

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was arguably the greatest graphic artist of his time; he is best remembered for his bold, colourful posters of Parisian entertainers. His childhood years were spent at his family chateau in the southwest of France where he broke both of his legs and therefore stunted his growth. This left him ill proportioned and dwarfish. This unfortunate event probably helped his artistic ability as he spent most of his time on his own.

Lautrec was at his peak as a painter and poster artist in the early 1890's at the time of the post impressionists.

During his life Lautrec felt most comfortable in the nightclubs, dance halls and brothels of Paris. The narrow life he led is clearly shown in the art that he produced. Lautrec was best renowned for his paintings of the Moulin Rouge and other Parisian entertainers. Lautrec was not the first artist to make the Parisian entertainers serious subjects to paint, Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas were among the first to paint the Paris nightlife and others soon followed their lead like Lautrec.

Although Lautrec's many paintings looked spontaneous and carefree he was never "slapdash" as in he was never messy or careless. He was in fact a dedicated craftsman who knew a lot about the technical matters of his work, especially printmaking. Even after a rough night he would be up to supervise the printing of his lithographs bright and early. Lautrec always carried a small sketchbook with him so he could quickly draw or sketch whatever caught his attention and today thousands of his rapid drawings still survive in the original sketchbooks. He has also reached the elevated position of a dead artist where there is a museum dedicated to him and his work in Albi, France close to where he was born near Toulouse. In the actual paintings of his sketches he tried to keep the spontaneity of the first sketch and therefore liked to work quickly. To work fast he liked to use paint that was thinned considerably with turpentine, which was called *peinture à l'essence*, which allowed him to so called 'draw with the brush'.

He also liked to use absorbent cardboard instead of canvas so the paint would dry quicker and therefore could maintain his momentum.

Most painters have a trademark technique and Lautrec's trademark was the printmaking technique called 'crachis' or spitting ink. He achieved this technique by flicking ink onto the lithographic stone with an old toothbrush to give the print a speckled effect.

The first picture I have chosen to talk about is Lautrec's first important painting, which is called 'At the Circus Fernando' which was painted in 1888. The painting includes his favourite clown Cha-u-kao who he painted many times before. This early example of Lautrec's caricature and graphic style shows the ringmaster and a bareback rider at one of the famous Montmatre circuses. The people at the Moulin Rouge thought so highly of the painting that it was hung in the dancehall from the opening night. The exaggerated features and silhouetted suit tails of the ringmaster make it look as if he has been cut out and stuck down in an appropriate position on the circus floor. I admired this painting because I liked the way he incorporated the sense of movement into the painting by firstly painting the horse when it was in the middle of a stride with its hooves in the air and secondly how he painted the rim of the circus in a curve, which gave a good effect. I was attracted to this painting because it is full of life and colour. Lautrec uses bright colours when he is painting the seating and the background, which contrasts with the relatively dull colours of the ringmaster and horse. Lautrec makes the dancer on the horse stand out by painting a dull green entrance wall behind the strong yellow hair of the dancer, which attracts your attention. I thought it was clever how he puts a bit more life into the painting by adding two other characters into the background, one his favourite clown Cha-u-kao and the other that I cannot identify.

The second of Laurec's pictures that I have chosen to talk about is 'At The Moulin Rouge' which was painted in 1892. One of the

things that appealed to me was how much of Lautrec's work is not only artistically attractive but also is accurate social history.

This painting shows a group of Lautrec's friends seated around the bar of The Moulin Rouge. Around the table there are five people, the elderly music critic Edouard Dujardin, a dancer known as La Macarona, the local photographer Paul Sescou, a champagne salesman and debauchee Maurice Guibert and finally an unidentified redhead. Behind the group at the table Lautrec walks with his tall cousin Dr Gabriel Tapie who he often drew emphasizing his height, while Mome Fromage keeps a watchful eye on one of her dancers La Goule adjusting her hair. On the right hand side of the painting it is clearly visible that there has been a piece of canvas added onto the painting. On the piece of canvas there is a woman's face that is lit with a brilliant green, it stands out vividly against the dull colours of the background and it attracts your attention as soon as you look at the painting whereas before this addition the painting must have been a restrained and balanced masterpiece. The unidentified redhead sitting at the table is wearing an exotic headdress that stands out magnificently against her red hair. If you look at each person they each have a distinctive hat or hairstyle as Lautrec was fascinated by different styles of headwear. The mirrored background that lines the walls gives the painting an undefined background so the silhouetted figures stand out boldly in the mirror. I liked this painting because it shows the somewhat quiet of the normally busy Moulin Rouge. The way Lautrec contrasted the brightly painted woman and the redhead at the forefront of the painting with the blacks and browns of the background also attracted me. I also admired the way Lautrec maintained the spontaneity all through his work.

My favourite painting of the two that I have talked about is 'At the Moulin Rouge' because I think that this one looks more difficult to paint than 'At the Circus Fernando' as it is in greater detail and most importantly I think it looks better. But take nothing away from 'At the Circus Fernando' as this is also a brilliant piece of art.

