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Toulouse-Lautrec in Paris

Monographies citadines



Toulouse-Lautrec, the painter, can be summed up in a story of families. His original family was one of the oldest of the French aristocracy, but, in the same way as for all the others of the same ranking, all it could do was sit back and watch its own decline. Yet it was he, Henri, the dwarf whose growth was probably stunted as a result of his parents' intermarriage, who, from his full height of 1.52 metres, brought the family name to the pinnacle of French art. Who would have believed it? Certainly not his own father, a Count with the airs of a lord, who had accumulated a full range of defects almost to the point of caricature. And what is more, Henri achieved all of this in the heart of Paris, far from the family castles in the distant provinces.

Now for the invented family, the one which included his loyal friends, such as Maurice Joyant, whom he met at school and who replaced Théo Van Gogh at the head of the Boussod-Valadon gallery. Count Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec (who understood nothing about his son's art but who had the honesty not to be influenced by his posthumous celebrity) awarded him parental rights and authorisation to manage his son's estate, which he did to the best of his ability, coming up with the idea of the museum devoted to the artist by the municipality of Albi. There was also his friendship with Dr Bourges, with whom he shared the same house for many years: friendships with those he met at Cormon's studio: Louis Anquetin



(a must), René Grenier with whom he lived in 1884 in the building where Degas had his studio at 19 rue Fontaine; Henri Rachou who also housed him at his studio at 22 rue Gagneron, the Englishman Conder who housed him in London in 1898. Lautrec never lived alone and even his cousins enjoyed following this daring and bold relation: Louis Pascal and Gabriel Tapié de Céleyran accompanied him to places where it was least expected to find children of such noble birth. However, they were all subject to Lautrec's tyranny, who, above all, relished in imposing his authority over those he knew, taking malicious delight in dragging his friends along on his wild adventures.

And, then there was the family of the night and of the spotlights, the world of the circus, the theatre, the cafés-concerts, and, above all, the brothels. He even went so far as to take lodgings at the brothel on Rue de Moulines, thus participating in the private world of the working girls. At the Chat Noir he met Aristide Bruant and the two became inseparable, especially after his friend bought the venue and named it Le Mirliton; at the Cirque Fernando, he met the female clown Cha-U-Kao, of whom he painted an incredible portrait (p 11) which the buyer, the collector Camondo, was not brave enough to exhibit among his collection choosing instead to hang it in a recess; at L'Elysée Montmartre, where Dufour, the conductor, invented the Cancan, he met La Goulue and Valentin-le-Désossé.

He met them again at the Moulin-Rouge, inaugurated in October 1889, where Jane Avril, who quite literally fascinated him, Môme Fromage, Gueule d'égout and La Macarona and Nini Pattes-en-l'air all performed.

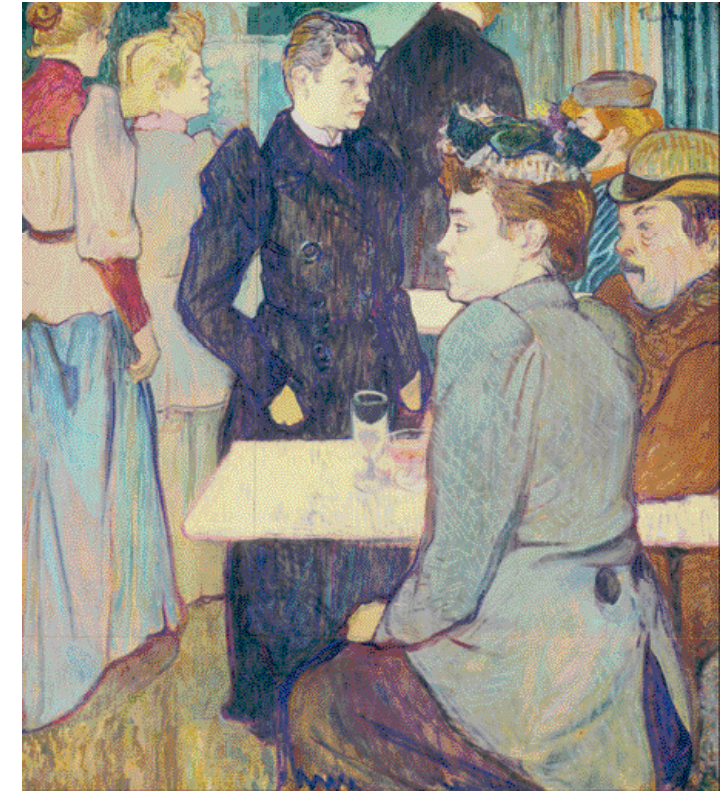
Between all these colourful characters, relationships were not always easy, the same as in all families. In *Divan Japonais*, Yvette Guilbert, furious to see herself made so ugly, did not realise the extent to which Lautrec had contributed to her fame. "Little monster! You have made a monstrosity of me". In May Belfort's sadistic and crazy bedroom, it probably cost him to share a bed with Jane Avril or May Milton. A strange world which never saw the light of day, the streets or the gardens, an in-between world where all that counted was the human figure. As with the landscape, which he reduced to the sole role of accessory, thus highlighting the fact that he was not part of the Impressionist movement, Lautrec showed nothing of the Paris of boulevards and its neighbourhoods. The only skies in his Paris were those of bed canopies in brothels: exotic, commonplace or Merovingian... as well as other beds without canopies. The question begs whether he ever did misery as well as the spirit of celebration, counted. A privileged witness, he never judged the good or evil of this family, which accepted him in spite of his ugliness and infirmity, and which allowed him – could he have done so elsewhere? – to satisfy his sexual desires that appear to have been in inverse proportion to his size. "Love does not exist" he once declared to Yvette Guilbert.



