



Léon Bonvin

Drawn to the Everyday



Léon Bonvin (1834–1866)

Rose Bud in front of a Landscape, 1863

Pen and brown ink, watercolour and
gouache. – 246 × 187 mm

The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

8.10.22–8.1.23

EXHIBITION AT THE FONDATION CUSTODIA

from 8 October 2022 to 8 January 2023

Léon Bonvin (1834–1866) *Drawn to the Everyday*

FORTY YEARS after the only retrospective devoted to him on the other side of the Atlantic, the Fondation Custodia is organising a major exhibition dedicated to Léon Bonvin (1834 – 1866), an artist who is now rare and much sought after by the greatest museums and the most discerning amateurs. On this occasion, the Fondation Custodia is publishing the catalogue raisonné of his entire oeuvre. The exhibition and the book shed new light on the life and art of Léon Bonvin. They reveal numerous yet unpublished works, scattered in public or private collections, mainly American and French.

Léon Bonvin (fig. 1) did not enjoy the same notoriety as his half-brother, François (1817 – 1887), who was an esteemed realist painter in the nineteenth century. Few sources and accounts about his life have come down to us. Most were written just after his early death – and often in reaction to it – before the memory of his career and work faded. Forced to spend his days working in the family inn in Vaugirard, Léon Bonvin painted his watercolours far from the gaze of the Parisian artistic and cultural milieu. He drew his inspiration from his immediate environment: bouquets of wild flowers simply arranged in a glass, kitchen still lifes, views of the still rural and working class plain of Vaugirard (fig. 2). The sincerity with which he depicted the reality of his daily life led to an art of singular poetry.

The exhibition opens with Léon Bonvin's early works: drawings entirely executed in black chalk. Through powerful contrasts, dense shadows, faint glows or sharp backlighting, the artist invites us into the intimacy of the inn, with its simple and rustic decor, its animals and its surroundings (fig. 3). Léon also depicted the people in it and drew a striking portrait of his father, François-Joseph-Eustache Bonvin (1796 – 1862), whose stooped and serious face emerges from the half-light (fig. 4).



4. Léon Bonvin
Portrait of the Artist's Father, 1856
Black chalk on beige paper. – 224 x 170 mm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, inv. RF 1937

Like most of the “black” drawings made in the second half of the 1850s, this sheet is held by the Musée d’Orsay, which has a substantial collection of drawings by Léon Bonvin.

Encouraged by François, Léon Bonvin gradually introduced colour into his work, favouring ink and watercolour from 1858. His technique evolved but, at first, the themes remained the same. The *Cook in a Red Apron* (1862) (fig. 5) is a remarkable sheet. Bonvin takes us into the humble kitchen of his inn. The female figure – probably his mother, or his wife – appears in other works of the artist, busy with her daily routine. The vegetables, which she is about to prepare here, foreshadow the series of still lifes that Bonvin produced from 1863 onwards.

Léon Bonvin’s still lifes often featured vegetables, or a basket of fruit, combined with other objects that the artist could easily find in the tavern, such as utensils, crockery, carafes or wine bottles (fig. 6). Bonvin’s focus on this subject was of course related to his work, but it can also be linked to the renewed interest for still life that took place in French art in the 1850s and 1860s. The painters, among whom was François Bonvin, were part of a tradition inherited from the northern schools, that had been passed on in France by Jean Siméon Chardin in the eighteenth century.



5. **Léon Bonvin**
A Cook in a Red Apron in the Inn at Vaugirard, 1862
 Pen and brown ink, watercolour and gouache over traces of graphite and gum arabic. – 208 x 162 mm
 Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, inv. 37.1505



7. **Léon Bonvin**
Bouquet of Violets, 1863
 Pen and brown ink, watercolour over traces of graphite. – 191 x 154 mm
 Zurich, Collection Walter Feilchenfeldt

Not far from these drawings, the visitor to the exhibition discovers the small bouquets of flowers in watercolour which were another favourite subject for Léon Bonvin. Instead of the symbol of vanity usually associated with them in painting, Bonvin preferred the direct and unvarnished simplicity of these field flowers, arranged with naturalness and a pleasant disorder in a glass or an ordinary vase (fig. 7). Devoid of any grandiloquence or pretension, these sheets demonstrate the admirable sense of observation that Léon Bonvin displayed throughout his output.

