CHAPTER 18

The Appeal of Modern Art: Toulouse-Lautrec

c. 1880–1900

INTRODUCTION With Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, as with his contemporary Seurat, the issue of popular art and modernism once again comes to the fore, as it did a generation earlier with Courbet, and will again with Van Gogh.

We have seen that for a few short years Courbet produced history paintings for the common people: workers, peasants, and the petit bourgeoisie. He did so by combining the scale, ambition, and even subject matter of Salon art with some of the forms and rhetoric of popular art. The *Burial at Ornans* (1849, p. 274), after all, represented one of the sacraments of the church, but its flatness and tonal simplicity recalled popular woodcuts from Épinal. This radical initiative could not, however, survive the years of repression and political reaction following the coup of 1851. For more than two decades thereafter, Courbet struggled to find or to create another equally compelling means of artistic address.

The art of Toulouse-Lautrec constitutes an alternative kind of popular art, one pitched at an urban audience already trained to enjoy the mass culture on offer at cabarets, dance halls, circuses, and even (for men) brothels. In that way, Lautrec was similar to Seurat, but with the following difference: Seurat, the Neoimpressionist painter, sought to understand and then to distill the delights on offer at the new, Parisian places of recreation in order to establish the basis for a universal language of harmony—one that might be useful in building an anarchist society, a kind of utopia. Toulouse-Lautrec, on the other hand, explored and recreated some of the visual delights of mass culture for the purpose of generating an equivalent optical pleasure for himself and his viewers. This was one of several, late nineteenth-century manifestations of modernism in the visual arts, along with Symbolism and Art Nouveau.

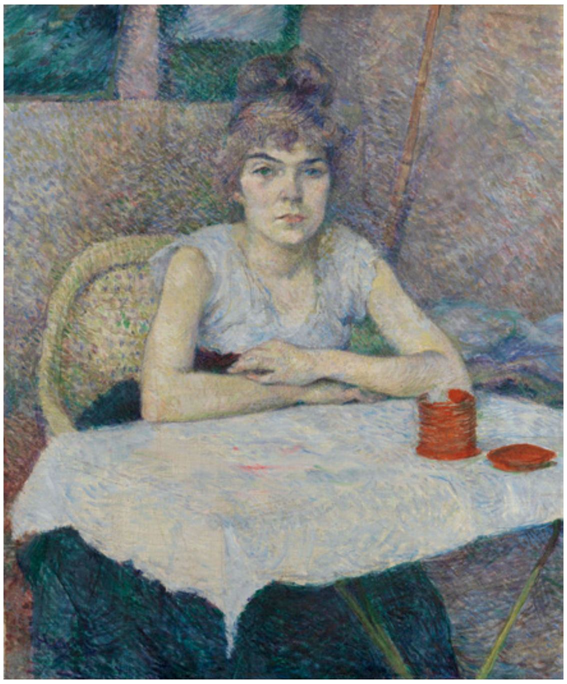
The period of Toulouse-Lautrec's life coincided with the greatest phase of Parisian urban growth in the nineteenth century. It was also the time when France experienced an industrial revolution, and, beginning in the 1870s, a series of economic crises. The consequence of all this was increased popular solidarity (through the growth of worker organizations and unions), and widespread conviction on the part of political and industrial leaders that this emboldened public must be addressed in ways productive for capital. That is what Toulouse-Lautrec and some others—especially the great advertising poster artists Jules Chéret, Théophile Steinlen, and Alphonse Mucha, among others—helped to do. Along the way, some extraordinary works were produced. Toulouse-Lautrec depicted a working-class woman's anguish and exploitation in *Poudre de Riz* (1887), and feminine, sexual mutuality in a series of almost unprecedented pictures of same-sex desire and women in bed. Courbet had depicted lesbians in 1866 (*The Sleepers*, p. 281), but in a far more sensational, and even exploitative manner.

