

Henri ROUSSEAU

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No. 5

HENRI ROUSSEAU
(Selected Chronology)

- 1844 Birth of Henri Julien Felix Rousseau, son of a Laval tinsmith, on May 21.
- 1849 Enters school. A mediocre student, both in primary school and later at the "lycée" in Laval, he is nevertheless runner-up for prizes in music and drawing; his childhood is spent in the atmosphere of a modest provincial bourgeois family.
- 1851 His father declares legal bankruptcy. The family moves several times and settles in Angers in 1861.
- 1863 Exempted from military service, Rousseau begins work in the office of an attorney-at-law; appropriates a very small sum of money and therefore enlists for seven years in the Fifty-first Infantry Regiment. His military dossier contains the following data: "Height, 1.65 m. (5'4"), oval face, high forehead, black eyes, average nose, average mouth, rounded chin, dark auburn hair and eyebrows, cut on left ear."
- 1867 At barracks in Angers, hears the reminiscences of some soldiers who had taken part in the ill-fated Mexican expedition installing Austrian Archduke Maximilian I as Emperor of Mexico. He later gives the impression that he had himself participated in it.
- 1868 Upon his father's demise applies for and is granted a discharge from the military. Moves to Paris. He meets Clémence Boitard, whom he marries the following year and with whom he has seven children. Only two of them survive, a son, who dies at eighteen years of age, and Julia Clémence, whose daughter is Rousseau's only descendant. He finds a job as a bailiff's clerk.

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- 1869 After beginning of Franco-Prussian War, Rousseau is recalled by the army, but is again discharged as the sole support of his widowed mother.
- 1871 He is employed by the Octroi, the toll-collecting service of Paris. Date of début as painter is unclear. In 1907, he will state: "My superiors in the Octroi gave me an easier shift so that I could work more easily."
- 1884 Rousseau applies for and obtains copyist's permit for the Louvre, Luxembourg, and Versailles museums. He moves frequently: for a time, at 135, rue de Sévres, he is a neighbor of painter F.A. Clément, whose talent he admires.
- 1885 In Rousseau's book of press clippings a handwritten note mentions his being represented in the Salon of 1885 with two paintings: Italian Dance and Sunset: "one was slashed with a penknife, and then they cheated me out of a payment, which made me have to show it again at the Réfusé (Rejected) group show that was held in June"; there is no other evidence that he actually showed at the Salon. The first unfavorable criticisms appeared in "L'Événement."
- 1886 Rousseau submits four works (among them A Carnival Evening) to second Salon des Artistes Indépendants. Seurat's Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte hangs in the same Salon. With the exception of the years 1899 and 1900, Rousseau shows at the Salon des Indépendants every year, considering it "the finest society and the most legal, since everyone in it has the same rights."
- Although the butt of laughter and mockery on the part of public and critics, Rousseau nevertheless at this period begins to benefit from a few favorable reviews in "Le Mot d'ordre."
- Death of his wife, Clémence.
- 1889 Opening (May) of the World's Fair: Rousseau writes a three-act vaudeville play, A Visit to the 1889 Fair (Une visite à l'Exposition de 1889), which is rejected by Châtelet Theater. Many canvases testify to his fascination with the Fair.
- 1891 At the seventh Salon des Indépendants, which includes a Van Gogh retrospective, Rousseau shows his first exotic landscapes. The canvases he submits, including Surprise!, inspire a review by the young painter Félix Vallotton in "Le Journal suisse":

Rousseau is informed he has been awarded a Silver Medal by the City of Paris, a decoration that was in fact intended for someone else with the same name.

- 1893 Rousseau moves to 44, avenue du Maine, a mews of artists' studios. On December 1 he resigns from his position as an employee of the Octroi with the modest pension of 1,019 francs. About this time Rousseau meets Alfred Jarry, like himself a native of Laval, who introduces him in literary circles. The young writer and the forty-nine-year-old painter become friends.
- 1894 The first issue of "L'Ymagier" (October), a review founded by Jarry and Rémy de Gourmont, makes mention of an exhibition "at Le Barc de Boutteville" in which Rousseau's work is being shown. Among the works hung at the Salon des Indépendants is War, which is later praised by "Mercure de France."
- 1895 The second issue of "L'Ymagier" (January) publishes lithograph of War. Rousseau shows his canvases to dealer Ambroise Vollard, who will not, however, purchase any until several years later. The portrait of Jarry, which in 1906 Apollinaire will see in a partially burned state, is one of ten works hung at the Salon des Indépendants that arouse the indignation of the critic of "Le Gaulois."
- 1896 Rousseau runs up debt with art supply dealer P. Foinet. Nevertheless, in 1897 provides shelter for Alfred Jarry and several of his friends, among them painter Maxime Dethomas, a friend of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and musician Claude Terrasse, Pierre Bonnard's brother-in-law, who has a passion for marionettes.
- 1898 Rousseau offers to sell the Mayor of Laval (who rejects the offer) his painting, The Sleeping Gypsy, which had been shown at the Salon des Indépendants the previous year. The painter moves to the rue Vercingétorix.
- 1899 Rousseau writes another play, The Revenge of a Russian Orphan, which he also submits to the Châtelet Theater and is turned down again. It is not published until 1947. He is married a second time, to Joséphine Noury, a widow.
- 1900 Joins a neighborhood orchestra and gives music and painting lessons at home.

