151 The Temptation of Saint Anthony

1897.
F. 1653 (*"La Tentation de saint Antoine"*).
Oil on canvas.
73.5 × 92.4 cm.
S.D.l.r., *Fantin. 97.*

Paris, Musée du Petit Palais (53).

The theme of the Temptation of Saint Anthony, a traditional favourite, continued to enjoy popularity from mid century onwards and was treated by such diverse artists as Millet (1846), Tassaert (1849 Salon), Émile Wattier (1865 Salon), Cézanne (1869), Eugène Isabey (1869 Salon), Louis Leloir (1869 Salon), Aimé Morot (1881 Salon) and Paul Quinsac (1888 Salon). Fantin's own preoccupation with the subject began in the 1860s and continued throughout his life; of the many versions that he did, this one of 1897 is compositionally the most complex and arguably the most beautiful.

Although by 1897 the subject was hackneyed at best, none of the critics faulted Fantin on this score when he showed the work at the Salon that year. The critic of *La Gironde* spoke for all when he stated the obvious – that Fantin's composition rose above the number of banal and vulgar treatments of the theme shown at the Salon, which were often no more than an excuse for sexual titillation. Disagreement arose among the critics not over the quality of the *Temptation*, but rather about its place in contemporary art. "What symbolism," wrote one critic, "awakening mysterious correspondences in the soul of the viewer, the sudden memory of some long-forgotten and disturbing dream"; another grouped Fantin with Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, and Eugène Carrière, whose example had pointed the way from "the analytic spirit and the investigation of sensations" to an art based on a truth greater than mere visual reality (*Journal de Genève* and Henri Hamel 1892, BN ACP, vol. II pp. 342, 344). Yet Fantin's interpretation of the theme had little in common with Moreau's (watercolour, *c.* 1890, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris) and certainly no one suggested any kinship with those of Odilon Redon, whose third series of lithographs inspired by Gustave Flaubert's novel of the same title (1874) had been published by Vollard in 1896. Young symbolist painters like Aman-Jean, who had exhibited in the first two Salons of the Rose+Croix, objected to Fantin's being ranked with Moreau and Redon as a precursor of Symbolism: in his review of the 1897 Salon, Aman-Jean assessed Fantin "the last adherent of the Romantic tradition." But Fabrice countered this rather dismissive appraisal by insisting that Fantin was independent, someone "who is not concerned with theories on the art of composing, whether in the official manner or according to the exaggerations of some of our most fiery symbolists." For Raymond Bouyer, Gustave Geffroy, and others, this was indeed the answer – Fantin was a wholly personal artist who had absorbed the art of the past but revealed as well "an incontestably contemporary style" (Geffroy).

This modern side of Fantin's imaginative works was seen in his gifts as a colourist. He was, wrote Arsène Alexandre, "the most perfect, the most captivating of the modern harmonists." Since the colours in many of Fantin's imaginative compositions have darkened with time, it is often difficult to understand such enthusiasm. Fortunately this is not the case in the *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, where we can still see what Gabriel Mourey described as "the mystic light of dreams," here created through "fine and delicate harmonies" of blue. Fantin has apparently used varying admixtures of Prussian blue, raw umber, and white in the background. For the flesh tones he has created subtle pinks and yellows with a slightly bluish cast that echoes the stronger blues of the background. In the dress of the figure second from the right, the rich viridian is mixed with white and some Prussian blue, thus maintaining the general blue tonality. By contrast, the vermilion and lake mixture found in the garment of the figure at the far left introduces an intensity of hue that plays off the dominant blues and heightens the soft, ethereal quality of the other figures. We have, in Geffroy's words, "a group of women, like a bouquet, arranged around the saint's homespun robe. They surround him with luminous flesh, with blue, rose, gold, all harmonized so skilfully that a chain of colours results."

Dark areas in this picture – in the background, in areas of shadow, and in the hair of the figures – exhibit a reticulated paint surface that suggests different drying rates of adjacent layers. This could have resulted either from Fantin's practice of adding a siccative to his paint or from the use of a bituminous paint like mummy – which is listed in Fantin's palette notes – to create transparency in the dark passages.

D.D.

Provenance City of Paris, bought from the artist at the Salon of 1897 (5000 francs).

Exhibitions 1897 Paris, Salon, no. 627; 1906 Paris, no. 188; 1936 Grenoble, no. 65; 1953 Paris, Petit Palais, *Un Siècle d'Art Français, 1850–1950*, no. 559; 1955 London, *Marcel Proust*; 1972 London, no. 63; 1972 Madrid, no. 54; 1980–1981 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, *Gustave Flaubert, exposition du centenaire*, no. 403.

Bibliography "Salon des Champs Élysées," *L'Art français* 24 April 1897; *La Gironde* 1897; *Revue Encyclopédique Larousse* 8 May 1897; Alexandre 1897 (unpag. p. 1); Aman-Jean 1897; Bouyer 1897; Fabrice 1897, p. 3; Geffroy 1897 I, pp. 319–321; Mourey 1897, p. 62; Stiegler 1897; Bénédite 1903 II, pp. 29, 34; H. Lapauze, *Catalogue sommaire des collections municipales*, Paris 1904, no. 47 (1906, no. 55); *La Revue universelle*, Nov. 1904; Bénédite 1906 I (pl. 47); Jullien 1909, pp. 54–55, 210; Gibson 1924, p. 66; Kahn 1926 (pl. 15); C. Gronkowski, *Catalogue sommaire des collections municipales*, Paris 1927, no. 185; Jamot n.d. (1929–1941), p. 132; Verrier 1978 (repr. p. 78).

Related Works Fantin frequently treated the theme of the Temptation of Saint Anthony, particularly in his later years. The first dated composition of the subject (F. 2438, Album II, p. 15, dated 26 Oct. 1868; Louvre, RF 12 473) features, as here, a temptress offering a glass of champagne. In 1881 Fantin treated the subject in a pastel he sent to the Salon, subsequently reworked with oil and sent to the 1885 exhibition of Les XX (F. 1194, Musée de peinture et de sculpture, Grenoble). Of the numerous treatments of the theme that Fantin did in the 1890s, two others beside this one were exhibited at the Salon: a painting in 1891 (F. 1434, 1891, 72.5 × 91.5 cm) and a lithograph in 1894 (H. 110, 1893). The composition of the lithograph was followed in another painting of 1897 (F. 1670, 61 × 75 cm).

