

October 2023

Jean Fautrier

On 7 September I took part in a round table conversation about Jean Fautrier at Christie's in Paris on the occasion of the publication of the catalogue raisonné of his paintings (Norma éditions). In the introduction to this book, I point to two aspects that are characteristic of Fautrier's work. One of these is his distinctive painting technique which he developed in the 1930s during the Depression, when he was working in the Savoy Alps as a hotelier and ski instructor. Fautrier chose paper as his support instead of canvas. Firstly, he put on a layer of gesso and then went on working in oils, gouache, watercolours, inks, pastels and powder pigments. His aim was to be able to use all media at once, thus bringing painting and drawing, matter and light together. To rule nothing out meant merely hinting at motifs on the vibrant surfaces of the paintings, avoiding any sense of immediacy and directness. In the series "Otages" (Hostages), first exhibited in 1945, the new technique reached its peak. Fautrier pared down the depictions to their essential features and since the colour scheme involved tender pink and green tones, he was obviously not paying tribute to wartime atrocities. As the first viewers of these works were already able to ascertain, what he was really interested in was the subtle differentiation of hues – it was painting itself that mattered. In the first article he dedicated to him in 1943, Jean Paulhan described Fautrier's character precisely in his title as "Un peintre ambigu": an ambiguous painter.



The second point is also demonstrated by this series, namely, Fautrier's efforts to evolve a motif into a visual type. Early on, he began to repeat nudes and portraits of women in series all of the same size, rendering his subjects with just a few visual signs. It is not without reason that Fautrier remained committed until late in life to the traditional genres of figure, still life and landscape, which provided him with a formal structure within which his painting of pictorial types could flourish. What appears to have been spontaneously jotted down was actually the result of a long process of reflection and concentration prior to the act of painting.



In addition to the catalogue raisonné, another book, on which I have been working since I curated the Fautrier retrospective of 2017–2018 in Winterthur and Paris, has just been published by L'Échoppe in Paris. Entitled "La peinture doit se détruire pour se réinventer" (Painting has to self-destruct in order to reinvented itself), the book is a compilation of Fautrier's writings and interviews. These do not only come from journals and exhibition catalogues; radio and television broadcasts in which Fautrier had something to say have also been transcribed. Light is also cast on the life of this little-studied individualist by the painter's statements along with testimonies by journalists from newspaper reports – all this accompanied by an extensive commentary. This "Rimbaud de la peinture" (Rimbaud of painting), as Jean Paulhan described him, hardly associated other painters, but preferred the company of poets and authors in the main. As André Malraux aptly put it, Fautrier had "many painters as opponents, but the majority of poets were his fans".



Above all, this compendium contains an abundant range of materials about the invention of "Originaux multiples" (original multiples). These pictures, which Fautrier exhibited in the early 1950s, were conceived by him, but produced by others as editions. Fautrier's intention was to displace the sacrosanct unique picture and bring about a turning point in art history. These works were not intended as reproductions, but rather as original pieces in series, which everyone would be able to afford. Fautrier propagated this idea obsessively in the 1950s, but to his great disappointment it ended as a spectacular flop. The most refined painter of his epoch throwing painting radically into question in such an unexpected manner is a paradoxical scenario: only one of the reasons for engaging with Fautrier anew today.



A conversation about Fautrier took place on the occasion of the exhibition which I curated at LGDR in New York in May 2023: <https://vimeo.com/829971771>