Perhaps most remarkable of all, Toulouse-Lautrec linked his art to fetishism. The term fetish is found in the discourses of anthropology, psychoanalysis, and Marxist economics. It has a somewhat different meaning in each domain, but in general indicates a purposeful misrecognition: a totem for a god, a secondary sexual characteristic (or miscellaneous object) for a primary one, and a commodity for a powerful or hypnotic being. Toulouse-Lautrec recognized the authority of the fetish and brandished it in his art, especially his posters and other prints. It is represented by the hat and cape of Aristide Bruant, the slender leg of Jane Avril, and the long gloves of Yvette Guilbert. In this way, Toulouse-Lautrec managed at once to celebrate unbridled desire, and at the same time make it available for capitalist exploitation. Toulouse-Lautrec's friend Vincent van Gogh, as we will see in the next chapter, explored still another kind of populism.

NOVELTY AND DESIRE

"His passion and his profession is to marry the crowd." Charles Baudelaire's famous phrase from 1859 was intended to describe the illustrator Constantin Guys. But it is more apt for Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec thirty years later, and for two principal reasons: first, because the crowd (the word *foule* also means mob, multitude, and mass) came more fully into being at the later date; and second, because Toulouse-Lautrec exploited print techniques and a medium (the poster) that, compared to the drawings of Guys, were more precisely tailored to mass spectatorship. But even Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings had a popular character. Many were large, raucous affairs, intended for exhibition at cabarets, restaurants, circuses, and other venues frequented by working-class and lower-middle-class crowds.

The popular appeal of Toulouse-Lautrec's artworks is not just a matter of their novel technique, medium, and exhibition circumstances: it consists equally in their peculiar, erotic urgency. In his paintings and especially his posters, the *nouveauté* of urban life—shoes, gloves, make-up, hair, hats, and the grinning faces of popular entertainers—are given over to the celebration of sexual desire. And not just any desire, but the fetishistic desire that was cataloged by sexologists of the time, practiced by clients and sex workers at the new *maisons de specialité*, and embraced by an emergent lesbian and gay subculture. Herein lies the source both of the great appeal of Toulouse-Lautrec's art and of its modernity. For more than a hundred years, capitalist commerce has used sex to sell commodities and thereby intervene in the domain of erotic and imaginative life. By crafting images that stimulate desires—and then proposing that these may be gratified by the purchase of designated commodities—industry and advertising have rationalized and regulated both sex and consumption. Parisian visual culture from the fin de siècle is an important early example of the practice. Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings and posters, however, may be said to have used commodities to sell sex, not the other way around. They highlight sexual pleasure as a refuge from working-class labor, and fetishism as a form of emancipation. His model of metropolitan desire is thus as unruly and unregulated as the *insoumises* (unlicensed prostitutes) who walked the streets of Paris and posed—dressed, half-clothed, or naked—for the artist.



18.1 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Poudre de Riz, 1887.
Oil on cardboard,
22 × 18⅛" (56 × 46)

THE CROWD

The growth of European cities and the emergence of crowds were epochal developments in nineteenth-century history. Between 1800 and 1900, Berlin grew from 200,000 to 3 million, London from 1 to 6 million, and Paris from 500,000 to nearly 3 million. The reason these cities grew at so unprecedented a rate was that modernization and capitalization in the countryside reduced or in some cases nearly ended small-scale ownership of rural lands, as well as nearly eliminated open lands available for common use. The cities were where industry and factories were located, and that is where the people had to move.

Within factories, working conditions were appalling, but circumstances were often not much better in the surrounding streets themselves. Metropolitan engineering rarely kept pace with population growth. As a consequence, there were teeming slums in all major European cities, and frequent outbreaks of disease. In France, a series of spectacular bank failures in 1882 exacerbated depressed economic conditions, and un-employment levels rose greatly. Masses of people in the French capital thus daily scraped, scrambled, begged, and stole to survive. Working-class women were subject to especially gross forms of exploitation, and were judged by bourgeois men to be indistinguishable from prostitutes. Indeed, even if they were regularly employed as flower-sellers, shop girls, artist's models, laundresses, or barmaids—the last
two depicted in Morisot's *Hanging the Laundry Out to Dry* 15.15
(1875, p. 382) and Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (*c.* 1882, 15.21
p. 386)—the working women of Paris were often forced to sell themselves in order to live. Estimates of the number of full-time prostitutes range from 30,000 to 120,000, though the number of part-time or occasional prostitutes must have been even greater. Nineteenth-century Paris may thus have constituted one of the most oppressive environments for women in modern human history, and it is necessary to keep this in mind when looking at the art of Toulouse-Lautrec. It is not so much that he regularly

chose prostitutes as his models and companions, as that the categories "prostitute" and "working-class woman" were in ideology, and often, in tragic fact, nearly indistinguishable. Toulouse-Lautrec depicted this disturbing ambiguity with extraordinary purposefulness, but without moralism or sentimentality.

