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Depictions of Power: Henri de Toulouse Lautrec and the Montmartre Performer

Independent Study: Henri de Toulouse Lautrec and Montmartre

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Renowned draftsman, printmaker, and painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is made most famous by his depictions of performers. Female dancers, sex workers, and circus performers dominate many of his most well-known works. With their stereotypically low social class, sexualized performances, bare outfits, and attention gained from members of the opposite sex, it is sometimes easy to place female performers such these in the role of a powerless victim of commodification. Lautrec, however, through his dynamic depictions of these sexualized performances, subverts this notion and instead depicts these women as celebrities in power of their situation and surroundings.

Throughout his tragically short but prolific artistic life, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was fascinated with the art of dance. Born with an unknown genetic defect traditionally attributed to inbreeding, Lautrec suffered from weak bone strength, stunted growth, and extreme difficult mobility his entire life. Despite this disability, Lautrec always found himself drawn to the art of movement. First, of the horses at his aristocratic family's country estate and then of the performers that populated the Opera, café-concerts, dance halls, and circuses of Paris.<sup>1</sup>

In early adulthood, Lautrec found himself drawn to the bohemian world of the emerging Montmartre, Paris. Set upon a hill, and removed from the city center, Montmartre had an identity separate from that of the more conservative central Paris.<sup>2</sup> Montmartre's dance halls, cabarets, café-concerts, brothels, and circuses created a racy, uncensored atmosphere that attracted working-class residents of the district, as well as thrill-seeking bourgeois patrons from central Paris and beyond. The neighborhood appealed to artists of all types, Lautrec included. For these

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Weaver Chapin, "Public Lives and Private Performances: The Dancers of Toulouse-Lautrec" in *Degas, Forain, and Toulouse-Lautrec: The Dancer*, ed. Annette Dixon (Portland: Portland Art Museum, 2005), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Thomson, "Introducing Montmartre," *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 65.

artists, the vibrant culture of Montmartre, with its unrestrained energy, tawdry behavior, garish colors, and provocative celebrities, was both a way to live and a subject to depict. Lautrec immersed himself in this exciting culture, painting and drawing by day and attending the cafés and cabarets by night.

Early in his artistic career, he imitated his favorite artists, Edgar Degas and Jean-Louis Forain, but he soon developed a style distinctly his own. As a frequent visitor to the Montmartre café-concerts and dance halls, Lautrec was familiar with proprietors, dancers, and visitors who frequented the establishments.<sup>3</sup> Where Degas and Forain took a much more distant approach to the depictions of their dancers, Lautrec was well acquainted with his inspirations and models, portraying a much more personal image with personalities and characteristics distinct to each of his dancers.<sup>4</sup>

Lautrec's most popular and recognizable images are those of performers. The women that made up Lautrec's depictions of performers and whom he helped propel to stardom were real life Montmartre performers. Lautrec developed fascinations or near obsessions with a number of these women including Louise Weber, Jane Avril, Cha-U-Kao, and Loie Fuller. Lautrec's *furias*, as he called them, were temporary obsession with an idea, individual, place, or technique. He felt the need to repeat the same types of gestures over and over and devoted nearly all of his time and attention to one performer and location.<sup>5</sup> One of these *furias* early on his career was with the Montmartre cabaret dancer Louise Weber, known as La Goulue, and her partner Jacques Renaudin, known by his stage name, Valentin le Dessosé. Lautrec followed this duo from dance hall to dance hall until they found their home at newly opened Moulin Rouge.

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<sup>3</sup> Chapin, "Public Lives and Private Performances", 137.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), 243.

