



***Félix Fénéon: The Anarchist and the Avant-Garde—
From Signac to Matisse and Beyond***

August 27, 2020 – January 02, 2021

The Museum of Modern Art

Voices included:

Starr Figura

Marnin Young

Mitch Abidor

Yäelle Biro

Stop 321: Introduction

STARR FIGURA: My name is Starr Figura. I'm a curator of Drawings and Prints here at The Museum of Modern Art.

Felix Fénéon was an art critic, a writer, an editor, a journalist, and a collector. And although very few people have heard of him today, he played an extremely important role in the development of modern art. We would probably not know, or at least not understand, the artists that you'll see in this exhibition the way we do if it hadn't been for Fénéon.

Fénéon lived during a period of intense social and political turmoil in France. He was a very committed, radical anarchist. For him, avant-garde art. For him, avant-garde art and radical politics were two sides of the same coin. They were both vehicles to achieve a more fair and just society - to create a world of greater freedom, not just for artists, but for everyone.

Stop 322. Paul Signac, Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background
Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in
1890. 1890

STARR FIGURA: Who is this enigmatic, magician-like man in this painting?

Felix Fénéon started his career as an art critic in the 1880s. And he was the first person to recognize and champion a new generation of artists who he called the neo-impressionists. And one of those artists was Paul Signac.

Fénéon has a very distinctive goatee which was one of his trademarks. He's wearing this very sharp yellow jacket. He was something of a Dandy. And he's also holding out a flower. And the pattern of the petals of that flower evoke the swirling pattern of the background. And so does the way that Fénéon holds it in his fingers. And I think it signals to us how generous he was to the artists and the writers that he supported.

Many of his artist friends including Paul Signac were also anarchists. This was a kind of leftist progressive attitude against government. And so Fénéon and his friends thought that by eliminating the government, there would be greater economic equality and greater creative freedom.

It's not just a portrait of the person in the painting. It's also in a way a portrait of the relationship between the subject of the painting and the artist. And I think in this case you really feel that sense of admiration and gratitude that Paul Signac feels towards Felix Fénéon.

Stop 323: Paul Signac, *Au temps d'harmonie* - Marnin Young

MARNIN YOUNG: My name is Marnin Young. I'm Associate Professor and Chair of Art History at Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University, here in New York City. In the shade of a tree, we see a man picking a fig. A mother tantalizingly offers a fig to a young child. Two men play a game of boules, a French version of outdoor bowling.

All of this is meant to be a pastoral image of a future utopian community. Signac, he writes in his journal in 1902, "Justice in sociology. Harmony in art. The same thing." The couple at the center, for example, he says are, quote "free love" exclamation point. The rooster, which has long been a symbol of France, he saw as a kind of announcement - the crowing of a new dawn arising.

One of the great debates among anarchists around the time of the production of this painting involved the use of violence in the advocacy of anarchism. Fénéon and Signac were comrades. They believed in the same politics and they believed in the same art, but probably did not see eye to eye on the most effective way to advocate for their cause. So, where Fénéon thought that bomb-throwing might best advance the cause of anarchism, Signac saw this painting as a kind of alternative propaganda tool.

Stop 324: Alphonse Bertillon, *Felix Fénéon* - Mitch Abidor

STARR FIGURA: This is a mugshot that was taken of Fénéon in 1894, when he was arrested in connection with an anarchist bombing.

MITCH ABIDOR: I'm Mitch Abidor. My specialty is French radical and revolutionary history.

Anarchy, literally, means “no government.” And he ended up working at, of all places, the Ministry of War. He really was a good employee, and he only lost his job when explosives were found in his desk. A bomb went off in the restaurant in the Hotel Foyot. And, Fénéon was a suspect in this bombing. Fénéon was arrested and they put 30 anarchists on trial in what came to be known as “The Trial of the 30.” And he was the star of the trial. Nothing intimidated him. When it was said that he was hiding behind a lamppost, he asked, “Which side of a lamppost is behind?” Because there is no such thing. So the trial ended up being an utter fiasco for the government. He'd be quite capable of planting a bomb. But this one? Not so certain.

There were many anarchists at the time who said there are no innocent victims. Some poor schmoo drinking in a cafe in Paris was as guilty as somebody who was himself an exploiter, because they accepted an unjust system and did nothing to destroy it.