Of course, wherever there is oppression, there is resistance. The forced assembly of so many people in brothels, factories, on the streets, and in the slums—their subjection to law, industrial discipline, and time management—meant that they gained knowledge of each other, of their work, their common poverty, and their common culture. While the English countryside was the place where capital was first organized, the metropolis was the place where labor was first organized, and where feminism made its first inroads. An International Working Men's Association, formed in London by Karl Marx and others in 1864, grew rapidly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and established important headquarters in all the major European capitals. The Association for the Rights of Women was founded in France in 1870, as was a newspaper, *Le Droit de Femmes*. International Congresses on the Rights of Women were held in Paris in 1878, 1889, 1892, and 1896, at which feminists demanded that wives and prostitutes be freed from the domination of men. The subservient condition of wives necessitated changes in the Civil Code; the desperate circumstances of prostitutes required additional measures—extraction of child-support from fly-by-night fathers, the abolition of the repressive *police des mœurs*, and closure of the notorious St. Lazare Prison where *insoumises* were routinely incarcerated.

The impact of urban, working-class, and feminist organizations on the development of art and culture in France and elsewhere, it is now generally understood, was enormous. For one thing, the surviving artistic bureaucracies of the old regime—in France the Salon and Académie des Beaux-Arts—came increasingly to be seen as fossils; their standards and programs were simply irrelevant to the concerns and experiences of emancipated women and lower-class spectators. For another, the increased confidence and sophistication of working people meant that they would demand the recreation in the metropolis of the rich and affective art and culture that had been theirs in the countryside—or at least they would expect a fairly good substitute. The creation of a replacement popular culture and art was the aim and achievement of the burgeoning entertainment, or culture, industry.

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC AND URBAN ART

The explosive growth in the numbers of workers and popular, mass organizations at the end of the nineteenth century meant a new audience for art at a time when traditional patronage from state and church had greatly declined. Though women, workers, and the petite bourgeoisie generally could not afford to buy pictures, they could be induced to pay small entrance fees to exhibitions and panoramas. (Panoramas, like the cinemas that took their place, were cheap and spectacular. For just 1/2 franc on Sunday, for example, audiences in the 1880s could see the *Storming of the Bastille* by Poilpot and Jacob.) Men had more opportunities than women to be consumers of mass culture. They could go where they wanted at night, and were seduced to pay for admission and watered-down drinks at cafés and nightclubs; these latter included the Grand Bouillon, restaurant du Chalet at 43 avenue de Clichy, and the cabarets Chat Noir, Mirliton, and Moulin Rouge—where paintings and other works of art were exhibited. At such places, social class itself was as much part of the show as the artworks, drunkenness, and ribald songs. To think of artworks by Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Anquetin, Bernard, and Guillaumin in these prosaic settings—and they in fact exhibited in November and December 1887 at the vast Grand Bouillon (*établissements de Bouillon* were large, salubrious, inexpensive restaurants found across Paris, in which all items, even napkins, were separately reckoned)—is to begin to transform our understanding of the popularity of modern art. Here Van Gogh showed his *Portrait of Père Tanguy* (p. 442), and Toulouse-Lautrec 19.10 some paintings of prostitutes. Van Gogh also exhibited that year at the café Le Tambourin on the Boulevard de Clichy, and in the lobby of the avant-garde Théâtre Libre of André Antoine.