Lautrec's intense engagement with dance accelerated with the opening of the Moulin Rouge in 1889. The Belle Époque was a period of peace and optimism marked by industrial progress, and a particularly rich cultural exuberance was in the air at the opening of the Moulin Rouge. Montmartre, which, at the heart of an increasingly vast and impersonal Paris, managed to retain a bucolic village atmosphere; festivities and artists mixed, with pleasure and beauty as their values. On 6 October 1889, the Moulin Rouge opened in the Jardin de Paris, at the foot of the Montmartre hill.<sup>6</sup> The Moulin Rouge changed the geographic face of Montmartre. Its address of 90 Boulevard de Clichy had before now been considered the outskirts of Montmartre nightclub district, but the Moulin Rouge became the center of Montmartre's night life. Its location of midway between the working class and bourgeoisie neighborhoods proved to be advantageous to the mix of social classes that made up its customers.<sup>7</sup> It was flashy, glittering, and the revolving red vanes of its fake windmill outlined with lights acted as the area's landmark. Its creator Joseph Oller and his Manager Charles Zidler were knowledgeable businessmen who greatly understood the tastes of the public at the time. Everything at the Moulin Rouge was to excess. Brilliantly lit with both gas and electric lights there were also footlights on stage. The orchestras boomed through each dancing and performance area with heavy brass instruments. Zidler incorporated a large wood and paper maché elephant in the garden that he had acquired from the recently closed 1889 Exposition Universelle.<sup>8</sup> The side of the animal opened up to hold a small elevated stage and orchestra. A group of small tame monkeys roamed around the premises, and it housed belly dancers, a shooting gallery, and a fortune-teller. Workers, residents of the Place Blanche, artists, the middle classes, businessmen, elegant women and foreigners

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Frey, *A Life*, 261.

passing through Paris rubbed shoulders. Oller and Zidler's, the cabaret quickly became a great success.

Early French poster maker, Jules Chéret was commissioned to create the first advertisement poster for the popular café-concert the Moulin Rouge in 1889.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of any discussion of Belle Époque posters, is Jules Chéret. Emerging nearly a decade earlier than most of the other well-known Belle Époque poster makers, he is rightly given the title of the “Father of the Modern French Poster”.<sup>10</sup> French lithographer, poster designer, and painter, Chéret received formal training at the Ecole Nationale de Dessin in Paris. After gaining his first lithographic apprenticeship at the age of 13, Chéret eventually established a commercial color lithographic shop in Paris in 1866.<sup>11</sup> At this time, lithography was limited to only one or two colors until 1869 when Chéret introduced a new system of printing from three stones: black, red, and the third with a graduated background. Chéret's new process became the basis of all color lithographic posters throughout the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his career, Chéret created over a thousand poster designs for performances, theaters, dancehalls, exhibitions, journals and books.

Chéret's lithograph, *Bal du Moulin Rouge*, depicts the exterior of the establishment and consists of a group of smiling, unnamed girls in revealing clothing riding donkeys. Much like his depiction of Guilbert, instead of capturing a moment, Chéret captures the atmosphere of the Moulin Rouge, symbolizing the promise of the establishment with a collection of tempting maidens.

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<sup>9</sup> Ebria Feinblatt and Bruce Davis, *Toulouse-Lautrec and His Contemporaries: Posters of the Belle Époque* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Feinblatt and Davis, *Toulouse-Lautrec and His Contemporaries*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Turner, ed. *The Grove Dictionary of Art* (New York: St. Martins, 1996), 549.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Two years after the Chéret's lithograph was printed, Toulouse-Lautrec was also commissioned to create a poster for the same dance hall.<sup>13</sup> *La Goulue, Moulin Rouge* is the largest of all Lautrec's posters, with its characters depicted as nearly life-size. There can hardly be a bigger contrast between images as those between Chéret's and Lautrec's posters for the Moulin Rouge. Whereas Chéret depicted a promising illusion of the establishment, Lautrec placed all of the importance and focus onto the star of the dance hall, La Goulue.

The undisputed star of the Moulin Rouge was Louise Weber, known as La Goulue (The Glutton). After dancing as a teenager she arrived at the Moulin Rouge already known as the "queen of the quadrille," and she quickly became the star of the show. Known for her vulgar charisma, she was described by art critic Gustave Coquiot "a strange girl with an ugly face, rapacious look, a grim mouth and hard eyes," while another wrote that she had "the face of a strong-willed, dirty-minded baby and a brash provocative stare".<sup>14</sup> La Goulue's vulgarity, heightened sexuality, dangerous high kick, and habit of occasionally "forgetting" to wear underwear commanded the public's attention and made her the star she was.<sup>15</sup>

*La Goulue, Moulin Rouge* can serve as the embodiment of Montmartre. La Goulue, Moulin Rouge depicts Louise Weber, La Goulue, and her dancing partner Valentin le Dessosse, or Valentin the Boneless, made famous by his slender frame and slinky rubber like contortions. While Valentin is clearly the central figure in the foreground, La Goulue is the dominant figure in the composition.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Chapin, "Public Lives and Private Performances", 144.

