



# Petite Construction

Jean Fautrier

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Petite Construction

**Artist/Maker:** Jean Fautrier

**Born:** 1957

**Object Type:** Painting

**Materials:** Canvas, Mixed Media, Oil paint

**Technique:** haute pâte

**Measurements:** h 504 x w 623mm (frame: h 611 x w 723 x d 63mm)

**Accession Number:** SAC 11

**Production Place:** Europe, France

**School/Style:** Tachisme, Art Informel

**Credit Line:** Bequeathed by Lady Sainsbury, 2014

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Painted in the final decade of Jean Fautrier's (1898-1964) life, *Petite Construction* (1957) is a small composition consisting of a central, heavily impastoed, rectangular mound of claggy paint, set against a thin, roughly painted background of dirtied blue. The central form — which is so built up as to bulge out of the tableau in the manner of a relief — is predominantly coloured in a shimmering haze of mauve, with golden colouration visible in its upper section. It is delineated further through sharp, purple incisions of paint which echo its rectangular shape; a feature characteristic of Fautrier's *Constructions* post-1957 [1].

*Petite Construction* is a prime example of Fautrier's distinctive and well documented *haute pâte* (high paste) painting technique. To produce such pieces, Fautrier began by glueing several pieces of thick paper onto a stretched canvas support, upon which he would apply extremely thick, white paint with implements such as a palette knife or spatula in order to build up the centralised heap. Research has found that this paint is made up of a very fine plaster [2]. With the thick paste still moist, he would then apply colour through a dusting of powder and crushed pastels and further through 'gouache, ink, and also oil paint' [3]. As Fautrier himself has noted, these works were usually completed with relative speed, within the space of a day [4].

The origins of this working process can be found in Fautrier's famous series of *Otages* paintings (1942-46) which, through their depiction of faces both mutilated and abstracted, respond to the atrocities committed by the Nazis in France during World War II. In a manner typical of the artist's later period however, the subject matter of *Petite Construction* is less evident. Fautrier's close friend, the art critic André Malraux, referred to his works of this time as 'lyrical improvisations...of a slow ripening', alluding to their non-objective quality [5]. Indeed, in its richly coloured and highly textured surface, *Petite Construction* emphasises the artist's interest in probing the material limits of his medium.

Such materiality prompted the critic and curator Michel Tapié (1909-1987) to characterise Fautrier's work as *art informel*, a loose term used to group a number of postwar European painters who were united by an interest in material and process. Fautrier always resisted such associations however, maintaining that however abstract his work became, it was always grounded in the representation of the real, never a purely formal investigation: 'Reality must subsist in the work as its raw material [...] it gives the impetus to everything that will ensure' [6].

Having been first exhibited at the Kunstverein, Fribourg-en-Breisgau in 1958, *Petite Construction* was purchased by Lord and Lady Sainsbury from the Hanover Gallery, London in 1959. In 1989, the couple loaned the work to the Musée d'art moderne da la Ville de Paris for the retrospective exhibition, *Fautrier 1898-1964*, before Lady Sainsbury bequeathed the painting to the Sainsbury Centre in 2014. *Petite Construction* was produced at a time of heightened international recognition for Fautrier, who was awarded the International Grand Prize at the 30th Venice Biennale in 1960,

just three years after its creation.

Freddie Warshaw, August 2021

[1] Palma Bucarelli, *Jean Fautrier: pittura e materia* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1960), p.200.

[2] Jean-Paul Leduc, 'Fautrier, le chair de l'émotion', in *Fautrier 1898-1964* ed. Suzanne Pagé (Paris: Paris-Musées, 1989), pp.42-45 (p.44).

[3] Jean Fautrier, 'Letter to Jean Paulhan, 1943', in *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1974* ed. Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.200.

[4] Fautrier, 'Letter to Jean Paulhan, 1943', p.200.

[5] André Malraux, 'Reply to an American Friend', in *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1974* ed. Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp.190-192 (p.190).

[6] Jean Fautrier, 'Fautrier Had Granted An Interview to Planète,' in *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* ed. Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.220.

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## Further Reading

Palma Bucarelli, *Jean Fautrier: pittura e materia* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1960)

Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler, *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

Suzanne Pagé, ed., *Fautrier 1898-1964* (Paris: Paris-Musées, 1989)

Michel Tapié, 'Fautrier Paints a Picture', *ARTnews* (1955),  
<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/archives-jean-fautrier-paints-picture-1955-10053/>.

Sarah Wilson, 'Jean Fautrier. Orthodoxy and the Outsider', *Art International*, 4 (1988), 33-40

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