



PRESS RELEASE

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MASTERPIECE OF FRENCH REALISM DISCOVERED IN UK AFTER HALF A CENTURY



Still Life with Hollyhocks, Cornflowers, Poppies, Willows and Butterflies at the Edge of a Wood
by French realist painter Léon Bonvin (1834–1866)
Estimate £10,000–£15,000 (lot 40)

LONDON, UK. NOVEMBER 20, 2025. Olympia Auctions is thrilled to announce the discovery of a watercolour by revered French realist painter Léon Bonvin (1834–1866), recognised today as a key figure in French Realist painting. Painted in 1865 in the final year of the artist's short life, its existence was previously unknown. It can now be added to the nineteen recorded works that Bonvin painted that year (only three of which remain in private hands) and is just the 117th work of which we now know the whereabouts, the vast majority of which are held in museum collections around the world. In all it is believed Bonvin completed less than 150 works in total. The appearance of this work is therefore an exciting moment and an important addition to the artist's small, but highly significant corpus of work.

Discovered in a family's private collection in North London, the watercolour, titled *Still Life with Hollyhocks, Cornflowers, Poppies, Willows and Butterflies at the Edge of a Wood* dates from 1865. The year marked both an extraordinary flowering in Bonvin's talent and presaged his tragic death at the age of just 31 years old in January 1866.

Commenting on the discovery, Art Specialist at Olympia Auctions, Adrian Biddell said: "The discovery of this unmistakable work, which is signed and dated by the artist, is a very significant addition to the artist's oeuvre. It had been purchased in 1969 from the Gomshall Gallery in Surrey. However, following this, the work slipped from scholarly attention and had been relegated to a bedroom wall, poorly framed and obscured beneath dull glass. When I was sent an image of it, I wasn't sure if it was just a reproduction, but I got round there pronto!" The work has been hailed as a "great example" by one of the leading scholars responsible for the recent catalogue raisonné on Bonvin's work, (compiled before this discovery), its re-emergence adding to our understanding of Bonvin's late period.

Interest in Léon Bonvin has grown considerably in recent years resulting in a 2022 retrospective at the *Fondation Custodia* in Paris, curated by the late Ger Luitjen and Gabriel Weisberg. The exhibition assembled nearly half of the artist's entire recorded output, accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue raisonné by French art historian and curator, Maud Guichané.

The discovery of this work has thrilled scholars, who regard it as a moment of great cultural and academic significance, especially as it was discovered inadvertently in a private collection, as the majority of Bonvin's work are held in major institutional collections, including the Louvre, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, the Morgan Library in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Cleveland Museum of Art. The emergence of this watercolour brings to light one of the very few Bonvin works remaining in private hands.



French realist painter Léon Bonvin (1834–1866),
image courtesy of Frits Lugt Collection, Fondation Custodia, Paris

About Bonvin

Bonvin was born in Vaugirard, then a rural village just outside Paris, the youngest of nine children from his father's second marriage. Encouraged by his much older half-brother, the painter François Bonvin (1817-1887), he studied briefly at the Ecole Bachelier, now the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs. At the Ecole he absorbed the renewed mid-nineteenth-century fascination with still life painting and particularly the legacy of Chardin. Natural shyness and the family's modest circumstances shaped his life profoundly. After the death of his father, he became the innkeeper and wine merchant of the family inn, the Bonvin de Bourgogne. A destination for artists, writers and actors from Paris as well as local trade, Bonvin was known to provide musical entertainment for guests on a reed organ. Early on he drew the interior of the inn, but from the early 1860s he began painting outdoors, almost exclusively in watercolour (oil paint was too expensive), and directly from nature with the eye of a botanist.

His works are small in scale, yet monumental in feeling, capturing flowers, plants and rural details with extraordinary accuracy and sensitivity. The discovered watercolour displays all of the qualities that have made Bonvin's work cherished by art collectors and experts. With patient observation he records hollyhocks, poppies, cornflowers, butterflies and the shadows of a willow tree, while in the background a solitary labourer bends to his work, dwarfed by the quiet authority of the natural world.

Bonvin's artistic talent was recognised by many of his contemporaries, yet financial hardship overwhelmed him. At the end of January 1866, after failing to sell his latest works in Paris, he hanged himself in the forest of Meudon at the age of just thirty-one, leaving behind a widow and three small children. His death prompted an unprecedented wave of support from the artistic community. Eighty-eight leading painters and printmakers, including Courbet, Corot, Monet, Nadar, Daubigny, Fantin-Latour, Breton and Jongkind, donated works to a sale at Drouot in May 1866 to help his bereaved family. Their participation stands as a remarkable testament to the high esteem in which the young Bonvin was already held.

Adrian Biddell tells us: "The market has been playing catch up with Bonvin's work in recent years and particularly since the Fondation Custodia exhibition in 2022. Against modest pre-sale estimates comparable watercolours by Bonvin have achieved strong results at auction, with a similar example selling for £75,000. Given the rarity of works of this quality, widespread institutional interest, that so few remain in private collections and the wonderful story of its discovery, we anticipate considerable interest amongst collectors internationally. As one of the leading experts has commented, this newly discovered watercolour is an important addition to the work of an artist whose small, fragile but supremely accomplished output resonates profoundly with audiences today."

The watercolour will be offered in **Olympia Auctions Fine Paintings, Works on Paper and Sculpture sale on December 10, 2025** with an estimate of £10,000-£15,000 (lot 40).

~ENDS~

You can download a hi res image of the painting and an archive picture from here (copyright is Olympia Auctions for the painting and 'image courtesy of Frits Lugt Collection, Fondation Custodia, Paris' for the archive image of Bonvin):

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1xHaiQtdYkYxthfGK-VwX0ctQ2e98sc9t?usp=share_link

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