<sup>15</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Toulouse-Lautrec and the Culture of Celebrity," in *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre* ed. Richard Thomson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 53

The image is highly sexualized (especially that of La Goulue), commenting on the sexual nature that pervaded the Montmartre culture and especially the Moulin Rouge. La Goulue dominates the center of the composition, one leg raised in the provocative high kick of the cancan. Her whirling petticoats (and specifically her sex) are the focus of attention. This attention to her sex is even more pronounced in Lautrec's preparatory drawing for the piece with heavy line of white emanating from the central focal point. La Goulue's frame is somewhat stocky, her left leg seems painfully bowed, and her posture is slouched; she is anything but the picture of perfection. Her form is highly sexualized but not what one would today call "sexy". She is in full color with a red blouse, white petticoats, and bright yellow hair. The only other elements to share this kind of full coloring are her inanimate surroundings, not individuals. Valentin wears monochromatic colors while the audience is nothing but a black silhouette. The only other forms that have the same kind of bright coloring are the objects of Moulin Rouge itself and the text labeling the establishment. The stage, surrounding walls, and some text are brightly colored. Through This use of color, Lautrec states that La Goulue *is* The Moulin Rouge just as much as the stage, lights, and name; her performance and celebrity makes the establishment what it is.

While La Goulue is clearly the focal point of the composition, her partner Valentin is still dominant in the foreground. His monochromatic coloring keeps him from competing with La Goulue and gives her the upper hand, placing her in great importance. His positioning on the poster causes him to become an obstacle that the viewer must look around. The viewer almost feels compelled to move their bodies to the left to see around him and look at La Goulue, showing just how much drawing power she has over us. He leans back slightly suggesting that he is leaning away from La Goulue's dangerous high kick, making a visual reference to La

Goulue's habit of kicking the top hats off of men in the audience.<sup>16</sup> Valentine's impassive expression imply indifference to his partner, but the sharp angles of his nose, chin, and left hand all lead the viewer's eye to La Goulue's sex. The positioning of his right hand around the groin suggests a kind of sexual arousal. Valentin is forced to succumb to La Goulue both with his posture and sexual stimulation.

The audience watching La Goulue and Valentin are not even given full forms. They are nothing but a stark black solid silhouette; completely nameless and unimportant. They stand in the background, at the Moulin Rouge for one thing, to see La Goulue perform her famous *chahut*, a highly eroticized version of the cancan. Everyone is enthralled with La Goulue's performance from her partner, to the audience, and us as the viewer. The power is in her hands.

Toulouse-Lautrec's images serves as a great contrast to Chéret's 1889 poster advertisement for the same establishment, Instead of the exterior, Lautrec drew the interior of the Moulin Rouge. In contrast to Cheret's thin delicate lines, Lautrec placed emphasis on masses of color creating a heavier picture. Laturec's image depicts Louise Weber as La Goulue, and her dance partner, Valentin le Dessosé, and is thus rooted in reality, unlike Cheret's illusion.

It is this stark difference between reality and illusion that gives the depicted females power. When the performers are shown as ethereal and otherworldly, they seem unattainable and unreal; like the unearthly apparition like forms are not achievable by mortal women. By basing his depictions off of easily recognizable real performers and placing them in actual locations and situations, Lautrec gives them the power. This power is not given to unearthly apparitions, but to

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<sup>16</sup> Chapin, "Toulouse-Lautrec and the Culture of Celebrity," 53.

real life imperfect individuals. While Chéret gave the establishment the power and intrigue, Lautrec gave it to his models.

Through his depictions of performers, Toulouse-Lautrec showcases and fairly newly developed depiction of dancers begun by one of his idols, Edgar Degas. According to scholar Tamar Garb, the mid-late 1870's saw the introduction of new depictions of dancers.<sup>17</sup> These dancers had traditionally been depicted as synchronized perfection and idealized beauty, an ethereal otherworldly blur, with little detail given to the body or face.<sup>18</sup> One artist to actively challenge this traditional depiction of the dancer was Edgar Degas through his representations of ballerinas. In these new depictions, the dancers were shown as more than an unearthly goddess and instead shown as the performers they were. By being accompanied by the men who framed their existence (musicians, patrons, customers, and teachers), the dancers were seen as a part of their environment instead of as an ethereal illusion.<sup>19</sup>

An example of this change in depiction of dancer can be seen by looking at a comparison of two works, one by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and one by Edgar Degas. Renoir's, *The Dancer* (1874), depicts a young angelic ballerina placed in the center of an unidentified setting with little to no definition of space. The young girl is in full makeup wearing a blue and white tutu, white stockings, and pink slippers. The pose of her twisted torso, straining neck, and feet in fourth position with one leg extended in front of the other, looks very posed and slightly uncomfortable. The artist glosses over setting and social identity and instead creates a floating young dancer or as Garb states, "a kind of fairy molded in earthly forms".<sup>20</sup> Degas' *Dancer in her Dressing Room*

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<sup>17</sup> Tamar Garb, *The Body in Time: Figures of Fertility in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>20</sup> Garb, *The Body in Time*, 11.

