

## 4 1881 / Heroic Indolence

Jean-François Raffaëlli, *The Absinthe Drinkers*

“Dans ses tableaux,” me disait un jour Renoir, en regardant une toile de Raffaëlli,  
“tout est pauvre, même l’herbe!”

—Georges Rivière, *Renoir et ses amis*

At the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881, Jean-François Raffaëlli showed the painting now known as *The Absinthe Drinkers* for the first time (fig. 81).<sup>1</sup> The large canvas depicting two ragged men drinking outside a bar in the outskirts of Paris received widespread praise that year, and the artist displayed it again in his enormous solo exhibition in 1884 and at the Paris Salon in 1889, when Jules Bastien-Lepage’s *Les Foins* and Alfred-Philippe Roll’s *Strike of the Miners* both hung at the Exposition Universelle. After appearing at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, it remained largely unseen for almost a century. The picture reemerged prominently in a variety of publications and exhibitions beginning in the late 1970s, but for all the revisionist scholarship this revival occasioned and for all the subsequent attempts to situate Raffaëlli within the artistic currents of his time—to brand him as a Naturalist, for instance—the painter remains for most historians of nineteenth-century French art an “academically oriented genre painter,” with only coincidental ties to the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup>

In his own time, however, Raffaëlli enjoyed extraordinary favor with critics across the artistic spectrum. From Edmond Duranty’s exceptionally high praise of *The Family of Jean-le-Boîteux, Peasants from Plougnasnou* at the Salon of 1877 to Stéphane Mallarmé’s close collaboration on *Les Types de Paris* in 1889, the artist established and maintained respectable avant-garde credentials (fig. 82).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the seriousness with which influential critics and writers set about describing a work like *The Absinthe Drinkers* gives some sense of the painter’s prominent place in the advanced artistic discourses of the period. Here, for example, is Félix Fénéon in 1889: “Some absinthe drinkers, men in frock coats and top hats, are seated at a table in front of a cabaret in the banlieue, under a bower stripped by winter; a thin inserted rectangle between the edge of a wall historiated with drolleries and the upper left of the frame allows a view of the countryside: a railroad signal, a palisade. M. Raffaëlli’s literary perspicacity excels at scrutinizing the life of dejected blighters, and