its subject. It is for this reason, I believe, that it became a powerful vehicle of expression for modern artists trying to find a form for their changing social world and the individual within it.
Fantin-Latour and the group of painters around him form an ideal case study for the modern group. They knew each other's work and, in most cases, each other – some very well. Their social circles and artistic allegiances overlapped, and a similar cast of characters appears in multiple works. These connections demonstrate an interest in group portraiture that was itself formed collectively, shaped and reshaped in a network of artists and writers, colleagues and friends. But the practice of group portraiture was not typically harmonious. The coordination of multiple personalities, each with their own interests, desires and opinions, and the pressures of public exposure in the very permanent form of painting, led to a range of dramas affecting the pictures' final form. For example, while Fantin's *Studio in the Batignolles Quarter* (1870) was in progress (Fig. 3), internecine battles strained the delicate boundaries of masculine honor and friendship. Fantin's good friend, the writer Edmond Duranty, criticized Manet's art in the press, and the conflict escalated into a duel that forced Durandy's removal from the picture. (Duranty reconciled with Manet quickly, but he and Fantin did not make up for seven years.) These interpersonal dramas were bound up with much larger ones having to do with the boundaries of the bourgeoisie – its rhetoric of egalitarianism on the one hand, and its exclusions and conformism on the other – and with artists' ambivalence about being or becoming bourgeois themselves. So rather than represent the group as a seamless, harmonious whole, Fantin attenuated his image of association with visible rifts and tensions, revealing the group's vulnerability, as well as its dignified force.

The painting's sober chromatic unity is unsettled by the disjointed arrangement of figures in space, so closely compacted in the shallow interior that they appear collaged in, one by one. Despite the figures' narrow spacing in a supposedly "sociable" group setting, there is no interaction between them; they gaze blindly past each other in all different directions, dissociating into solipsistic individuals. Their close proximity only exacerbates the psychological distance that seems to separate them – at no point do they touch or make eye contact, showing just enough "association" to convey a common purpose while still maintaining distinctly separate realms of attention.

The large-scale group portraits Fantin-Latour painted for the Paris Salon between 1864 and 1885
constitute the most ambitious effort to represent collective affinities in modern painting. In these works’ forms and in their histories, the high stakes and competing demands of group affiliation come into focus, shedding light on a range of problems endemic to the formation of an avant-garde: the fractious nature of realism and impressionism as movements; the ambivalent position of artists in nineteenth-century society; the increasing desire to withdraw into the seclusion of the studio, in tension with the continuing need to stake a claim to public respect; and the pressures that shifting definitions of masculinity exerted on artistic groups, and on art itself. Ultimately, group portraiture was a means to tackle a central problem in modern painting and bourgeois life: the relationship between the individual and the group. It was a way to give that relationship form, to make its tensions and significance concrete.

The divisions and differences that animate a group portrait in the form of color, gesture, stance, or pose often encode social tensions and the fundamental desire to distinguish each individual from the next. The artistic impulse to mark these differences – in some cases to emphasize them to the point of virtually dissolving the pictorial union – cannot be separated from a central strain of bourgeois culture: the strong desire for distinction within the security of a basically homogeneous group. How can one form a sociable collective while preserving an ideal of autonomous individual identity? In nineteenth-century France this was a bourgeois dilemma as well as an artistic one. Revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity were clashing with modern ideals of privacy and interiority, and it was in group portraiture that the friction between these values took visible shape.

Studio group portraits – situated where group bonds were often forged and, just as often, dissolved – are especially equipped to comment on the artist’s social nature, marking off a privileged space of community and conversation. Not only can they explore the interrelations of an artistic group, but they can also speak to the relationship between that group and the larger society outside the frame. The studio became the prime locus for group portraits of the artist’s friends and colleagues in the 1860s and 1870s, when a generation of artists redefined association
as something stilted, deeply desired yet elusive, perhaps even on the verge of vanishing. Almost invariably in this period, the grouping of artists, writers and musicians appears in sequestered interior spaces – spaces of art, work and study – and the relationship between individual and group is pressured, fragmented and compressed by shallow space. In *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter*, Fantin surrounds his colleagues with uninflected black paint, collapsing the space of the studio into an airless void. For these men (and they were always men, for reasons I explain further in my book), the challenge was how to represent the brittle force of the modern group, and how to negotiate anxieties – their own and those of their subjects – about collectivity as a social and pictorial project.

![Around the Piano, Henri Fantin-Latour, 1885](image)

While writing this book I increasingly wondered whether the march of individualism so central to accounts of nineteenth-century art is exaggerated, or at least too unquestioningly assumed – a sense that the theme of “alienation” so central to modernism from Manet forward has another side. At the very least, the proliferation of group portraiture in the mid-nineteenth century proves that the modern idea of art as the expression of a unique subjectivity did not preclude collectivity as a subject. It certainly made it a more complicated (and potentially dystopian) subject, and much of my effort is to describe how that complication appears. Ultimately, what group portraits by Courbet, Manet, Degas, Bazille, Renoir and Fantin collectively say – in a broad range of ways – is that the bourgeois individual so prized by modernism (and especially the artist individual) can only proclaim his all-important uniqueness in relational terms, through an acknowledgement of his position in, his dialogue with, and his partial conformity to a group. To be a renegade, to be avant-garde, was to be neither a lone wolf nor a face in the crowd, but rather to define oneself through a select group of other selves.

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