(1879), on the other hand is situated 'behind the scenes'. Whereas Renoir gives the viewer a sublet and gentle mix of colors as a background, Degas places his dancer in a contextual setting. This depiction shows the same kind of subject, a young ballerina in full makeup and dress. However Degas' depiction gives the viewer something that Renoir's does not. We see her in the process of transforming from a young girl into the object of public fascination. Standing in front of an unseen mirror, she is in the middle of creating the angelic image of a ballerina that the public had come to love. The dramatic contrast in her heavily powdered and pallid face with her highly saturated rouged lips highlights the theatrical makeup the dancer wears for her performance, enhancing the notion that the young girl is not in her natural form. Clothes are strewn about the room as the girl hastily pins up her hair for the performance. This is no floating, otherworldly goddess, but a young girl in a messy room creating a façade.<sup>21</sup>

By placing his dancers within the context of their performance and exhibiting them not as unearthly goddesses but as mortal actors playing a part, Degas completely alters the way in which the dancer is viewed. By taking away a bit of the mystery surrounding the enigmatic dancer, Degas is giving credit and power to the young girls dancing instead of holding a kind of dancing spirit up to higher regard.

While separated by some years Edgar Degas was one of Toulouse Lautrec's favorite artists and earliest and biggest inspirations. Degas is known to have been a primary visual influence on Lautrec's work; he went so far as to blatantly copy his subjects and techniques. Known for his reclusive disposition and harsh criticisms of other artists, Degas never showed any particular interest in returning a young Lautrec's affections. Nonetheless, Lautrec followed

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

in his idols footsteps with his interpretations of dancers.<sup>22</sup> Lautrec, like Degas, also placed his performers in the context in which they are viewed and which makes them famous. One can again see the dramatic changes that occur by placing performers in context by looking at another comparison of two works, this time by Toulouse-Lautrec himself and Jules Chéret.

Cheret's poster *Yvette Guilbert au Concert Parisien* (1891) relates well to the ethereal depictions of dancers mentioned above. The subject of the poster, popular Montmartre dancer Yvette Guilbert, floats around the poster surrounded by nothing but masses of color. Wearing a revealing brightly colored red dress and high black gloves, Guilbert stares at the viewer out of the corner of her eye, on the profile of her face visible. Large, heavy text takes up one-third of the upper poster, with her name written in bright yellow. Her figure is not grounded or shown in any kind of context besides the text and her heavily painted face and dress marking her as some kind of performer, but what kind the audience does not know. As was common to advertisement techniques of the time, the poster was meant to be more informative than engaging.

In contrast to Chéret's impersonal poster, Lautrec's image of popular dancer Jane Avril does put the subject in the context of her performance. *Jane Avril at the Jardin de Paris* (1893) depicts Jane Avril of the Moulin Rouge mid-high kick. Her brightly colored dress and overflowing skirts draw the attention of the viewer while the neck of the double-bass twists around the poster to create a frame for the stage.<sup>23</sup> The addition of the wooden stage, musician and musical notes place Avril in a realistic setting. While Chéret created an imagined abstraction, Lautrec created a composition framed in realism.

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<sup>22</sup> Frey, *A Life*, 180.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Ireson, Ed. *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril: Beyond the Moulin Rouge* (London: Courtauld Gallery in Association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011), 83.