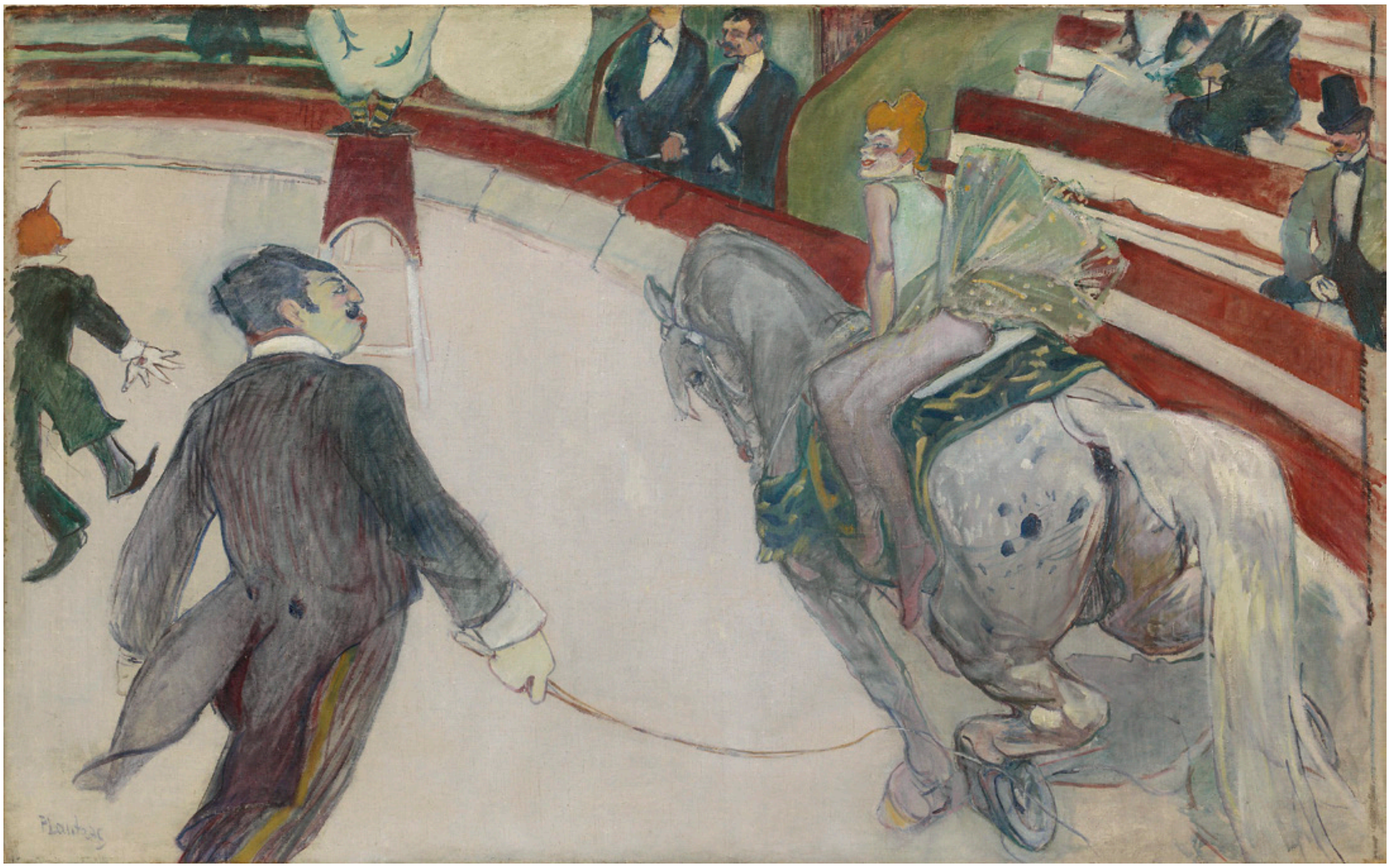
Laborers, shop assistants, clerks, servants, and prostitutes might in addition see works by these and other artists at the newspaper offices of *La Vie Moderne* and *Le Gaulois*, and in the pages of cheap illustrated papers, such as *Le Courrier français*, *Le Mirliton* (the product of the eponymous cabaret), and *L'Escaramouche*. Outdoor circuses and amusement parks had painted sets, and artworks were now also visible in the streets: the posters of Chéret, Steinlen, Grasset, Mucha, Bonnard, Toulouse-Lautrec, and many others decorated the walls and kiosks of the Parisian metropolis. These posters, Roger-Marx wrote with excess sobriety in 1897, have "no less meaning, and no less prestige than the art of the fresco."

