About the Artist
The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Henri Fantin-Latour
The Fantin genealogy indicates the family was of Italian decent from the village of San Fantino. One ancestor added the name Latour at the end of the seventeenth century to recognize their estate, Latour. Henri Fantin-Latour was born on January 14, 1836, in Grenoble, France, to Jean-Theodore and Hélène de Naidenoff, who was the adopted daughter of a Russian countess. Fantin was first born with two younger sisters to follow. His father, Jean-Theodore, was a painter who studied at the School of Art in Grenoble and copied paintings at the Louvre. His specialty was religious painting for churches and convents, and portraiture. Fantin signed his paintings with “Fantin” to distinguish his work from his father’s.

The Fantin family moved to Paris in 1841 hoping to find better opportunities for commissions for Jean-Theodore. At the age of five, Fantin began his formal schooling taught by his godfather who came to live with the Fantin family. Lessons in Latin and math quickly gave way to drawing lessons as per Fantin’s request. He exhibited a genuine talent for drawing, noted even when he was younger. His father noticed Fantin’s preoccupation with drawing and his desire to learn more and by the age of ten, his father began giving his son his first formal art lessons. Copying the works of other artists was a typical learning approach so Fantin began with copying available engravings and lithographs, especially those of his favorite, Girodet, a French painter of the Romantic movement.

Four years later, Fantin noticed the sign, School of Drawing as he passed by on the street. He entered the building, noticed the drawings on the wall by students, and asked the receptionist if he could be a student. The age of admittance was fifteen, three months short of Fantin’s actual age. The receptionist kindly overlooked the three months and permitted Fantin to be admitted and to begin classes the very next day. In order to place students in appropriate level drawing classes, students had to draw a casted figure. Fantin did so well that he was placed in the highest level class, alongside a student named August Rodin. One of Rodin’s previous teachers had been Lecoq-de-Boisbaudran from another institution who taught students to draw and paint from memory. Starting with a posed model, Lecoq-de-Boisbaudran instructed students on the anatomical form, color, light and shadows and then dismissed the model. Using their memory, students had to create a drawing or painting. This approach engaged students’ ability to observe, intellectualize and analyze information, and memorize what they saw. This process gave students the skills and application of knowledge they needed when they drew both from memory and imagination. Students were even able to recall people they saw days earlier running or riding a bike and could render a quick sketch with exact body position and posture. Fantin convinced his father to permit him to attend some memory classes with Lecoq-de-Boisbaudran.

Fantin continued to advance his artistic skills and was eventually invited to the compete at the School of Fine Art when he was eighteen; however, he was dismissed after three months when judges felt he was not progressing as they wished. For the next sixteen years, Fantin was responsible for his own learning and spent endless hours in the Louvre Museum studying and copying paintings for patrons. During his time at the Louvre, Fantin became acquainted with other artists including Manet, Whistler, Morisot and many more who often gathered in the evenings at Café Moliere for conversation. The Louvre Museum was “home” to Fantin who was tiring of his copy work and longed to do original work. In 1859, Fantin submitted three original paintings to the Paris Salon; one was a self-portrait and two were of his sisters. All were denied, as were Whistler’s submissions and those of many other young artists.

Fantin chose to live at home with his parents and sisters while pursuing his art career. His sister, Natalie, gradually showed signs of a mental breakdown and was committed to an institution. The anguish of this event took its toll on Fantin, prompting his friend, Whistler, to extend an invitation to join him in London. Once there, Fantin thoroughly enjoyed London and the hospitality of Whistler’s brother-in-law, Dr. Seymour Haden. Visits to the National Gallery where he studied works of Rembrandt, Van Dyck and Velasquez built his confidence and desire to continue painting portraits, florals and still lifes back in France. Fantin never considered himself a great portrait or landscape painter. At the time of the Impressionists, Fantin found displeasure in painting outdoors as the ever changing weather conditions distracted him. He preferred to paint indoors and brought nature into his studio with flowers, branches, fruits and a few domestic objects. He preferred to paint his still lifes in his summer home in Normandy, France, where he picked fresh flowers from the garden and arranged them in a simple vase.