The most prominent part of Lautrec's images are his models, Montmartre performers. According to scholar Susan Waller, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw many changes the artist's model. Because of the general consensus of the ideal physical form as male and attempts to maintain the morality of young male art students, female models were banned from academic instruction prior to 1863.<sup>24</sup> Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when female models were allowed, models began to overrun their demand, their wages for the work dropped dramatically, and the job of artist model moved to the fringes of society with the working class. Many of these new models, much like Lautrec's inspirations, came from a theatrical performance background. As the background of the models changed, so did the viewer's perception of the figure. While at the salon the visiting public viewed the models through the lens of bourgeoisie morality, these new models however came from a social milieu in which common-law marriages were acceptable and pre-marital chastity deemed unnecessary.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, it is important to stress here that, in addition to being well-known performers in Montmartre, a number of Toulouse-Lautrec's subjects were also sex workers. Prostitution was not illegal in 19<sup>th</sup> century France; instead the women were subject to strict regulations and surveillance.<sup>26</sup> One lead chief theorist of the system of prostitute regulation in the nineteenth-century, Dr. Alexandre- Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet stated, "Prostitutes are as inevitable in an agglomeration of men as sewers, cesspits, and garbage dumps."<sup>27</sup> While prostitution was not necessarily encouraged in nineteenth-century Paris, it was seen as a necessary evil. Men needed their sexual needs met. Society, not willing to allow the young and pure ladies of the upper class

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<sup>24</sup> Patricia Mainardi, Review of *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830–1870* by Susan Waller *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (March 2008), 156.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4.

to acquiesce to those men's desires, made necessary compromises with the willing lower-class sex workers.<sup>28</sup>

Dance halls like the Moulin Rouge did not directly advertise prostitution, but it always went without saying that they profited from the business. Parisian dance halls greatly profited off of the black economy of prostitution with their performers working doubly as dancers and sex workers.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, the parading of the performers during their dance numbers served both as a choreographed routine, and as a way for the clientele to see who was available for hire later that evening.<sup>30</sup>

Parisian laws at the time called for strictly regulated prostitution. The brothel system was centered on the registered prostitute (*fille soumise*) who was tied to her establishment, worked for a madam, and was made to submit to routine medical checks to prevent the further spread of sexually transmitted disease that were running rampant at the time.<sup>31</sup> However, many sex workers soon posed a threat to this by working as *filles insoumises*, who worked unregulated at establishments like the Moulin Rouge or out on the streets.<sup>32</sup> This completely destroyed conservative Parisians hope that prostitution could remain a regulated and "safe" environment.

Scholar Charles Bernheimer alludes to the fear unregulated prostitution brought with it, calling it a "fantasmatic threat to male mastery." These women were selling their bodies and being commodified, but still held a distinct power over the diverse men who sought them. The men were lustful, sex-driven, and were at the mercy of willing sex workers. This heady

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Thomson, "Maisons Closes," in *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre*, ed. Richard Thomson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 205.

<sup>29</sup> *Toulouse Lautrec and Montmartre*, 112

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

combination of fear and power is somewhat easily understandable when one looks at the power of Lautrec's depictions of performers have over us as the viewer and the audience of his posters.

The notion of power in the hands of female performers is shown in Toulouse Lautrec's other print *Englishman at the Moulin Rouge*, an image of an older man seemingly attempting to acquire one of the two female figures for sex. This print, unlike *La Goulue, Moulin Rouge*, was not meant for advertisement but was one of many prints Lautrec created to sell. This creation of images of lower-class entertainers and prostitutes indicates the power of the Montmartre limelight and the changing climate of celebrity culture. These women had such a drawing power that not only did the public go out to see them perform, but they purchased images (oil paintings, prints, posters, and photographs) of them to hang in their homes.<sup>33</sup>

The model for *The Englishman* was William Tom Warren, a painter from an intellectual family who moved to Montmartre in the late 1890s where he met Lautrec.<sup>34</sup> Although Warren's figure is located in the foreground and imposing, his importance compared to the two women is greatly diminished by his monochromatic coloring and their perspective demeanors. On a fairly simple level, the male figure is outnumbered two to one. The two groups are also divided by their figural makeup and color composition. The male figure is outlined all around with a dark navy. His entire form is made up of one single dull heavy color of reddish brown. His figure is one-dimensional but his features are fully defined. This monochromatic coloring is directly opposed by that of the two females who do not possess the same coloring of the male. The viewer sees their pale white skin, colorful dresses, and strikingly colored hair, and they are put into a more powerful position than the male because of their strikingly vibrant color.

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<sup>33</sup> Chapin, "Toulouse-Lautrec and the Culture of Celebrity," 56.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Thomson, "Dance Halls," in *Toulouse Lautrec and Montmartre* ed. Richard Thomson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 110.

This monochromatic coloring eludes the idea that this man is simply “one of many” that the women have received propositions from; and is nothing of great importance. His appearance and personality hold no kind of power over the women who are clearly not impressed by his advances.

