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Paper #2: **Historical and Cultural Context: Toulouse Lautrec's *Le Jockey***

Introduction

The subject of this paper comes from the Post-Impressionist Movement. Post-Impressionism involved some of the artists from the Impressionist movement, and others who were informed by Impressionism but sought to move beyond it. They took the expressive colors and free brushwork from Impressionism, and added a wider range of subjects and a further abstraction of form, and a desire to create important and lasting works. Post-Impressionism (roughly 1885 to 1905) became a jumping-off point for several later art movements.

Primarily based in France, some of the Post-Impressionist artists included Paul Cézanne (who broke from Impressionism, wanting to create something he called more “solid and durable”), Georges Seurat (originator of pointillism), Paul Gauguin (who worked in Tahiti and Martinique in addition to his native France), Vincent Van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and the imaginative Odilon Redon. These artists often worked alone; they were not as cohesive a group as the earlier Impressionists.

On the Minnesota Institute of Arts exhibition placard, it is explained that:

“[...] they gradually left realism behind. [...] The deeply personal and simplified styles they used to express their unique perceptions often resulted in abstract patterns and flattened scenes, which many people found difficult to appreciate. Their admirers, however, understood that in these difficult new paintings, the artists were revealing their souls.”

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, a French artist known for his depictions of cabaret and nightlife scenes and posters, created the piece described below.

Example

Le Jockey

Color lithograph on chine volant paper, 20 5/16 x 14 3/16 inches

19th Century, 1899

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864-1901).

Accession #2003.214, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

There were 12 prints in the original edition; later there was a run of 100. A print from the latter run recently sold at auction (Christie's) for \$79,000.

Subject

In the foreground, a jockey in white shirt, black cap and tan pants rides a galloping, reddish-brown horse; we see horse and rider from the rear, speeding away from the viewer. Another racehorse and jockey, this one with a pink shirt, is seen further ahead and to the left of the first horse. The setting is suggested rather than fully rendered, but a windmill can be discerned in the background to the upper right.

Form

This two-dimensional print is about 14 x 20 inches, in vertical orientation. An open composition, one can imagine that there is more action just out of the frame; indeed, the horse in the lead is half out of view. Although it is in color, the color is fairly flat and the palette is limited. Areas of color include the grass, horses, and jockey's clothing; the jockey on the left, who appears smaller/is further away, has a pink shirt and red cap. Value and tone is created by means of

black line work (originally pencil), which uses sketchy cross-hatching and bold, almost scribbled lines to capture the action of the scene, and the light and shadow that gives dimension to the horse's muscular form. The repetitive lines used for texture appear to have been applied quickly, adding to the active feeling of the piece. There are two pennant-shaped flags ahead of the riders, barely sketched in, and on the horizon to the right, an old Dutch windmill. Both riders stand in their stirrups, appearing to race at great speed. We even see the upturned bottom of one horse's hooves as they run away. The action appears to happen on a turf track; the foreground is a pale green color, with penciled lines in a pattern to suggest grass. The horizon, darkened by repetitive pencil lines and texture, cuts across the picture about one quarter from the top of the frame.

Content/Interpretation

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, born into an aristocratic family in France, began painting while he was convalescing after suffering two broken legs as a teenager. He had a condition that prevented his bones from healing properly, and his growth was stunted as a result. Finding less acceptance in formal society, Toulouse-Lautrec found kindred spirits in the artistic and nightlife community of Paris. He was popular for his wit and psychologically revealing portraits of performers, prostitutes and artists within the cafés, theaters, cabarets and bordellos of the Paris scene. One of his more famous paintings depicts a scene at the Moulin Rouge. Although he was a prolific artist, Toulouse-Lautrec was an alcoholic. While staying at a psychiatric hospital in 1899, he began work on a series of lithographs with a horse-racing theme. This print, *Le Jockey*, was the only one of the series produced before his death in 1901.

According to the museum description, “As a young artist, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec enjoyed depicting outdoor scenes, especially those with horses. Later in life, he frequented the racetrack at Longchamp in the Bois de Boulogne, in Paris.”

Upon further reading I discovered an earlier work, an oil painting from 1882 called “*The Jockeys*,” which was accompanied by an explanation of the attraction of horses for Toulouse-Lautrec:

“ ‘In our family,’ Toulouse-Lautrec quipped, ‘once baptised, one is in the saddle.’

Lautrec's father was a fanatical-and somewhat idiosyncratic-horseman, falconer, huntsman and racegoer, who intended his only child to follow his example.”

Of course, because of his disability, he could not ride, but he studied painting with René Princeteau, a well-known sporting artist and friend of his father's.

Returning to the subject of horses two years before his death, I can imagine that Toulouse-Lautrec was perhaps recalling his earlier life and reminiscing about time spent at the races.

While he himself was never able to ride, his work nonetheless captures the dynamic command of the horse that the jockey is able to exert. The line work is quick and confident. But the series was never finished; the artist died an alcohol-related death of a stroke in 1901.

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