Back in Paris, he submitted three painting to the 1863 Salon which were admitted into the exhibition and caught the attention of an English lawyer, Mr. Edwin Edwards and his wife, who...
were visiting Paris. The Edwards became good friends of Fantin and made his work known and appreciated in London. On another visit to London, Fantin enjoyed seeing two of his floral paintings hanging in the Royal Academy.

Back in the days when Fantin worked in the Louvre copying paintings, he had noticed a young woman, Victoria Dubourg, who frequented the museum. He was too shy to introduce himself at that time. Years later, Fantin traveled to Belgium and Holland with his friends, the Edwards, and their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Dubourg, parents of Victoria. Fantin and Victoria eventually were properly introduced and developed a long friendship, eventually marrying in 1876.

Fantin’s artistic career continued with regular acceptances into the Paris Salons, national and international exhibitions, and eventually into collections into museums around the world as well as winning awards. On the morning of August 25, 1904, the sixty-five year old Fantin, apparently in good health, suddenly collapsed, became unconscious, and died in the arms of his wife. His modest funeral was at St. Germain des Pres in Paris, with burial at the cemetery of Montparnasse.

About the Art

Cup and Saucer was painted, oil on canvas, by Henri Fantin-Latour in 1864, and is 7 3/8 x 11 3/8 inches. It is the property of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England. In this particular still life, Fantin omitted his usual flowers and focused on only a cup and saucer with spoon. These simple, ordinary objects are not left over from a meal, as the cup is empty and clean. Rather, they are the subjects to be studied. The composition is tight with extended space around the subject cropped so the isolated focus becomes more powerful. The cup is not circular but has a series of flat planes. Fantin’s ability to use value effectively shades each plane, drawing the eyes around the shape in a concentrated effort. The cup and saucer are positioned a bit to the left of the canvas but the placement of the extended spoon brings the entire setting back to the center.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of Cup and Saucer and tell them it was painted in oil by Henri Fantin-Latour in 1864, then share biographical information. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Fantin was gifted in drawing and painting in black and white. With a deep understanding of value, he masterfully used the full spectrum of white to black to emphasize texture and shape. Using an image of Cup and Saucer, discuss his techniques of using the element of value.

2. Fantin’s artistic training began at the early age of five and continued throughout his life. His work was rejected on many occasions yet he persevered. Discuss the dynamics of training and perseverance as they apply to art. How did the role of his friends (Whistler, Rodin and the Edwards as his agents), play into his success?

3. Discuss the idea of drawing from memory. Practice this concept.

4. Examine Cup and Saucer from a distance, then up close. What do you see? This is a simple still life but perfectly rendered. As in all still lifes, you have to be able to consider depth and properly draw or paint one object behind another. Scale and color play a role in this as items in the back should be a bit smaller and more pale in color.

5. Examine Cup and Saucer and other still lifes for the angle of sight. From what angle is the painter looking at the objects?

6. Do you think it’s harder or easier to paint an isolated item such as a cup/saucer or a subject with many parts? Why? Experiment doing both to truly understand.

Things to Do

Fantin, as a still life artist, knew how to set up an engaging and challenging still life. As the instructor, you have many choices to make in setting up a still life for your students. There are many books, DVDs, even YouTube instructions available. Your objective is to place objects on a plane (flat surface) with sensitivity to exposing the table’s edge. Objects may cascade over the edge for interest. Select objects with varying surface textures and transparency. Also consider reflective material such as glass, silver and copper. Encourage students to capture the objects in the reflection. Avoid highly textures items such as stuffed animals. Begin with simpler still lifes with minimal, hard-surfaced objects and a cropped view such as Cup and Saucer. As students build confidence, develop more complicated still lifes. TIP: Still lifes can take a long time to draw and often create space issues in a classroom. Consider several small still lifes glued onto small trays for easy transporting and storage between art classes.