Some scholars believe the two female figures to be La Goulue and La Mome Fromage, although this is not certain.<sup>35</sup> If those in fact are the figures, it adds to the paradox of the situation. The Englishman is proposition two of the star dancers of the sexually promiscuous *chahut* who are, ironically, not interested in male attention.

The depictions of the two women’s clothes also play into their power dynamic. Both of their dresses are made of brighter, more vibrant color and different from their male companions in that instead of possessing what seems to be a solid wash of color, their dresses are made up of distinct ink splatters. This technique of splattering was a favorite of Lautrec’s and can be found in many of his works. The Englishman is actually composed of these splatters as well, but they are much more muted and uniform, making them hard to determine. This stark contrast in color formation gives the female a much more powerful compositional make up than the male, giving them more strength. At the same time, the splattering also veils the women in a sense of mystery. What we see is a facade. While the male is wholly present and obvious, the women are enigmatic and elusive.

The Englishman’s facial expressions seem somewhat pleading and silly. With smirking lips, forward shooting chin, and eyes pictured as nearly slits, he seems to be attempting to seduce and not succeeding; his expressions and demeanor only leave him looking self-important and ridiculous.

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<sup>35</sup> Chapin, “Public Lives and Private Performances”, 149.

The reactions and figures of the women directly oppose the gentlemen's desperate and pathetic attempts. While the gentleman seems eager, the women are anything but. Their facial expressions represent contempt and malice toward the Englishman. The back figure wears a rather terrifying facial expression: her eyes slanted slits with dark furrowed eyebrows. She is looking directly at us in a manner that is almost predatory. A strange redness circles her eyes and she wears a menacing smile. The man is unaware, unsuspecting of her position and her ability; like she could strike at any moment and he would be far too busy to protect himself. Her companion is less visible but she seems to have the same demeanor. The Englishman imposes on her personal space and she leans back slightly away from him. This however does not seem to be a submissive movement or made out of fear, but she is instead keeping a distance as chosen by herself. The top of her shoulders and back are arched high, somewhat resembling a hissing cat; like she too could pounce at any moment. Again, the male is so preoccupied with his excitement with the two figures that he has no idea what seeming danger he is in.

Carefully chosen details like small black accents throughout the ladies forms and the spatter technique used on their dress unify these women and in a way turn their figures into one form; both going against the somewhat pathetic, isolated, and lonely male figure.

This isolated and somewhat tormented male figure can be found in another one of Toulouse-Lautrec's works, *Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)* (1887-1888). This large oil on canvas measures nearly 3.5 feet across and depicts a circus scene. Another great spectacle of nineteenth-century France, the circus amused spectators of all ages with poised gymnasts, acrobats, trained animals, clowns, and slapstick comedy.<sup>36</sup> Toulouse-Lautrec always had a deep love for the circus, going back to his love of horses at his family's country estate. Like Toulouse-

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Thomson, "The Circus," *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 237.

Lautrec's favorite dance hall haunts, the circus also had a pervading sexual current.

Contemporary literature of the time touched on the erotic nature of the relationship between the bareback rider and her horse. Hughes Le Roux, who published an exhaustive account of the circus in 1889 wrote, "It's through love of those little hands that pat their necks that the stallions put all their energy into leaps that wear them out; it's because of love that they debase themselves, that they kneel."<sup>37</sup>

*Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando (1887-1888)* deals with the erotic nature of the bareback rider. The composition is dominated by the interplay between the large and attemptively authoritative ringmaster, and the bareback rider on her stallion galloping around the circus tent.

The rider is believed to be dancer, circus performer, and aspiring artist, Suzanne Valadon. The most prominent part of Valadon's figure is her heavily painted face. Heavy handed and thick brushstrokes of saturated white make up her skin, a bright ruby red creates lips, dark rouge strikingly cover her cheeks, and dark navy line her eyes. This heavy theatrical makeup makes it clear that Valadon is just that...a theatrical performer; this is a painted façade. Her brightly colored and sparking clothes are impossible to miss and also play into the theatricality of her figure. From afar she would seem beautiful, but up close the figure looks almost disturbing. Every feature and facial movement is so exaggerated and heavily painted that it is somewhat off-putting. Much of her lower body is exposed with her glittered skirt rising above her thigh. Valadon's posture and body exposure suggests sexuality, but her somewhat long, gangly, and undefined legs lack that same sexuality. The exposure of her body and makeup on her face suggest the idea of sexuality for the entire form, but after close inspection of the individual characteristic, some of that sexuality is gone. Valadon knows what she is exposing and how she

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 239.

is exposing it. Everything about her figure is a facade: the makeup, the glittery outfit, her carefully positioned uprisings skirt.

