

Lifelong Customs Office to
an Incredible Artist
Henri Rousseau

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A dream- like French artist, Henri Rousseau had filled our world with his fabulous paintings. He was born in 1844 in Laval, France, on a town midway between Paris and Brittany. However he had died of blood poisoning at an age of 66. He had lived for most of his life serving as a toll collector then finally fulfilling his dreams being one of the most celebrated painters.

Henri Rousseau was born gifted and had displayed lots of talents in the arts music. He had set his dreams toward being an artist. He educated at Laval Elementary School that started out to be a good way to reach his goal. However with family's financial problem, his father lost all they processed. With this challenge, Henri was unable to pursue his dreams of attending an art school. With his father's bankruptcy they moved to Angers. So setting his dreams aside, Henri started to begin working at a young age. He enlisted to be a soldier and served in the army. His father passed away and he was released from the army where he decided to move back to Paris. There he married Clémence Boitard, and had 5 children. Yet four of them died of diseases and only one daughter of their marriage reached adulthood.

He later on employed as a permanent civil servant, in Paris toll service. (Stabenow) During his spare time, he would make mental notes of what he saw and then make attempts at painting. After working hard, he got assigned to work in the tollhouse with a beautiful view that also helped him to start painting. He would always work from top to bottom when painting. He loved to paint landscapes, portraits and town scenes yet it was not what he loved painting. He loved painting forests the most. A lot of his work featured tropical places he never been to and was inspired by stones, photos and other artwork.

He created so many paintings that it was later on shown at the “Salon des Independents”. (Shabenow) Artists who went to look at the artwork there admired his work. Camille Pissarro was among the first to admire Henri for his spontaneous creativity. His wife Clemence Rousseau had sadly died of tuberculosis in 1888. He took every opportunity to mourn in public the death of her. (Shabenow) He tried to fill the emptiness of her death by having love affairs with other women yet it didn't work. He send his only daughter left to Angers hoping to keep her away the disease tuberculosis which had caused his wife and four children to their graves. (Shabenow) In 1893, he decided to retire from toll service and become a professional artist, his dream. Soon Henri entered the artistic life and was into competition with others.

While painting, Henri painted what he saw and tried to make coincide what he saw with what he knew of the facts. (Pioch) He seeks and tried to emphasize the details as much as possible. With the lack of experience and training, he was fateful with the concept of perspective. (Pioch) He tries to compel the viewer to reconstruct his landscapes visually step by step. (Shabenow) He also distributed the colors in a unique way that made the objects separate from each other. Each object was seen separately, generally full face, and the outlines were very clear. (Pioch) With his interests in forests, he worked through his paintings of scenes of the jungle with his extraordinary imagination. (Pioch)

In 1899 he married to a widow Josephine-Rosalie Nourry. Together, they opened a stationery shop where his paintings were offered for sale. Henri also gave lessons at an adult education center to teach others how to paint. However Josephine died shortly of illness and after a few years later, Henri was introduced to the poet Guillaume Appollinaire. Appollinaire praised Henri, “Glorious painter of the Replublic's spirit, The Proud Independents hail your name as their banner.” (Appollinaire) He also introduced a few famous artists to Henri too. One of them was Pablo Picasso who was one of the people who adored Henri's work and said, “There is nothing odd about Rousseau. He is the most perfect representation of a distinctive and immutable logic.”(Picasso) It was a general opinion of Rousseau's naiveté as a consequence of lack of professional skill.

(Shabenow) In honor Picasso threw a banquet to Henri. It was Henri's first time to really feel accepted as an artist and earned respect for his work. (Slater) Henri also had a saying that he wished to say, "If my parents had recognized my gift for painting... today I would have been the greatest and wealthiest painter in France." It was at last Henri who was recognized by society.

However Rousseau was sentenced for bank fraud and forgery, where he was condemned in January 1909 to years of prison and 200 francs fine. Henri decided to close his intriguing career with a renewed affirmation of faith in grand realism. (Shabenow) Yet he died of blood poisoning on September 2 at an age of 66 where they recorded him as an alcoholic.

Henri Rousseau, *Carnival Evening* 1886, was one of Henri's well-known pictures. It was a painting that caused many viewers to laugh till they cried. He had outlined and colored the white moon, clouds against the deep indigo of night, black tracery of bare trees, a transparent woodland pavilion and a couple in fancy dress, hovering like figures straight out of a belle with meticulous care.

(Shabenow) I personally think this is a nice painting. I especially like the sky and the 2 clouds. It looks so real and captures my eye before looking at the rest of the painting. The only awkward object in the picture is the puppet theatre and the couple. When I imagine the word Carnival, I will think of a place filled with people, however this does not match my description.

Henri Rousseau, *The War* (1894) was a hallucination of violence and death at the world's end. (Shabenow) In this painting he forecasted lots of color with lots of meaning. For the landscape and sky, he used unnatural colors, black was regarded as matter and the gray tree became apocalyptic lightning. He also painted lots of crows and dead bodies. It really portrayed the theme of war, which was also dealt with blood and death. I thought this painting was really interesting because the colors he used look really sharp and appealing. I liked how he used black to deal with death and how he used red clouds for blood. I thought this was an awesome painting.

Henri Rousseau, *The Dream* (1910) was one of the last paintings he ever painted before he died. The woman in the picture was supposed to represent his

first wife who died of tuberculosis. He painted it very mystical with the jungle and the glowing moon at night. It seemed to make the jungle peaceful and wonderful. When I looked at the painting, I disliked it because it was a bare naked woman. Yet after I found information on it and Henri drew it to represent his wife. I thought it was very touching so I thought about describing it. I liked the jungle and the trees. It seemed so alive.

Henri Rousseau, the naïve artist would always be remembered by his creativity through each of his art. He had brought inspiration to any young artists who intend to be a professional. He didn't attend to an art school yet he was still famous for his art. Art is not why comes from educations or school. It comes from the heart and your creativity.

Citations

- 1) Henri Rousseau, Cornelia Stabenow, Germany, Beate Frosch
Cologne 1994: Page 8
- 2) Henri Rousseau, Cornelia Stabenow, Germany, Beate Frosch
Cologne 1994: Page 94
- 3) Henri Rousseau, Cornelia Stabenow, Germany, Beate Frosch
Cologne 1994: Page 9
- 4) Henri Rousseau, Cornelia Stabenow, Germany, Beate Frosch
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Bibliography

- 1) Cornelia Stabenow. Henri Rousseau. Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, 1994.
- 2) Andrea Mulder-Slater. Henri Rousseau.
<<http://arthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa092501a.htm>>
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