With the same care he depicted these flowers in their environment. Wild roses, thistles and bellflowers grew on the edge of the fields of the Vaugirard plain and in the foreground of his watercolours (fig. 8). Venturing outside, escaping from the confined life of the tavern, Léon Bonvin also strived to render the variations in colour and light at different times of the day and seasons. Guided by what he saw and seeking to scrupulously reproduce what he perceived, Léon Bonvin also explored the graphic techniques at his disposal. He combined them in a personal way, superimposed them and exploited them inventively to represent the ablaze sky at sunset, the autumnal mist that envelops nature, or the winter frost that covers everything (fig. 9).



9. Léon Bonvin
Winter Landscape, Hoar Frost, 1865
Graphite, watercolour and white gouache. – 201 x 266 mm
Département des Hauts-de-Seine, musée du Grand Siècle,
Donation Pierre Rosenberg

Many of the works presented at the Fondation Custodia come from the holdings of The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, the main lender, whose collaboration in this project has proved invaluable. This collection contains the largest group of works by Léon Bonvin in the world – fifty-seven of the one hundred and sixteen known and identified to date. It was essentially assembled during the artist's lifetime by William T. Walters, thanks to the American agent George A. Lucas, who lived in Paris and purchased the works for the Baltimore collector.

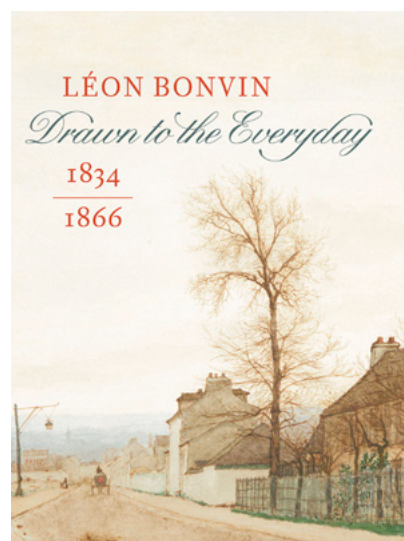
The features of Léon Bonvin who, as a young man, posed on the occasion of his marriage to Constance-Félicité Gaudon in a daguerreotype presented in the first room of the exhibition, reappear at the end of the show in a moving self-portrait (fig. 10). Acquired by the Fondation Custodia in 2016, this drawing is a precious testimony to the artist's life. An inscription in Bonvin's hand dedicates the work to his wife and dates it 19 January 1866, only a few days before the artist tragically took his own life. Léon Bonvin's suicide, at the age of 31, contributed fully to the myth of the misunderstood and isolated artist that soon surrounded his person.

The grieving François Bonvin appealed to the artistic community to organise a sale, the proceeds of which would help Léon's family. The catalogue of this sale, that took place in May 1866, is presented in a final chapter of the exhibition, devoted to the family and artistic ties that united Léon and François. A close study of the works of each of them reveals a certain number of common features proving that the two brothers had rubbed shoulders and had undoubtedly exchanged views on art (fig. 11). But, beyond the technical or iconographic similarities that link their works, this comparison is also a way of underlining the singularity of Léon's art, which could be described as intuitive realism, without prejudice, in its most honest and immediate form. This singularity and sincerity made Léon Bonvin a poet of the everyday.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue raisonné of Bonvin's work, published in two versions, English and French. The catalogue is introduced by essays written by Jo Briggs, Associate Curator at The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maud Guichané, Assistant Curator at the Fondation Custodia, Ger Luijten, Director of the Fondation Custodia, Michèle Quentin, garden historian and Gabriel P. Weisberg, Professor of Art History Emeritus at the University of Minnesota.

