

## Toulouse-Lautrec: A Stand-Alone Celebrity Artist

Essay by Allison Marino

At the end of the 19th century, Paris was the epicenter of a poster craze. Jules Chéret's advancement of the lithographic process in 1880 lowered the cost and effort required to produce posters, and soon Paris was saturated with colorful advertisements promoting everything from theater to consumer goods. Although Chéret is often considered the father of the modern poster for his role in streamlining production, it was Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec who raised the medium's rank to fine art in 1891 with his infamous poster advertisement for the Moulin Rouge.<sup>1</sup> Soon after, posters were being commissioned and showcased in exhibitions as fine art.

The poster evolved as an egalitarian art form. Unlike painting and sculpture – which required lengthy, tedious production – the poster was mass produced and widely disseminated. Available to a wider audience on urban streets, the medium became a point of discussion for members of all classes; consequently, the poster became more popular with contemporary artists, such as Pierre Bonnard and Théophile Steinlen. Toulouse-Lautrec, however, distinguished himself from other poster artists of the period, his unparalleled fame resulting from his unique style and intimate relationships with his subjects.

Unmatched by his contemporaries, Toulouse-Lautrec defined his graphic style through large areas of bright, vivid colors, silhouetted and caricature-like depictions of famous subjects, and disorienting perspectives. These characteristics, along with broad passages of negative space, created flattened and compressed compositions that removed both his subjects and the viewer from any specific setting or time. These distinctive elements separated Toulouse-Lautrec's work from what earlier artists had traditionally created, often employing deep and complex perspectives to satisfy their Renaissance or biblical narratives.

Moreover, Toulouse-Lautrec maintained an eclectic style that resists classification within any specific Western artistic movement. Like his contemporaries, such as Mary Cassatt and Eugène Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec drew inspiration from *ukiyo-e* prints, which were developed in Japan in the 18th century and are characterized by flattened perspectives, large areas of color separated by thick contour lines, and simplified forms or figures. Toulouse-Lautrec's work became recognizable because of his adoption of this influential technique; however, his incorporation of elements from more recent Parisian art movements gave his work a standout quality. In *Divan Japonais* (1893) and *Eldorado: Aristide Bruant* (1892), for instance, Toulouse-Lautrec depicted real people, embracing a modern interest in narratives from everyday life. Furthermore, Toulouse-Lautrec used erratic and unnatural colors characteristic of the Post-Impressionists as in his work *Debauchery* (1896). In his piece, *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine* (1896), he utilized a more restrained palette and simplified geometric shapes suggestive of the Art Nouveau style, which Czech artist Alphonse Mucha was developing around the same time.

---

<sup>1</sup> International Poster Gallery, "A Brief History of the Poster," Accessed 23 July 2019. <https://www.internationalposter.com/a-brief-history-of-the-poster/>.

In addition to his distinctive artistic style, Toulouse-Lautrec's personal relationships with many of his subjects separated him from other artists of the period.<sup>2</sup> His genetic physical abnormalities prevented him from participating in the aristocratic lifestyle into which he was born, and his unusual looks drove him to a place that embraced the peculiar: the artist-friendly Parisian neighborhood of Montmartre. While Montmartre's ribald venues offered explicit performances that were perceived as representative of the working class, it was the wealthy who often frequented Montmartre's cabarets and cafes. Toulouse-Lautrec was accepted by Montmartre's inhabitants – performers, painters, prostitutes – despite his aristocratic status and strange appearance. His friendships with stars, including Jane Avril, Yvette Guilbert, and Aristide Bruant, enabled him to depict them in a more personal way than other artists could. Guilbert's signature black performance gloves and Bruant's intimidating gaze and stature, for example, were details he incorporated into his images. These details provided audiences with intimate access to these performers, similar to the way Degas invited the viewer into the lives of his subjects in his *Ballet Dancers* series of paintings – depicting them at rehearsal or behind theater curtains.

Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of Jane Avril, for instance, were often recognizable by her distant facial expression and gawdy stance caused by her disorder.<sup>3</sup> Viewers were made to feel as if they knew Avril personally because they knew her story. Toulouse-Lautrec established a viewer-subject relationship through his posters, whereby ordinary viewers could achieve artificial celebrity status by engaging personally with his famous subjects.

This unique method of engagement was unlike the generic, distant connections often present in mass-produced posters by other artists. Toulouse-Lautrec's use of negative space to divorce his narratives from a specific setting did not deter the viewer; rather, it removed visual distractions, allowing the viewer to connect more fully with his subjects. Toulouse-Lautrec's unique artistic style and personal celebrity relationships invited his audience into his art, giving his posters an unmatched accessibility that remains to this day.

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that other contemporary artists also maintained friendships with the stars of Montmartre, but Toulouse-Lautrec's connections were more intimate because he spent a significant amount of time in the district, and his reputation and physical abnormalities distinguished him from other working artists of the time.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Avril was hospitalized in 1882 with chorea minor, a movement disorder that caused uncontrollable movement (Hughes, Kathryn. "Jane Avril: Toulouse-Lautrec's Muse." *The Telegraph*, Last Modified 12 June 2011. Accessed 23 July 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/8563573/Jane-Avril-Toulouse-Lautrecs-muse.html>.)