



## *Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)*

1887–1888

By Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

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# Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

## *Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)* 1887-1888

Oil on Canvas, 100.3 x 161.3 cm (39.5" x 63.5")

Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1925.523

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec enjoyed breaking the rules. When he came across an idea that interested him, he tried it—regardless of whether it was acceptable or not. Toulouse-Lautrec loved life and took inspiration from everything he came across. As a young man, he became interested in the circus and in circus performers, and when a fellow artist showed him how to look at subjects as if they were cut off or “cropped” like a photograph, he took up that idea as well.<sup>1</sup> Painted when he was only 24 years old, *Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)* became one of his most well-known works.

### **Toulouse-Lautrec: Childhood and Training**

As his name implies, Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Montfa was born into a wealthy family on November 24, 1864. As a young child, his parents were aware that his physical development was not normal as he often was ill, his leg bones broke easily, his speech was unclear, and he didn’t grow taller as he aged. Discussing Toulouse-Lautrec’s condition in 1994, biographer Julia Frey calls it congenital (something he was essentially born with) and states, “Although posthumous diagnosis is always risky, experts on endocrine disorders say that Henry was probably suffering from a genetic mishap which caused fragility at the growth end of the bones, hindering normal bone development and causing pain, deformation and weakness in the skeletal structure.”<sup>2</sup> She adds, “As he entered adolescence, Henry’s long bones began to atrophy at the joints where the adolescent growth spurt would typically manifest itself.”<sup>3</sup> His cousins also showed such symptoms, making this a genetic defect within the family. Although both parents loved him dearly, his father was often away from the family pursuing his own interests, such as hunting and horseback riding. His mother was devoted to him, however, and oversaw his medical care. The two were inseparable for most of Henri’s childhood and adolescence.

As Henri often had to lie in bed in order to recover from one of his illnesses or another broken leg, he was given art materials by his uncle Charles, his father’s eldest brother, who encouraged his budding interest in art. During the long hours and many days that Henri had to lie in bed, he had two favorite activities: stamp collecting and making art in the form of sketches and watercolors.<sup>4</sup> When Henri was thirteen, Uncle Charles began to give Henri more formal training and had the boy copy magazine illustrations, prints, or even draw small sculptures.<sup>5</sup>

When Henri was 17 years old, he decided to pursue a career as an artist, not something a young man from an aristocratic family normally chose at that time. His parents, realizing that their son would never be able to have many opportunities that would make him happy, agreed to find him a school that they felt would be appropriate for him. Through his uncle’s contacts, Henri began to frequent the **atelier** of a well-known Parisian artist, René Princeteau, to study with other aspiring art students. This was how Henri was allowed to begin a life of his own in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

About a year later, the Toulouse-Lautrecs moved Henri to the atelier of another Parisian painter, Léon Bonnat, a well-known, but extremely conventional, society painter. The affluent



residents of Paris sought after Bonnat's paintings, and Henri's parents probably switched his studies there for social rather than artistic reasons<sup>7</sup>.

Bonnat was not sympathetic to Henri, but his studio was located in a section of Paris called **Montmartre** and Henri traveled there every day by horse-drawn cab. Montmartre was very different from the neighborhood around the posh hotel in which he lived, and Henri's studies there served as his introduction into a very different kind of world, a world that he quickly came to love. For the first time in his life Henri had the freedom to do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. In Montmartre, Henri met and became friends with fellow students who introduced him to more **avant-garde** artists working in Paris at the time. Henri was fascinated by their work and their lives, and soon lived among them, adopting not only their artistic techniques, but their lifestyle as well.

### Montmartre: The Artist's Quarter

In the 1880's artists began to populate Montmartre because they were looking for cheap places to live and work.<sup>8</sup> Situated on a steep hill that overlooked the city of Paris, the quarter became known not only for its artists and writers and the dance halls and cafés they frequented, but for its more risqué residents such as its prostitutes and thieves. An intoxicating feeling of freedom pervaded the atmosphere and even **bourgeois** residents of Paris came to Montmartre in the evenings to experience a bit of the **Bohemian** life. This lifestyle was quite different from the life of privilege to which Henri was accustomed. While enjoying the freedom life in Montmartre brought him, Henri was always aware of his family's position and initially careful not to mix his two worlds.<sup>9</sup>

