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French family of painters. (1) François Bonvin and his younger half-brother (2) Léon Bonvin came from humble origins; their father was a constable in the Parisian suburb of Vaugirard. As artists they were largely self-taught.

(1) François (Saint) Bonvin

(*b* Vaugirard, Paris, Nov 22, 1817; *d* Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Dec 19, 1887).

François trained first as a printer and later briefly at the Gobelins. From 1828 to 1830 he was a student at the Ecole de Dessin, Paris, and later attended the Académie Suisse. In 1843 Bonvin showed some of his drawings to François Granet, whom he considered his only mentor.

In his earliest known canvas, *Still-life with a Beer Mug* (1839; Paris, priv. col., see Weisberg, 1979, p. 208), painted while working as a clerk for the Paris police, he displayed a predilection for still-lives that he maintained throughout his career. By the mid-1840s Bonvin devoted more time to his painting, although he did not officially leave the police until February 1850. In 1844 Bonvin met his first patron, Laurent Laperlier (1805–78), an official in the War Office, who bought some drawings that Bonvin showed under the arcades of the Institut de France, Paris. In 1847 he exhibited a portrait in the Salon and continued to show there until ill-health forced him to retire in 1880.

Through his friends, the novelist and art critic Jules Champfleury and the painter and writer Gustave Courbet, Bonvin joined the Realist movement. He had lengthy discussions with Amand Gautier, the writer Max Buchon (1818–69), and later the art critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary at the Brasserie Andler, Paris. These conversations probed the nature of Realism and the principles of truth and exactitude held by the artists in the group. François remained attached to the group until the mid-1860s.

In *La Silhouette* (1849) Champfleury singled out François's small *The Cook* (exh. Salon 1849; Mulhouse, Mus. B.-A.), comparing it with the work of Chardin, an artist whom François greatly admired. (Indeed, Bonvin convinced Laperlier to collect works by Chardin, from which he then borrowed motifs.) *The Cook* was awarded a third-class medal and won Bonvin a much-needed 250 francs. By the early 1850s François's dark-toned canvases were frequently exhibited and were sufficiently successful to win him a state commission to complete *The Girls' School* (exh. Salon 1850–51; Langres, Mus. St-Didier), which was awarded a second-class medal.



François Bonvin: Interior of a Tavern, oil on panel, 501×372 mm, 1867 (Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Acquired by Henry Walters, 1910, Accession Number: 37.837); image credit: The Walters Art Museum

During the Second Empire (1852–70) François became well known for his small still-lives and intimate genre scenes inspired by earlier painting. His *Interior of a Tavern* (1859; Arras, Mus. B.-A.) shows the influence of the Le Nain brothers. *Interior of a Tavern (Cabaret flamand)* (1867; Baltimore, MD, Walters A. Mus.) is reminiscent of 17th-century Dutch painting, especially the work of Pieter de Hooch. Bonvin's preference was for thin tones of brown, grey, and black, enlivened with red or yellow highlights. In 1859, when a number of young painters (including Whistler and Fantin-Latour) were rejected at the Salon, Bonvin held an exhibition of their work at his own atelier.

After his half-brother's death in 1866 François went to the Netherlands, where he studied Dutch painting in order to find inspiration for his images of 'an art for man' as expressed by the critic Théophile Thoré. Bonvin spent a year in London during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). When he returned to France he settled in the village of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where, despite failing health and eyesight, he continued to create intimate Realist charcoal drawings and paintings of humble everyday objects and scenes.

(2) Léon Bonvin

(b Vaugirard, Paris, Feb 28, 1834; d Meudon, Hauts-de-Seine, Jan 30, 1866).



Léon Bonvin: Still Life with Cruets and Vegetables, watercolor with gum heightening, iron gall ink and pen, over graphite underdrawing on slightly textured laid paper, 165×213 mm, 1863 (Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Acquired by William T. Walters, Accession Number: 37.1646); image credit: The Walters Art Museum)

Half-brother of (1) François Bonvin, he first earned his living as an innkeeper but had artistic ambitions from an early age. He first executed small, sombre charcoal and ink sketches of his bleak environment, but by the end of his life he was producing luminous watercolour still-lives (such as Still Life with Cruets and Vegetables; 1863; Baltimore, MD, Walters A. Mus.) and studies of the countryside directly from nature, in a style that looked forward to Impressionism. When his watercolours were rejected by a Parisian art dealer, Léon committed suicide in a fit of despair by hanging himself from a tree in the forest of Meudon. Although encouraged and supported by his half-brother, he was largely ignored during his lifetime; however, a sale of his watercolours after his death brought his destitute family over 8000 francs. The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, MD, has the largest collection of his work.

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