

Auguste Renoir and Raoul Rigault: an unexpected meeting in Marlotte!

It is such an incredible story that one could believe it came from the painter's imagination. The meeting of Auguste Renoir, a painter who was not at all interested in politics, and Raoul Rigault, a revolutionary journalist who had become one of the leaders of the Commune.

1870: a chance meeting in the forest of Fontainebleau

Early August 1870, in the forest of Fontainebleau. The war had just begun. Renoir is quietly installed near Marlotte. With his easel deployed, he works on the motif. The sun rays were barely peeking through the tall trees when, suddenly, an individual appeared out of the bushes... Silent, he had been secretly observing the young painter for several minutes.



Frédéric Bazille, *Portrait of Renoir*, 1867



Auguste Renoir, *La promenade*, 1870

He introduces himself to Renoir as “journal editor at *La Marseillaise*” and explains that he is being hunted by the imperial police. A revolutionary at heart, Rigault had just been released from Mazas prison¹ where he had been detained since February 7. Renoir immediately suggested that he blend into the population of painters and artists of Marlotte and he had him lodged at the Antony inn for a while, long enough to make the authorities forget him: he “suddenly left one day, and I never saw him again. »

Born in 1846 in Paris, Rigault had a good classical education before collaborating on various protest publications, such as *Le Démocrate* or *Candide*, which earned him

¹ Prison facility located next to the Lyon train station, demolished in 1898.

several convictions. Since 1866, the man who was considered as “the best-known man in the Latin Quarter” proudly collected arrests and imprisonments. This is a new conviction on July 13, 1870, toughened by two years of imprisonment and 2000 francs. fine, which undoubtedly pushed him to disappear.

1871: how Rigault provided protection to Renoir...

Shortly after that meeting in the forest, Renoir was enlisted and joined his regiment in the Bordeaux region where he fell ill and was hospitalized. Once the war was over, he returned to Paris in his studio on rue Visconti. But the insurrection of the Commune came to him as a surprise, and he had to quickly leave “with all the shells raining in the neighborhood”. He settled on the left bank, however worried about not being able to practice his profession freely. One day, while he was doing a study at the Tuileries, an officer of the Commune suggested that he leave quickly because his men were convinced that he was spying for the people of Versailles! Penniless, Renoir then has to move around the capital at his own risk.

By an amazing strike of luck, while walking one evening near the Odéon, he recognized in a window the engraved portrait of the fugitive he had helped a year earlier: Raoul Rigault had now become a civilian delegate at the former police headquarters, de facto head of General Security - he became, a few days later, attorney general of the Commune, before being shot by the Versaillais on May 24. Edmond Maître, a Parisian friend whom Renoir frequented at the time (a portrait of his wife is dated April 1871)



Alfred Le Petit dit Zut, *Portrait of Raoul Rigault*, 1871



Les hommes de la Commune, from L'illustration, 15 juillet 1871

advised him to go to the prefecture to request a “pass”. He went there immediately and managed to get notified to the new Parisian police chief. Citizen Rigault, informed of the presence of his savior, then appears very moved and plays the *Marseillaise* in honor of Citizen Renoir. He gives him the precious door opener, which specifies that the authorities “owed aid and assistance to citizen Renoir”! The painter is then free to cross Paris and can safely join his parents in Louveciennes.

You can find this story of an unlikely meeting between an apolitical painter and a revolutionary journalist in a short novel by the writer Bernard Chambaz, *La peau du dos* (Seuil, Points, 2023). It is mainly based on the memories of Renoir, received and transmitted by Ambroise Vollard and Paul Valéry.