Henri himself moved to Montmartre in the fall of 1884 when he was 20 years old. Now he finally lived in the neighborhood in which he had worked (and played) for the past two years. While Henri was serious about his work as an artist, and now studied at Cormon's atelier, he was equally committed to having fun. Costume parties were popular at this time and there are many photographs of Henri and his friends dressed up as Gypsy dancers, or in traditional Japanese or Spanish attire.<sup>10</sup>

Cafés were the centers of life in Montmartre. Artists met there to eat and drink, discuss art, and exhibit their work. Students like Henri could not only meet fellow students, but could be close to revered, older artists such as Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, or Auguste Renoir, each of whom frequented the cafés as well. Toulouse-Lautrec so admired Degas that he would pay homage to him all his life.

One of the most popular café proprietors was the singer and social activist Aristide Bruant. His café, Le Mirliton (which means toy whistle or trivial comic verse)<sup>11</sup>, was a favorite of Henri and his friends. Bruant in turn liked his art and often interrupted his singing when Henri and his entourage arrived, saying, "Silence, Messieurs, here's the great painter Toulouse-Lautrec with a friend..."<sup>12</sup> Nightclubs and dance halls where the popular *quadrille* was performed also were filled with fun-

seeking patrons. The quadrille could be performed by anyone who wanted to dance, and customers especially wanted to see the *chahut* or can-can section in which the women kicked their legs high into the air, revealing their underwear. Some of the most famous quadrille dancers, like La Goulue or Jane Avril, were subsequently immortalized in Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings and posters.

### The Circus Fernando in Montmartre

Circuses were another form of popular entertainment and Paris had three permanent ones. Just as people of all classes frequented the cafés and dance halls of Montmartre, so too did they attend performances at Le Cirque Fernando (the Fernando Circus) which was located in Montmartre near Le Mirliton<sup>13</sup>. Henri, whose father's passion for horses pervaded his childhood, was attracted to the equestrian acts for which this particular circus was known, in addition to its convenient location<sup>14</sup>. He attended rehearsals and, with his burgeoning eye for detail and his keen ability to render objects in motion, captured the essence of watching the bareback rider and her horse being put through their paces in *Equestrienne* (*At the Circus Fernando*), probably painted in 1888. The painting was one of about six works Toulouse-Lautrec painted dealing with circus themes between 1888 and 1891. After falling ill in 1899, he would return to circus themes again, making over 50 drawings from memory of the people and animals he had observed so well<sup>15</sup>.

In *Equestrienne* (*At the Circus Fernando*), the subjects are not glamorous; instead, the artist's tight focus on the ringmaster and rider and her horse in the background captures both their relationship and the sense of their being in motion. The large rump of the horse, its raised hind leg, in addition to the billowing skirt of the rider, suggest that the horse is moving at a fast clip around the ring. Also in the ring are clowns engaged in their own rehearsal, uninvolved with the equestrian duo. A number of well-dressed spectators are present, but perhaps because it is a rehearsal, the performers look at each other and don't seem interested in playing to the audience. The few men in audience, those whose eyes can be seen, aren't looking at the scantily dressed rider, but seem to gaze at some elements of the rehearsal outside of the painting's space.

The close-up view ironically removes the viewer from the spectacular nature of a circus performance and concentrates his or her gaze instead on the details of the performers' interactions. The faces of the rider and ringmaster evoke a complex relationship based on power and on mastering the effort to perform correctly. The artist's tight lens also allows one to notice the garish color of the rider's makeup and costumes as well as the stolid nature of the horse's anatomy, playing against what is usually portrayed as glamorous and exciting.

As a frequent visitor to Le Cirque Fernando, Henri knew the ringmaster he depicted, the *Monsieur Loyal*, but it is thought his friend Suzanne Valadon, a painter and former circus performer, modeled for the figure of the bareback rider<sup>16</sup>. At this time, Valadon was an artist's model and was also the mother

of the young Maurice Utrillo, who would become a well-known French painter of the next generation<sup>17</sup>.