«TOULOUSE-LAUTREC IS
THE GREAT CLASSIC OF THE
SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH
CENTURY BECAUSE HE SUC-
CEDED IN DEPICTING WITHIN
THE HUMAN FIGURE THE MO-
DERNITY OF THE MOMENT AND
THE TRUTH OF ALL TIMES.»

BRUNO FOUCART

OPPOSITE
Un coin du Moulin de la Galette -
A corner of the Moulin de la Galette, 1892
oil on canvas
100 x 89cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington © Awesome art



FAMILY PORTRAITS



Therefore, Lautrec's art can be seen as a huge family portrait in which the dances at the Moulin-Rouge and scenes from the brothels were evenings with friends or meetings with cousins, familiar places where the painter was never a voyeur because he was never a stranger. That is why the same figures can always be seen, the same silhouettes stand out and the same groups ignore one another. It is precisely in the relationship that Lautrec had with his subject that the power of his art can be seen as well as his extraordinary talent as an illustrator. Here, there is no unnecessary pathos. No one, neither Lautrec nor the other participants in these endless nights were complaining or displaying their moral depravity even if an undeniable halo of sadness floats above the spotlights. Because, although Valentin-le-Désossé may well appear poised, Chocolat may well be contorting herself in all directions and the dancing girls may well be lifting their legs to reveal their many layers of petticoat, the Parisian nights in these shuttered worlds do not have the freshness of the dances of Ile de Chatou, nor do they recall the lightness of the dances at the Moulin de la Galette where men and women had fun beneath the garden lights of the Montmartre cabaret.



ON THE LEFT
**La Goulue entrant au
Moulin-Rouge -
- La Goulue entering the
Moulin Rouge, 1892**
oil on cardboard
80 x 60 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
© Awesome art

OPPOSITE
**Jane Avril dansant -
Jane Avril dancing, 1892**
oil on cardboard
84 x 44 cm
Musée du Louvre, Galerie du Jeu de Paume, Paris ©
Awesome art

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**Au cirque Fernando -
At the circus Fernando, 1887-1888**
oil on cardboard
100,3 x 161,3 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago, USA © Bridgeman Images



Here, although people come seeking intense experiences, they also come in order to die a little because it is not possible to survive with impunity among all this alcohol and sex. Lautrec died from this way of life at the age of 37 years having contracted a number of diseases (syphilis and alcoholism). However, he was even dignified enough not to complain about it.

Not only did Lautrec have talent, he also had an education. Therefore, there is no vulgarity in the depiction of Gueule d'égout or Suzanne Valadon in Gueule de bois, no more than when he shows a prostitute washing herself or two girlfriends in bed. Although, with Lautrec, a pair of buttocks really is a pair of buttocks, there is nothing seedy about it and, above all, there is nothing that might shock bourgeois morality. In all these characters, there is great dignity, especially a form of personal dignity which makes it possible to tolerate the solitude. Only in the eyes of the figures and, in the silences which the sound of the orchestra is unable to mask is it possible to glimpse the darkness. Personal matters, but, certainly nothing to do with art. No mention will be made here of the fate of Jane Avril who, interned at a very young age in Dr Charcot's service at La Salpêtrière hospital because of a nervous disorder, found salvation in dance, by great chance, before, once again, going quite mad; nor of any of the other characters,





«WITH WOMEN, AROUND WOMEN,
HE CONTENTED HIMSELF WITH
HIS GLUTTONY AND HIS CURIO-
SITY ABOUT THE FEMALE BODY
AND HEART, WHICH IS INSA-
TIABLE. MAYBE THE THING THAT
SATISFIED HIM THE MOST WAS
THE NEED TO LOVE THAT REIGNED
CONSTANTLY IN HIS HEART THAT
WAS NOT A FAKE.»

THADÉE NATANSON

«THOSE WHO DON'T CARE
ACTUALLY DO CARE BECAUSE
THOSE WHO DON'T CARE DON'T
SAY THAT THEY DON'T CARE.»

ON THE LEFT
**Au cirque -
At circus**
pencil on paper
© akg-images

OPPOSITE **La Clownesse Cha-U-Kao -
The Clown Cha-U-Kao, 1895**
oil on cardboard
57 x 42 cm
Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris © akg-images

