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TOULOUSE-LAUTREC: PARISIAN PARTY ANIMAL

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There's not much yellow sunshine in "Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre" at the National Gallery of Art. Its glow is greenish. That's partly the gaslight, partly the absinthe, and don't forget the queasiness of the morning-after dawn. This is a show about the club scene. It takes you out all night.

There are many oils, posters, prints and party invitations (one suggests you check your fig leaf at the door), 10 connected rooms and 250 pictures of dance halls, nightclubs, bars, circuses and brothels, and the people who hang out in them: artists, drinkers, gawking tourists, whores. The show, on view through June 12, sweeps you back in time up the steep streets of Montmartre to the hottest spots in Paris, where women are available and getting stoned is easy and dancing girls kick high.

The atmosphere is charged with showbiz glamour, lust, bohemian license, art, scruffiness and slumming. You are not far from the thug life. You meet a lot of painters. Bearded Vincent van Gogh is drinking in the corner; he has four works in the show. Young Pablo Picasso, who has five, is up from Barcelona. There's Finland's Eero Järnefelt. Erik Satie is on piano. You get to go behind the scenes - Santiago Rusinol takes you to the kitchen of the Moulin de la Gallette - and every now and then you run into old masters, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, men who understood Montmartre before it got hot.

Their pictures aren't alike. It's not style that connects these men - there are 50 in the show - but a preference for Montmartre and for living on the edge. The place is rife with painters. They drive each other on. One of the most gifted - Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), is your sharp-eyed constant guide.

Everybody knows him. He's pretty unmistakable. Lautrec is under 5 feet tall. His torso is a normal size, but his brittle, often-broken legs are as spindly as a boy's. His gait may be unsteady (his walking stick is hollow, he keeps it filled with booze), but his manners are delightful and his banter is exquisite. The man is an aristocrat, but his lips are red and bulbous, and he drools.

Unlike his cousins, he couldn't ride to hounds. That sort of life was closed to him. But Montmartre's was wide open. Had he not been so odd, he might have been dismissed as yet another well-bred youth going

down, but here, among bohemians, where hierarchies of class and taste were overturned with glee, his deformities promoted him. He wore them like a badge.

As he hobbled up the cobbles to the Moulin Rouge or the Moulin de la Galette, the Chat Noir or the Mirliton, Lautrec blazed a trail. When Bob Dylan left his hometown of Hibbing, Minn., to go to Greenwich Village, when Packards on Park Avenue purred up to the Cotton Club, they were treading the same path.

Lautrec was very good. He was fabulous at faces and at body language, too. His eerie skill for capturing a likeness, swiftly, empathetically, still seems a sort of miracle. His drawing and his painting aren't separate, they're one. And he was heroically productive. Lots of wild people get over the club scene, but he didn't, and it killed him. By the age of 33, when he went to the asylum, he was pretty much a ruin, a paranoid, forgetful, syphilitic drunk, drawing creepy circus scenes for the doctors. Yet he'd managed to produce more than 700 canvases, 360 prints and thousands of sharp drawings. He has 140 pictures on display in this show.

Their candor is terrific. "I do not spare the warts," he wrote, "and I enjoy adding the hairs that sprout from them."

His painting style is not exceptionally original. The borrowed strands from which he wove it - naturalist, impressionist, cartoony, Japanese - are pretty clear to see. Lautrec is hardly shallow, but his oils, seen together, aren't as endless or as deep as those of Manet or Paul Cezanne. Purely as a painter he isn't quite there at the top with the grandest of French masters. What makes him so important, and also so prophetic, is something else about his art.

Lautrec put it all together. To read his pictures rightly is to be as hip as he was. Beauty in his pictures is almost incidental. That's not what they're about. What they offer is a joining of rough new music, sex, mass-market promotions, avant-garde delirium, shocking truth, celebrity, decadence and dazzle. That potent combination fuels the art world still.

One night in December 1891, 3,000 Toulouse-Lautrec lithographs were pasted up all over Paris. Part ad, part newspaper cartoon, part Japanese wood-block print, "Moulin Rouge: La Goulue" looked like nothing that Parisians had ever seen. La Goulue, "the glutton," was a young and supple dancer. Lautrec's flatly colored picture shows her on the dance floor. It is focused on her bloomers. La Goulue was known for kicking off the top hats of the gentlemen who neared her. Every now and then, to heighten the maneuver, she'd "forget" to wear her underpants. Lautrec's poster of her kicking made her famous, too.

They did as much for singer Aristide Bruant. Bruant glowered at his listeners. Often he insulted them. Bruant half-talked the songs he wrote in a near-impenetrable streetwise Paris slang. Historian Richard Thomson, who with the museum's Philip Conisbee led the team of scholars that put the show together, says Bruant's voice suggests pre-electric Dylan's.

Lautrec's posters made Bruant's costume - the club, the tall black boots, the hat, the working man's black jacket, and the scarf, a bright blood red - a sort of logo of the man.

No respect or seriousness is granted to the square world, much less to officialdom in the gallery's display. The politics of France had been hopeless for a century. Bourgeois respectability, overstuffed and

stifling, wasn't more attractive. No wonder so many people of all sorts were attracted to the club scene. It was the other side of the coin.

As museum shows and motel art testify together, late 19th-century French painting is what Americans like best. Too often what we're shown is anodyne in spirit - shimmerings of color, shiverings of space, sunlight on fresh flowers, sunlight on fresh fruit, glintings on the Seine. This show is a corrective.

The Chat Noir opened in Montmartre in 1882. Bruant's club, the Mirliton, closed in 1897. The intervening years are the period of the show. The world was getting modern. The Eiffel Tower (built in 1889) now ruled the Paris skyline. Electric lights were shining where once there had been gas lamps. Shoppers were exploring the extravagant department stores. The broad and stately avenues that Baron Haussmann had shoved through the old city made urban life in Paris increasingly anonymous.

They also made it easier for people of all classes to reach the windmills and the crooked streets and nightclubs of Montmartre.

The girls wore floor-length skirts then, and complicated hats. Men affected toppers. But there is something at the core of "Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre" - an attitude, a pulsing - that feels as new as now.

"Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre" will remain on view in the mezzanine and upper level of the National Gallery of Art's East Building, on the Mall at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue NW, through June 12. The exhibit will then travel to the Art Institute of Chicago. It has a corporate sponsor, Time Warner, as well as a foundation sponsor, the **Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation**, and is supported by a grant from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Prof. Richard Thomson of the University of Edinburgh served as guest curator.

The gallery is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. For information call 1 (202) 737-4215 or visit www.nga.gov. Admission is free.

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