The new spaces for public art generated enormous interest among painters and sculptors, and not simply because they offered opportunities for employment. Such artists as Toulouse-Lautrec, who disdained the jury system still employed at the Salon des Artistes Français, were especially glad about the new circumstances for exhibition. At these new venues, they could directly communicate with large numbers of spectators, and thereby achieve something of that public renown that had long been the goal of ambitious French artists. In addition, those artists who counted themselves on the anarchist or socialist left—Toulouse-Lautrec flirted with them—could now believe it was possible both to follow their individual artistic inclinations, and remain in close contact with the proletarian mass, those "newcomers of tomorrow," as Mallarmé once called them, who promised to become the ruling force in the next century.

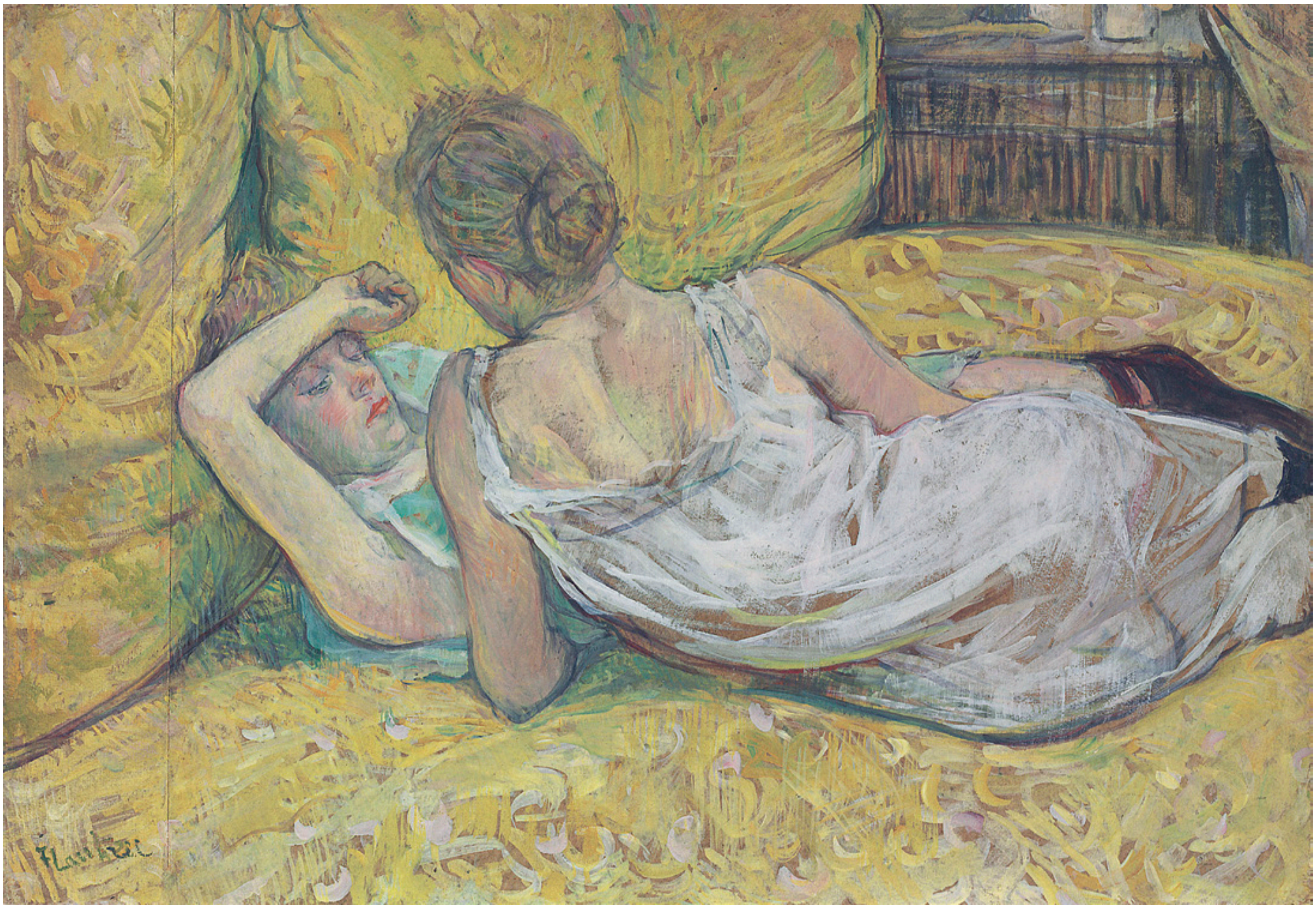
MODERN FORM, POPULAR CONTENT

Toulouse-Lautrec, in fact, took great advantage of these new patronage circumstances, and devised novel solutions to the integration of modern art and popular culture. Like Degas, for whom he had unbounded admiration, he was highly experimental in his approach to form. He employed unorthodox perspectives, garish stage lighting, strong contour, startling color choices, and *peinture a l'essence*—oil paint thinned with turpentine and freely brushed, lending works a sketchy and spontaneous aspect. From the standpoint of any Salon juror, Toulouse-Lautrec's works would have been deemed unfinished and *laid*, or "ugly"—the epithet routinely used to describe both modern paintings and those with working-class subject matter. But that was precisely the point of the works. Toulouse-Lautrec literally brought the metropolitan crowd within his orbit of address: they are both the subject and the object
18.1 of many of his best works. Such paintings as *Poudre de Riz* (1887, p. 425), *Au Cirque Fernando: Equestrienne* (1887–88), 18.2
and *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* (1889, p. 381) represent 15.14
working-class people in the places they frequented, and the paintings were exhibited in those very same places—*Poudre de Riz* at Aristide Bruant's Cabaret Mirliton, and the second at the Moulin Rouge. Van Gogh saw *Poudre de Riz* as representing an archetypically Montmartrois character; he wrote Theo van Gogh in August 1888 that he
wished to see it hung beside his own Provençal *Patience* 0.3
Escalier (1888, p. 14). *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* was, in a sense, brought even closer to its subjects: it was reproduced on the pages of the cheap and popular newspaper *Le Courrier français*.

