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Fallen Angels

The Must-See Show in New York This Week



Henri Fantin-Latour, *Portrait of Arthur Rimbaud* (1872). Courtesy the Morgan Library & Museum, New York

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“You are not really serious when you are 17,” wrote the French bad-boy poet [Arthur Rimbaud](#) in *Romance*—which he penned in 1870 at the tender age of 16. But in Henri Fantin-Latour’s magnificently drawn likeness, Rimbaud appears not just youthfully fetching but serious as sin.

The work is on show as part of the exhibition “Drawn to Greatness: Master Drawings from the Thaw Collection” at The

Morgan Library and Museum (until 7 January 2018). Of the 150 works on paper, dating from the Renaissance through to the present day, Fantin-Latour's black chalk and watercolor study of the then 18-year-old Rimbaud nearly jumps off the wall.

The drawing is so striking in its naturalism that it constitutes, together with Étienne Carjat's 1871 photograph, the most famous representation of the poet, who would go on to write the prose poem *A Season in Hell* (1873) and the incomplete collection *Illuminations* (1886). It is a perfect, hyper-real illustration of the *ur*-Romantic creature who was dubbed *L'enfant sublime* by the poet Paul Verlaine, with whom he had a tempestuous relationship.

A study for the painter's large oil *By the Table* (1872), the sketch was initially an afterthought for an academic canvas meant to represent Paris' most famous poets. Now, 145 years later, Rimbaud is the focus of the work, which hangs in the Musée d'Orsay.

In his book *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel*, the novelist Edmund White claims that when the young poet posed for Fantin-Latour, the painter had to order him to wash his hands before posing. They were covered in chilblains and were red and swollen with splotches from prolonged exposure to freezing streets and even colder garrets.

A painter of flowery still lifes and prettified realism, Fantin-Latour mostly abjured ugliness in his paintings (unlike his more famous friend Manet). This drawing of Rimbaud, though, conveys the grimy facts of rough trade with an unvarnished verity.

Fantin-Latour's portrait of Rimbaud is all rough diamond: the poet spills his handsome face forward into his palm, his tousled hair signaling this young rebel's disdain for society's creaky rules. Quickly executed, the drawing skillfully conveys some of the poet's infamous unwholesomeness. It feels like you can smell his perfume—a mixture of wood smoke, tobacco and BO.