

## Toulouse-Lautrec and the Art of Celebrity: Carpe Diem

**Pin-Ups: Toulouse-Lautrec and the Art of Celebrity at the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2018 to 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019**

Carpe diem might be the watchword for this exhibition. Seize the day, because almost everything featured in Pin-Ups: Toulouse-Lautrec and the Art of Celebrity at the National Gallery in Edinburgh was short-lived – the artist, the period, the stars he celebrated, even the art works themselves.

We all know about Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec – if there is one artist whose life story is inseparable from his art, it's Lautrec. Born in 1864 into an aristocratic family, he suffered from a rare bone disorder. While his torso developed normally, his legs were stunted and brittle, and he stood no more than 4' 6" tall. Physically frail, his family encouraged his artistic talents and in 1882 aged 18, Lautrec travelled to Paris to study art and infamously to discover the sleazy delights of Montmartre. At home in the demi-monde, he became famous for posters that immortalised the celebrities and hit shows of fin de siècle Paris until his louche lifestyle took its toll. Aged just 36, Lautrec died of alcoholism and syphilis.



Charles Maurin (1856–1914) *Portrait of Toulouse Lautrec* Aquatint on paper, 22.4 x 13.6 cm Collection: National Galleries of Scotland, Kenneth Sanderson Bequest 1943

Lautrec's career lasted no longer than the final decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but what a decade this was! On the surface, belle époque Paris was a city of optimism and material wealth. But lurking beneath this was the sense that material wealth leads to decadence, ennui and pessimism, the mood that we now associate with the fin de siècle. And nowhere represented the desire to escape rampant materialism more than Montmartre, home to famous night clubs like the Moulin Rouge and the Divan Japonais, and the celebrities who performed in them, like Yvette Guilbert, Jane Avril and Aristide Bruant, famous at the time but now largely forgotten.

Art followed the mood of the time, finding solace from materialism in the aesthetic, the religious and especially the erotic. What's more, technological advances were making it easier for artists to mass produce their work. Colour lithography in particular allowed larger prints to be made in more eye-catching colours. Impresarios and celebrities alike quickly recognised the commercial potential of these new production methods and the modern advertising industry was born.

Soon Montmartre was covered with posters, advertising the latest shows and building the personal brands of the celebrities in them. So distinctive was Lautrec's work however it stood out and he quickly became famous in his own right. Rather than being plastered over by adverts for the next big show, his posters were instead carefully peeled from the walls and coveted. Many of the posters in this show have torn edges and faded colours; the wonder is that such disposable art survives at all.

The genius of Lautrec though is in distilling this fleeting moment in time into art that still has the power to surprise and thrill us. Take for instance his first poster in the show *Moulin Rouge – La Goulue* (1891). The surprise here is its size, nearly seven feet high and four foot wide. With its bold black outlines, acidic colours and the repetition of the lettering, this poster created a huge impact and brought Lautrec immediate recognition.

Its composition also adds to the impact. 'La Goulue' (aka the Glutton on account of her penchant for guzzling customers' drinks as she passed their tables) takes centre stage, her petticoats swirling as she dances the cancan. In the foreground in silhouette is her partner, 'Valentin le Decosse', nicknamed 'the Boneless' from his contorted style of dancing. But around them, again in outline, are the crowd, standing in a circle that bends round the poster until it includes us, making us feel like we are there, seeing the show even today.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) *Moulin Rouge, La Goulue* (Poster), 1891 Colour lithograph, 182.8 x 115.5cm Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum, London, presented by Mrs. J. T. Clarke © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Lautrec also quickly recognised the power of the individual celebrity and pared down his art almost to the point of caricature so that his famous clients would be instantly recognisable. In *Le Divan Japonais* (1892), Jane Avril the dancer, famous for wearing extravagant hats, is unmistakable in the foreground, while in the upper left corner is Yvette Guilbert. With bright red hair, thin lips and a gaunt physique, she was to become one of the most recognisable of Lautrec's regular clients. And while all we can see in this

poster are her tall frame and signature black arm-length gloves, Lautrec still provides enough visual clues for her to be recognised.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) *Divan Japonais*, 1892 Poster, Colour lithograph, 79.8 x 60.5 Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Lautrec often manipulates perspective in these works by placing the viewer at a low vantage point. In the two posters of Aristide Bruant, the singer looms over us. Dressed as usual in a wide brimmed hat

and oversized black jacket, he cuts a dangerous figure. Renowned for his coarse songs of working-class life, he fills the poster with a menacing presence in keeping with the edgy nature of his act. An unashamed self-promoter, Bruant more than any other celebrity commissioned Lautrec to create a personal brand and to advertise his act.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) *Eldorado... Aristide Bruant dans son Cabaret (Poster)*, 1892; Colour lithograph on paper, 140 x 98.5cm Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum, London © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

And Lautrec plays with perspective again in his last poster in the show, *Troupe de Mlle Églantine* (1896), by placing us at knee height as the diagonal line of dancers perform the cancan above us, out of reach. 'Look but don't touch' seems to be the message. But this poster is proof of the transitory nature of the fame Lautrec depicted. Commissioned for a show in London, the craze for the cancan had already passed its peak. Thought too respectable and genteel, the show received a lukewarm reception. Tastes had already moved on.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) *Troupe de Mlle Églantine (Poster)*, 1896 Colour lithograph, 62 x 80.5cm Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum, London, given by Mrs G. R. Halkett. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The show also includes works by Lautrec's contemporaries like Alphonse Mucha and Jules Chéret, some of which are pleasant surprises. But mainly these works serve to throw into relief the modernity of Lautrec. His life and career may have been short, his art disposable, and the celebrities he created now only names in history books, but his influence has been anything but short-lived. His unique art still defines how we imagine fin de siècle Paris; he recognised the commercial potential of merging high art and advertising; and he paved the way (for good or ill!) for the modern-day cult of the celebrity.

So, if you're in Edinburgh and need a break from the mayhem of the Christmas market, or perhaps a place to spend a quiet morning after the excesses of Hogmanay, visit the National Gallery and pay homage to an artist whose influence still genuinely surrounds us.

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