## A Bold Style

One of the artistic techniques that influenced Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec at this stage in his development as an artist was **cloisonnism**, developed by Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin, and used by other artists such as Paul Gauguin. Based on medieval enameling techniques, cloisonnism used heavy outlines to bring out areas of flat colors, creating an appearance similar to stained glass windows<sup>18</sup>. Another influence was Japanese wood block prints that used the same heavy outlining technique. Japanese prints were popular with artists in Paris such as Vincent van Gogh, whom Henri knew at this time. Given Henri's penchant for absorbing new ideas, these techniques, along with cropping the view in order to focus the viewer's gaze, constituted a different way of looking at contemporary Parisian life.

*Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)* was purchased by the owner of a soon-to-be-famous Montmartre nightclub, the **Moulin Rouge**, where it hung in the grand entrance hall beginning in October, 1889<sup>19</sup>. In turn, the painting influenced other artists such as Georges Seurat (*A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*) who painted his own circus picture in 1891.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec continued to paint and to incorporate new ideas into his work. He went on to become one of the most well-known visual chroniclers of Parisian life in the late 1800s. His work in **lithography**, the medium used for his posters which advertised the music halls and cabarets of Montmartre, was truly innovative and made him famous in his own time. Sadly, his health never robust, he was unable to control his alcoholism in addition to his other ailments, and he died at the age of 37 at his mother's house, Malromé, on September 9, 1901.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frey, Julia. *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1994, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Frey, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Frey, p. 71

<sup>4</sup> Frey, p. 75

<sup>5</sup> Frey, p. 79

<sup>6</sup> Frey, p.116

<sup>7</sup> Frey, p.125

<sup>8</sup> Frey, p. 132

<sup>9</sup> Frey, p. 146

<sup>10</sup> Frey, p. 167

<sup>11</sup> Frey, p. 183

<sup>12</sup> Frey, p. 187

<sup>13</sup> Frey, p. 225

<sup>14</sup> Frey, p. 225

<sup>15</sup> Frey, 470.

<sup>16</sup> Thomson, Richard, Cate, P.D., Chapin, M.W. *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre*. Washington DC and Chicago: National Gallery of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, 2005, p. 239.

<sup>17</sup> Frey, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> Frey, p. 238. Druick, Douglas W. and Zegers, P.K. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago and Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2001, p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Frey, p. 260.

# Vocabulary List

**Atelier** The studio of an artist who teaches other artists

**Avant-Garde** A group of people who are stylistically ahead of their time

**Bohemian** Artists who live an unconventional lifestyle

**Bourgeois** A person of the middle class who strives for material well-being and respectability

**Cloisonnism** A painting technique taken from stained glass that outlines areas of color with dark lines in order to make them stand out

**Lithography** A printing technique in which the image is drawn with grease crayon onto a stone. The non-printing areas are protected with gum Arabic to keep them clean. Paper is then laid over the surface of the stone. When printing ink is rolled over the image, the ink only sticks to the greasy areas.

**Montmartre** A neighborhood of north Paris where many artists lived in the late 1800s and early 1900s

**Moulin Rouge** (The Red Mill) Famous nightclub in Montmartre frequented by artists and society people alike beginning in the late 1880s

# Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

## ELEMENTARY LEVEL

### •Cropping

*Illinois Learning Standards: 5A, 5B, 5C*

Students should look through magazines and select some photographs that depict a number of different people engaged in a variety of different activities. Have them cut out a small square or rectangular shape from a piece of plain paper to make a picture frame. Students can then practice cropping the action by placing the frames over various areas of the photographs. How does framing help to focus one's attention on the subject? Could important information be left out as a result?

### •Let's Imagine

*Illinois Learning Standards: 2A, 3A, 3B, 3C*

Let's imagine that we could expand the *Equestrienne* to include the rest of the circus ring and the rest of the audience. Have students draw or paint what else one might see at the Circus Fernando. Using this fuller picture as a starting point, students can then write a short story about an imaginary trip to this circus, incorporating the elements they included in their picture.

### •Using Your Senses

*Illinois Learning Standards: 5A, 5B, 5C*

Circuses provide lots of things to see, but there are lots of other kinds of sensory stimuli as well. By looking at *Equestrienne* (*At the Circus Fernando*), can you discover what someone who is in this picture might hear? What might they smell? What might someone who's watching the rehearsal want to eat? What might it feel like to be sitting in the audience? What might it feel like to be the bareback rider, the ringmaster, or perhaps even one of the clowns? What does circus music sound like? What things has Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec included visually in this painting to engage our other senses? [Also see Circus Smells and Sounds activity].