It's the third Republic, which was notoriously corrupt, which was notoriously repressive, where workers were killed when they went on strike. And so, the destruction of anything and everybody involved in this system was probably, for him, what anarchy meant.

Stop 325: Helmet Mask

YELLE BIRO: Wherever you stand in the galleries. This helmet mask might be looking at you.

Hi, my name is Yelle Biro. I am the associate curator for African Art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. So, you are looking at works from Africa that were collected by Felix Fénéon at the beginning of the 20th century.

One of the things that really brought African objects to the forefront of the avant-garde in Paris was a fresh way of thinking about the representations of the human body. We were really moving away from natural forms and moving into things that were much more stylized.

Early 20th century collectors were interested in the pure form. The function of the object was really not the main focus. This mask from the Congo is only one part of the full ensemble. It would have been probably performed during ceremonies where the dancer, the masquerader, would have been hidden by fibers. The rest of the performance, the sound that went with it, the movements and the music and the fibery costume would have been left aside.

Stop 326: Henri Matisse, *Landscape near Collioure* (1905) – Starr Figura

STARR FIGURA: Canvases like this just shocked audiences. The paint is applied in these almost frenzied gestures across the canvas. We might be used to seeing that now, but at that time, people hadn't seen anything like that before.

Matisse and Fénéon had met just a year before this painting was made. And then Fénéon got a job at Gallery Bernheim-Jeune as a dealer. In 1909, Fénéon signed a contract with Matisse. This was huge for Matisse because he had been struggling financially for years.

There was one day in the gallery when a couple came in and they were interested in looking at some of Matisse's paintings. And Matisse was there, and he was very encouraged. But then, the couple left without buying anything and Fénéon actually had discouraged them from buying it. And Matisse was flabbergasted, and said to Fénéon, "Why didn't you sell them a painting?" And Fénéon said, "you wouldn't want your beautiful painting to go and live with those stuffy people."

Fénéon really believed in the art more than anything else. And it was very important to him that the art be placed somewhere where it would be properly appreciated.

Stop 327: Heddle Pulleys

YELLE BIRO: My name is Yelle Biro. Felix Fénéon throughout his life collected a large number of objects from Africa, and also from the Pacific.

The five objects that you see in front of you are heddle pulleys that were parts of looms. They hang in front of the face of the weaver, and this is the main element that the weaver would see while weaving a band of cloth. What we think was particularly appealing for somebody like Fénéon was the endless inventivity shown by these Baule and Guro artists in the reinterpretation of this very simple object into something of delight.

At the end of the 19th century, objects from Africa started entering ethnographic museums. This was very much tied to the colonial enterprise and the sense that the objects were being collected as the last testimonies of disappearing cultures. So, the objects were really not seen as works of art.

Fénéon had a little bit of a different sensibility. He was very quiet about his own collecting practice. What is interesting and what we do know is that Fénéon himself never called these objects primitive. He preferred the term “art from faraway places.” And what that says is that he didn't consider these works inferior in any way. He just realized that they came from elsewhere. Within the colonial context of the time, having a gaze that can see these objects as something beautiful and worth of admiration was quite a change.

Stop 328: Conclusion – Starr Figura

STARR FIGURA: In this last section in particular, there are a number of works by artists like Matisse, Modigliani, Seurat, Bonnard, as well as African and Oceanic objects that Fénéon once owned. They were stuffed together along with hundreds of other works in the succession of small apartments that he and his wife lived in, in Paris.

MITCH ABIDOR: He continues to be followed by the Parisian police. And as late as 1908, he's still being reported as an active anarchist militant. He never, ever gave up on his beliefs. So, he remained a leftist to the end of his life.

STARR FIGURA: He did not want his works to go to the state because he was disappointed that the Louvre and other museums were not embracing and enthusiastically collecting the work of avant-garde French artists. During his lifetime, Fénéon was constantly buying and selling works of art from his collection. When he died, there were hundreds of paintings and hundreds of sculptures that were auctioned off. And you can see the catalogs for the four separate auctions in this gallery.

MITCH ABIDOR: Everything that he was aiming at was like freeing humanity from the chains that they were living in. In a period, full of interesting characters, Fénéon in his own quiet way, was one of the most fascinating.