Léon Bonvin (1834-1866). Drawn to the Everyday
Paris, Fondation Custodia, 2022
304 pages, c. 170 colour illustrations,
28 x 21 cm, hardcover
ISBN 978 2 958 323 40 0
€ 35,00



TWO EXHIBITIONS AT THE FONDATION CUSTODIA

from 8 October 2022
to 8 January 2023
Fondation Custodia, Paris

Practical Information

EXHIBITIONS

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From 8 October 2022 to 8 January 2023

Nineteenth-century French Drawings. Fondation Custodia
From 8 October 2022 to 8 January 2023

PRESS OPENING

Friday 7 October 2022 from 10 to 11.30 am

VERNISSAGE

Friday 7 October 2022 from 6 to 8.30 pm

OPENING HOURS

Every day except Monday, from 12 to 6 pm

ADMISSION CHARGES

Full price € 10 / Reduced € 7
The entrance ticket gives access to
both exhibitions

LOCATION

Fondation Custodia
121, rue de Lille – 75007 Paris – France
www.fondationcustodia.fr

ACCESS BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Metro: Assemblée Nationale (line 12) or Invalides (lines 8 and 13, RER C)
Bus 63, 73, 83, 84, 94: Assemblée Nationale

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

Gaëlle de Bernède
gaelledebenede@gmail.com
Tel: +33 (0)1 75 43 46 80

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

Roxane Latrèche
contact@gbcom.media
Tel: +49 176 8006 5583

PRESS CONTACTS NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM

Noepy Testa
noepy@entesta.nl
Tel: +31 (0)6 29 14 10 54

Heidi Vandamme
bureau@heidivandamme.nl
Tel: +31 (0)6 29 53 26 86

DIRECTOR FONDATION CUSTODIA

Ger Luijten
coll.lugt@fondationcustodia.fr
Tel: +33 (0)1 47 05 75 19



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Images Available to the Press

Léon Bonvin (1834–1866) *Drawn to the Everyday*

1. Portrait of Léon Bonvin
Daguerreotype
Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt,
inv. 2019-A.214



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3. Léon Bonvin
The Plain of Vaugirard, 1856
Black chalk and stumping. – 175 x 266 mm
Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt,
inv. 2008-T.8

2. Léon Bonvin
Road in the Plain of Vaugirard, 1863
Pen and brown ink, watercolour. – 212 x 162 mm
Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt,
inv. 2009-T.5

6. Léon Bonvin
Still Life with Pomegranate, 1864
Pen and brown ink, watercolour over traces of graphite
and gum arabic. – 245 x 187 mm
Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, inv. 37.1664



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8. Léon Bonvin

Rose Bud in front of a Landscape, 1863

Pen and brown ink, watercolour and gouache over traces of graphite and gum arabic. – 246 x 187 mm

Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, inv. 37.1530

10. Léon Bonvin

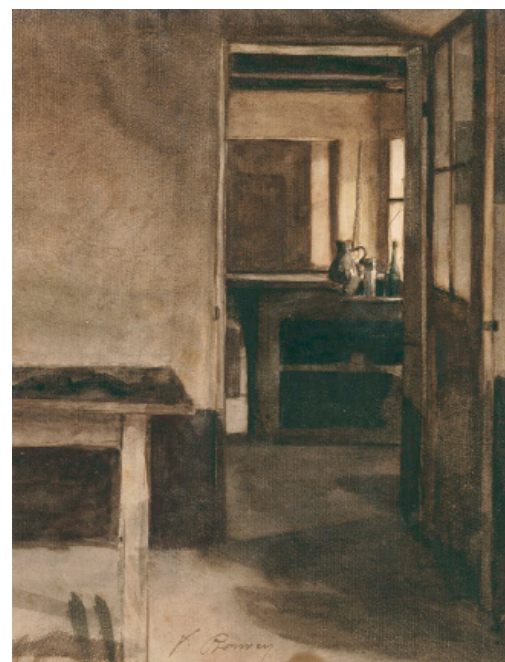
Self-Portrait, 19 January 1866

Pen and brown ink, watercolour heightened with white gouache. – 136 x 110 mm

Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, inv. 2016-T.38



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11. François Bonvin (1817–1887)

View of the Bar in the Inn at Vaugirard

Pen and brown ink, watercolour. – 219 x 168 mm

New York, private collection