### •Circus smells and sounds

*Illinois Learning Standards: 18A*

[To support *Using Your Senses* Activity]

Roast peanuts or have students produce some of the aromas one might smell at the circus. (Which aromas would you rather not create?!) Additionally, have students research and record circus music. The group presentations of this activity can then be done in "sense-surround"; that is, accompanied by the sounds and smells of the circus produced by the students.

### •Putting on a Show

*Illinois Learning Standards: 5C, 18A, 18B*

Presentations—whether circuses, plays, films or concerts—require practice. What things might the rider and her horse have practiced with the ringmaster? Practice such as this is called a "rehearsal." Have you ever rehearsed for anything? What did you have to do? Small groups of three or four students might want to rehearse and present a circus "trick" for their classmates. Tricks might include making a pyramid by kneeling on each others' backs, balancing in arabesque (with one leg extended in the air) while holding hands, or any variety of simple acts. In their rehearsals, groups should coordinate and plan their entrances and exits, and how they are going to perform—i.e., in unison, "on the count of three," one after the other, or in any other way.

### •Creating the Circus Environment

*Illinois Learning Standards: 18A*

You will notice that the performers are wearing costumes, or special clothes that someone wears for a show but wouldn't wear in everyday life. Can you think of other entertainers who wear costumes? How do costumes add to the spectacle of a performance?

Use crayons or paints to design your own circus costumes. Students may want to design costumes in groups; one group could design the trapeze artist's costumes and another the lion tamer's, etc. To present the designs, students can make a three-dimensional cardboard circus ring and cardboard cut-outs of circus performers who will then wear the costumes.

## SECONDARY LEVEL

### •Cropping/Expanding the View

*Illinois Learning Standards: 5C*

Toulouse-Lautrec purposely focuses our gaze on just a portion of the circus rehearsal. Note the many places where he cuts off our view. If you were to fill out those places, what would you add? In photography, this would be called a "tight shot." What do you notice as a result of this tight shot that might otherwise be lost in the spectacle of a circus performance? Paint or draw what else one might see if the view could be expanded.

## •Color and Line

*Illinois Learning Standards: 25A*

Artists use painting basics, such as color and line, in many different ways. In *Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)*, Toulouse-Lautrec uses wide, narrow, straight, and curving lines to create paths for our eyes. Color, too, contributes to the ways in which we give our attention to various parts of a painting. How does Toulouse-Lautrec use lines and color in order to get our attention, allow us to follow the action, and contribute to our interpretation of this painting?

## •Countering Expectations

*Illinois Learning Standards: 5A, 18A, 18B*

Have you ever been to see a circus or have you seen one on TV? What do you remember about the performances? What things has Toulouse-Lautrec done to de-glamorize or go against our usual expectations of what a spectacle might look like? Why do you think he might have wanted to do these things?

## •Structure and Form

*Illinois Learning Standards: 25A, 26A, 26B*

Artists often use models to pose for them so that they can draw or paint the human form to their satisfaction. Suzanne Valadon was the model for Toulouse-Lautrec's bareback rider. What parts of her form do you think the artist wanted to be sure he got just right? Have a friend pose for you and draw, using pencil or charcoal, their posed form. What elements of their pose do you want to try to capture? Describe why, as an artist, these elements are important to you.

## •Impressionists

*Illinois Learning Standards: 5A, 5B, 25A*

Toulouse-Lautrec lived in a time during which great changes took place in art. The Impressionists—artists of the generation just before his—looked very closely at the world, at the light that allows one to see it, and tried to break down that light into its component colors. Toulouse-Lautrec and fellow artists like Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin absorbed the Impressionists' lessons about light and color, but used them in new and very different ways.

- Research the scientific properties of light, including the colors of the visual spectrum. Study the effect that elements such as dispersion, wavelength, and color perception by the brain have upon the appearance of color.
- Look very carefully at the bareback rider's skirt, the back of the ringmaster's coat, or even the legs of the horse. Note how Toulouse-Lautrec uses many different colors in a small area to convey subtle changes in light. Can you use the principles of color theory from above to explain why the artist incorporated these colors? Try this technique yourself: in a drawing or painting, use changes in colors to show light and shadow.

*Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)*, 1887–1888, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

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