

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec as The Montmartre Joker

Essay by Sarah Ortiz-Monasterio

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec embodies the concept of the “artist as performer” who not only illustrated modern life, but also experienced that which he rendered. He immersed himself in the social environment of Paris’ Montmartre district, attaining distinction as an aristocrat who chose to establish himself and his artistic practice in a quarter of the city known for its unconventional population and activities. The intersection between these two facets of his persona evidences the unique role that Toulouse-Lautrec assumed as the iconic lithographer of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian cabarets. In this capacity, Toulouse-Lautrec simultaneously publicized the district’s performers and exposed frequenters of Montmartre’s risqué underbelly.

Toulouse-Lautrec’s role as an artist in Montmartre can be evaluated through the lens of William Shakespeare’s wise fool.¹ An example of the wise fool appears in the Shakespearean tragedy, *King Lear* (1605-06).^{2,3} Although the Fool ridicules the folly of King Lear, he does so in a manner that provides Lear with insight and wisdom to aid him in his journey of self-realization. As the King’s personal court jester, the self-aware Fool is permitted to voice his acerbic, but perceptive comments. And, although the Fool pokes fun at his king, he is loyal to him, remaining with Lear when the King is vulnerable. The Fool’s qualities serve to illuminate Toulouse-Lautrec’s objective to function as Montmartre’s own wise fool: The Montmartre Joker.

Described by Colta Ives in *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (1996) as the “Midget king of the hill, or at least a court jester, [Toulouse-Lautrec] was, all the same, a determined and industrious artist”⁴ who established himself through various commissions as the revealer of Montmartre’s eccentrics.⁵ Among his esteemed clientele was stage performer Jane Avril.⁶ A champion of Toulouse-Lautrec, Avril said of her friend, “It is to Lautrec that I owe my fame.”⁷ Yvette Guilbert is another popular performer who appears in Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters. However, Guilbert was less enthused than Avril by Toulouse-Lautrec’s depiction of her, saying that he made her appear “horribly ugly,”⁸ additionally commenting, “Really, Lautrec, you are a genius at deformity.”⁹ Nevertheless, Guilbert signed the artist’s 1894 print album which included her portrayal.¹⁰ Guilbert’s comments call attention to an important aspect of Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster portraits: The individuals whom he portrayed were caricaturized through his use of severe contour lines and intense flat areas of color. Similar in function to Lear’s Fool, Toulouse-Lautrec operated as The Montmartre Joker, poking fun at his associates through his renderings, while nonetheless serving as their advocate. As he satirized his subjects, he popularized them, facilitating their respective journeys to stardom.

A vital aspect of embodying the character of a joker is the ability to not only satirize others, but also one’s self. Toulouse-Lautrec accomplished this as The Montmartre Joker by revealing the irony fundamental to his own subjectivity. A critical instance of this exposure appears in *Elles*, which the artist created in 1896. The composition features a woman – a prostitute – whose back is turned to the viewer. A top hat set upon a side table is the poster’s key symbol, functioning as a stand-in for wealthy clients who, like Toulouse-Lautrec, frequented Montmartre’s brothels. Toulouse-Lautrec satirizes the privilege of his class to be able to participate in this culture by featuring the emblematic top hat. Through creating *Elles*, The Montmartre Joker uncovered the “hidden” behavior of the upper class, and exposed himself as an aristocrat able to capture this forbidden environment because he was a part of it.

Similar to the Fool in *King Lear* who was a member of Lear's court, but still situated on the periphery of the aristocracy, Toulouse-Lautrec existed in a binary of class. He was at once a comrade and an outsider to the Montmartre performers whom he illustrated, and an affiliate and a critic of the upper class. As a result of these varying perspectives, Toulouse-Lautrec was in the unique position to evaluate the dynamics of two disparate social groups and his personal relationships with them. The dual nature of his character consequently permitted him to successfully embody the role of The Montmartre Joker.

Endnotes

1. Peter Milward, "Wise Fools in Shakespeare," (*Christianity and Literature* 33, no. 2, 1984), 21-27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44324052>.
2. Milward, "Wise Fools in Shakespeare," 21-27.
3. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (Simon & Schuster: Folger Shakespeare Library Series, 2003).
4. Colta Ives, "Toulouse-Lautrec: An Introduction," *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (MetPublications, 1996), 10, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Toulouse_Lautrec_in_The_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art#about_the_title (Accessed June 11, 2019).
5. Ives, "Toulouse-Lautrec: An Introduction," *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 15-17.
6. Zuzanna Stanska, "Meet Jane Avril, The Great Muse of Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec," *DailyArt Magazine*, September 20, 2016, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/meet-jane-avril-the-great-muse-of-henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/> (Accessed July 21, 2019).
7. "Women and Toulouse-Lautrec: The famous painter portrayed the women in his life," (*LIFE* 57, no. 16, October 16, 1964), 84, <https://books.google.com/books?id=Q0gEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=I%20owe&f=false> (Accessed July 21, 2019).
8. Ives, "The Museum's Collection: Principle Works," *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 55.
9. Julia Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*. New York: Viking, 1994. (Yvette Guilbert, *La chanson de ma vie: Mes mémoires* [Paris, 1927], p. 272, quoted in Frey 1994, p. 311); quoted by Colta Ives in *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (MetPublications, 1996), 55.
10. Ives, "The Museum's Collection: Principle Works," *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 55.

Works Cited

Frey, Julia. *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*. New York: Viking, 1994. (Yvette Guilbert, *La chanson de ma vie: Mes mémoires* [Paris, 1927], p. 272, quoted in Frey 1994, p. 311.)

Ives, Colta. *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. MetPublications (1996). Accessed June 11, 2019.
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Toulouse_Lautrec_in_The_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art#about_the_title.

Milward, Peter. "Wise Fools in Shakespeare." *Christianity and Literature* 33, no. 2 (1984): 21-27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44324052>.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Simon & Schuster: Folger Shakespeare Library Series, 2003.

Stanska, Zuzanna. "Meet Jane Avril, The Great Muse of Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec." *DailyArt Magazine*. Last Modified September 20, 2016. Accessed July 21, 2019.
<https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/meet-jane-avril-the-great-muse-of-henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/>.

"Women and Toulouse-Lautrec: The famous artist portrayed the women in his life." *LIFE* 57, no. 16, October 16, 1964. 82-92. Accessed July 21, 2019.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=Q0gEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=I%20owe&f=false>.