Toulouse-Lautrec's most ambitious efforts to combine popular subjects and audacious, modernist means are his large paintings of cabaret and circus scenes, such as *Au Cirque Fernando: Equestrienne*. The picture anticipates
by two years Seurat's *The Circus* (p. 422), and is certainly 17.14
more spontaneous and more gross. It is also the artist's first large-scale engagement with a fetishistic theme current in the decadent literature of the day. *Au Cirque Fernando: Equestrienne* is broadly and thinly painted with pinkish white relieved by stripes of red and patches of green, gray, and violet. The artist has taken particular delight in painting the horse's massive croup (we can easily see it is a stallion), which is then implicitly compared to that of



18.2 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Au Cirque Fernando: Equestrienne, 1887–88. Oil on canvas, 38¾ × 63½" (98.4 × 161.3)



18.3 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec *Two Friends*, 1895. Oil on cardboard, with strip added on the left, 17⅞ × 26⅝" (45.5 × 67.5)

the ringmaster, bareback rider, and even clown at the left. The red-haired *équestrienne* has heavily rouged cheeks and painted eyes and mouth, recalling the dissipated rider in Catulle Mendes's "L'Amant de sa femme," from *Monstres parisiens* (1882). In that story, a man is irresistibly compelled to return to his wife whom he had thrown out of his house years before for her adulteries. Now she is a circus performer, "starring at the Hippodrome, under a pseudonym, in the pageant of *Riquet à la Houpe*." Indeed it is the very degeneracy of Mendes's bareback rider—evidenced by her sagging flesh, livid face paint, and ripe odor—that arouses the lust and devotion of her cuckolded husband.

Whereas Seurat's bareback rider is a weightless sprite—note the upward direction of the skirt, arms, and hair—Toulouse-Lautrec's figure is awkward and angular, and her body is as hard and flat as her paste make-up. This very crudeness, this very visible corruption, like that associated with Mendes's wife turned circus equestrienne, is the source of the picture's erotic charge, and the intended basis of its popular appeal. Toulouse-Lautrec in fact painted an over-lifesized version of the composition. Known today as the "missing *Ecuyère*," the picture is lost, but its scale—and a confirming letter from the artist to his mother—indicates it was intended for exhibition at the Cirque Fernando itself. In any event the smaller canvas was exhibited above the bar at the cabaret Moulin Rouge beside *Dressage des nouvelles* (1889–90) and Adolphe Willette's *Danseuse* (*c.* 1890). There, working-class spectators could easily glimpse its vulgar humor, while bourgeois men could revel in its degeneracy.