- 1901 Listed as teacher of drawing and painting on china and porcelain in the Bulletin of the Philotechnic Association until 1904.
- 1903 Death of Joséphine, his second wife.
- 1904 Appointed Professor of Drawing at the Philotechnic Association, continues to give classes at home "at moderate prices." He is charged with non-payment of debts by art-supply dealer Foinet, is found guilty by the justice of the peace for the Fifteenth Arrondissement, and ordered to reimburse his supplier of canvases and paints with monthly payments. Publication of his waltz, Clémence. Once again, in error, he is awarded a decoration, the "Palmes académiques," mention of which he is to have printed on his visiting cards for several years.
- 1905 Rousseau moves to 44, rue Daguerre. His works are noticed at the third Salon d'Automne, at which the great revelation is the emergence of the Fauves. Louis Vauxcelles, who is responsible for naming them, compares The Hungry Lion to a Byzantine mosaic and the Bayeux tapestry, but expresses regret that Rousseau's technique "is not equal to his candor."
- 1906 Rousseau shows for second time at the Salon d'Automne. Moves to 2 bis, rue Perrel. Either this year or the next meets Guillaume Apollinaire through Jarry.
- 1907 Last appearance at the Salon d'Automne. Meets the German critic and collector Wilhelm Uhde, who is living in Paris; Uhde will write the first monograph on Rousseau. Also meets Robert and Sonia Delaunay, who will eventually own some twenty of his works. A story told by Delaunay's mother about her trip to the Indies becomes the basis of The Snake Charmer. The majority of Rousseau's exotic canvases are inspired by visits to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and by illustrations in books and magazines.
- In January 1909 Rousseau is given a suspended sentence of two years' imprisonment. Vollard and a few buyers begin to show an interest in his work; among the latter are Serge Férat, a painter of Russian extraction (whose real name is Jastrebzoff), and his sister Baroness d'Oettingen, who is known by several pseudonyms (Roch Grey, Leonard Pieux).

1908

The Salon d'Automne rejects Old Junier's Cart. Uhde then organizes the first Rousseau exhibition on the premises of a furniture seller in Paris; unfortunately, since the address is inadvertently left off the invitations, no one shows up.

At first meeting, Apollinaire had not appreciated Rousseau's work, finding "his ingenuity too chancy." Later mentions Rousseau in his reviews of the Salons and this year introduces him to Picasso (perhaps in 1907). Relaxing, Rousseau gives "soirées familiales et artistiques" in his home for his Plaisance neighbors, the parents of his pupils, painters and writers drawn to his work and amused by the Douanier's personality, and foreign dealers and collectors.

Picasso purchases large Portrait of a Woman, which will remain in his possession until his death, and organizes Banquet at the Bateau-Lavoir attended by Apollinaire, Marie Laurencin, Fernande Olivier, Georges Braque, André Salmon, Jacques Vaillant, Leo and Gertrude Stein, Maurice Raynal, and others. Rousseau plays his waltz, Clémence, on the violin and declares to Picasso: "We are the greatest painters of our time, you in the Egyptian style, I in the modern"; Apollinaire dedicates to him the famous lines:

You recall, Rousseau, the Aztec landscape
The forests where the mango and pineapple grew,
The monkeys sucking out the juice of watermelons,
And the blond emperor they shot out there.
The pictures you paint you saw in Mexico...

Tu te souviens, Rousseau, du paysage astèque,
Des forêts où poussaient la manne et l'ananas,
Des singes répandant tout le sang des pastèques,
Et du blond empereur qu'on fusilla là-bas.
Les tableaux que tu peins, tu les vis au Mexique...

Although the organizers of the Banquet may not have been completely reverent, they are nonetheless serious in their homage to the guest of honor.

1909

Rousseau has more and more purchasers, among them Vollard, Uhde, Joseph Brummer, the Baroness d'Oettingen and her brother Serge Férat, and Ardengo Soffici. Rousseau falls in love with a fifty-four-year-old widow who turns down his offers of marriage--he is profoundly upset.

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1910

Rousseau shows The Dream at the Salon des Indépendants. The critic A. Mercereau asks him for three works for an exhibition in Russia. Rousseau is becoming famous, and some reviews are full of praise. As a result of an infection in his leg, however, he dies almost alone in a hospital on September 2. Only seven people attend his funeral, among them Paul Signac, representing the Salon des Indépendants, and Robert Delaunay. He is buried in a common pauper's grave. Two years later Delaunay and Rousseau's landlord Quéval organize a committee to provide for his burial in the cemetery of Bagneux where they pay for a thirty-year lease. Apollinaire writes an epitaph that is engraved on a stone by Brancusi and Ortiz de Zarate in 1913:

We salute you
Gentle Rousseau you hear us
Delaunay his wife Monsieur Queval and I
Let our baggage through free at heaven's gate.
We shall bring you brushes, paints, and canvas
So that you can devote your sacred leisure in
the light of truth
To painting the way you did my portrait
The face of the stars.

Nous te saluons
Gentil Rousseau tu nous entends
Delaunay sa femme Monsieur Quéval et moi
Laisse passer nos bagages en franchise à la porte
du ciel.
Nous t'apporterons des pinceaux des couleurs et
des toiles
Afin que tes loisirs sacres dans la lumière réelle
Tu les consacres à peindre comme tu tiras mon portrait
Face aux étoiles.

In late 1910, Max Weber organized at 291 in New York an exhibition of the works of Rousseau in his possession, and in 1911, the Salon des Indépendants held a retrospective showing of his works (45 paintings, 5 drawings). In 1947 Rousseau's remains were transferred to Laval.

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