This idea of Valadon as a facade plays well into Lautrec's depiction of her as in power. Some viewers might find it easy to state that in any situation such as this (performer and spectator) that the performer is in a lesser power position, and that by being a spectacle is losing control over his or her body. The body becomes a commodity – the performer's very being becomes a commodity and spectacle. However, by the use of the facade Valadon's portrayed persona is not actually herself; she is heavily painted, overly dressed, and overly sexualized. By taking her sexuality and body to the point that she does (kind of 'playing the game') she becomes the one with the power. She is playing into the hands of the spectator and is in full control of what she is showing and exuding, therefore the spectators lose all power even though they might not necessarily realize this.

The focus of the work seems to be the intense and silent interaction between Valadon and the ringmaster. Her undeniable smirk and playful eyes suggest that she is taunting him and fully enjoying it, while his look of contempt and annoyance suggests that the taunting is working. The dominant power in this relationship, while one might first assume would be the ringmaster, seems to clearly lie with Valadon. His large frame, location in the circus ring, whip, and very title of "master" all lead the viewer to first feel that he is holding the power, however all of this falls short. The male figure's frame is large but not in a sense that typically demands respect (tall, broad shoulders, muscular). He is instead overweight, dumpy, and easily laughed at. While he is located at the center of the ring, Valadon circles around him on the horse, taunting him, almost as if she is playing a game of "keep away", just always out of reach. Valadon is elevated on the horse, and has the speed and moving ability. The whip, while at first thought one

would think this to be an undeniable power token. However the depiction of this particular whip leaves room for question. It is extended forward toward the moving horse, like it has just been cracked. However, the tail of the whip is not taut and ‘stinging’ but instead curled up and flaccid (fairly blatant sexual innuendo here). This whip and its lack of power questions his very manhood. Based on the horse’s expression and body language, he is fearful of the whip. His head is down turned and slightly turned towards the viewer, his eyes downcast in a look of coyness or submission.

Valadon’s power over the ringmaster is strengthened by the composition of the piece. Valadon is supported not only by the figure of the horse, but she is supported figuratively by a full range of colors and forms behind her in the piece. Her figure is surrounded by color and form while the ringmaster is left isolated by stark whiteness of the ring. He has little to no figures or forms surrounding him. While there are few spectators in the image, the ones that are present are in the area around Valadon. They are not there to see a male ringmaster. They are there for show put on by Valadon and other female performers. Much like La Goulue, Valadon is the show, not the ringmaster. She is in control both of the horse, the spectacle, and her ringmaster.

Valadon has created herself in a way that she both holds the attention and the upper hand in her current situation, whether it be with the ringmaster or the few spectators.

Through his intense *furias* with performers and locations, Toulouse-Lautrec made stunningly complex, entrancing, beautiful, and disturbing images of Montmartre nightlife and the women who embodied it. Louise Weber, Jane Avril, Suzanne Valadon, and countless others like them catered to the sexual desires of their clientele, whether it be through the actual act of sexual intercourse or the sexually charged *chahut*. While these women could somewhat easily be viewed as commodified victims of a class-driven society, these performers were anything but.

Toulouse-Lautrec arrived in Montmartre at the height of the lust for the celebrity. Something that was once reserved for rulers, politicians, and great men, the title of celebrity could now be attributed to entertainers, dancers, courtesans, writers, and artists. Through his keen observations, a fascination with larger-than-life personalities, and a great understanding of the new rules of celebrity, Lautrec placed his depicted women in a position of power that helped to promote them as individual stars and propel their careers.

Through images such as *Jane Avril at the Jardin de Paris*, *La Goulue*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Englishman at the Moulin Rouge*, and *Equestrienne (At the Circus Fernando)*, and many others Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec placed a special focus on the female performer. The focus of the composition was no longer on the idea of dancer as an otherworldly goddess, not attainable on earth, but on a flesh and blood performer with personality and distinctive characteristics. While the women Lautrec depicted were performers trying to please a certain kind of clientele, the power in relationship between these women and their potential sexual partners is very much in the hands of women.

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