Even when Toulouse-Lautrec was not painting for the metropolitan public, his works often exhibited a similar embrace of popular themes and exotic sexual perspectives. There is no evidence that *Two Friends* (1895), for example, was exhibited at a brothel; on the contrary, it appears to have been made for the private delectation of a male friend of the artist. But it addresses one particular aspect of contemporary prostitution with considerable directness—that is, lesbianism. Though Toulouse-Lautrec's several paintings of sexual intimacy between women recall poetry and painting devoted to the theme—consider Baudelaire's condemned "Lesbos" from *The Flowers of Evil* and Courbet's *The Sleepers* (1866, p. 281)—they are also derived from contemporary literary and sexological sources. Mendes was enamored of lesbian themes, though his Satanism and misogyny are generally absent from Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings. More apposite is Richard

18.3 **11.23**

Eisenman, S. F. (2020). Nineteenth-century art : A critical history. Thames & Hudson, Limited.
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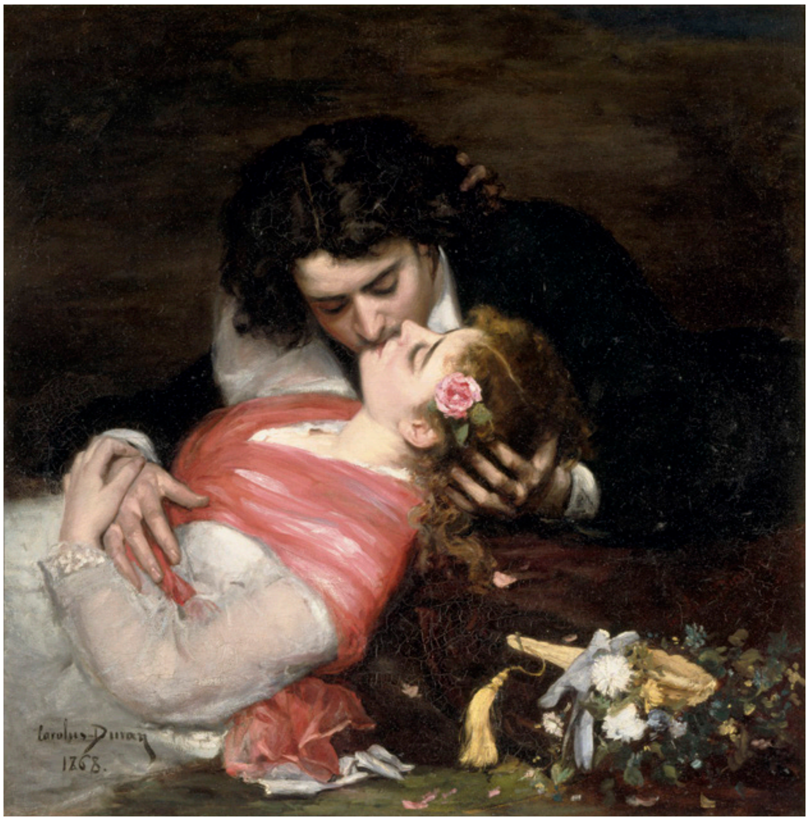
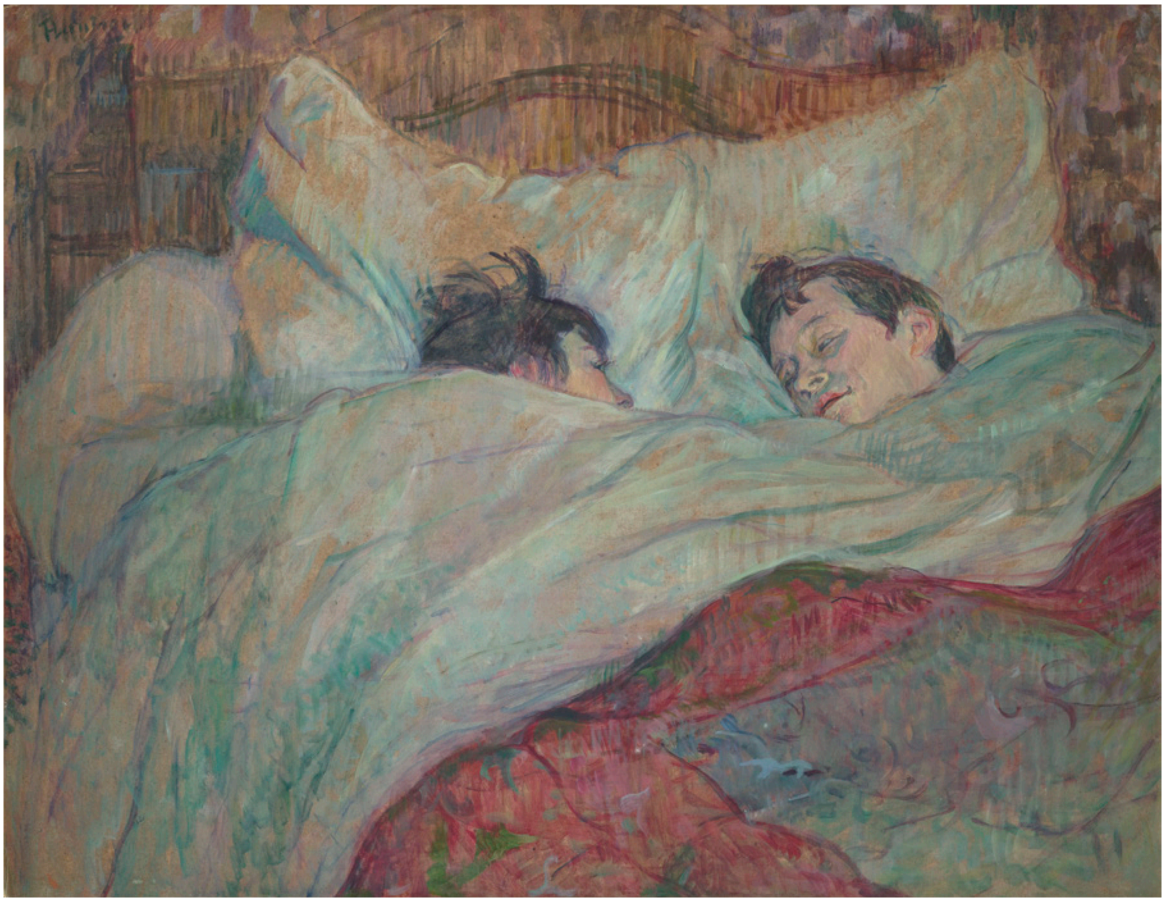
von Krafft-Ebing, whose scholarly monograph *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) was read by Toulouse-Lautrec and cited by him with some regularity, according to the painter's friend Thadée Natanson. In this celebrated book, Krafft-Ebing specifically described lesbian love ("congenital sexual inversion among women") as the frequent solace of prostitutes. He writes:

> Prostitutes of gross sensuality who, disgusted with their intercourse with perverse and impotent men by whom they are used for the performance of the most revolting sexual acts, seek compensation in the sympathetic embrace of persons of their own sex. These cases are of very frequent occurrence.

18.5 *Two Friends*, like *In Bed* (*c*. 1892) and several others, clearly represents the solace provided by lesbian sex and intimacy—the proximity of the figures to the picture plane, the warmth of the colors, and the great emphasis upon pillows, blankets, and varied patterns and textures, all combine to create a palpable physicality and closeness. Indeed, it may be that male spectators, used to seeing male/female pairings in such Academic paintings as 18.4 Carolus-Duran's *The Kiss* (1868), were encouraged to experience a measure of transgender identification with



18.4 ABOVE **Charles-Emile-Auguste Carolus-Duran**
The Kiss, 1868. Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 35⅞" (92 × 91)



18.5 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
In Bed, *c*. 1892. Oil on cardboard, 21¼ × 27¾" (54 × 70.5)

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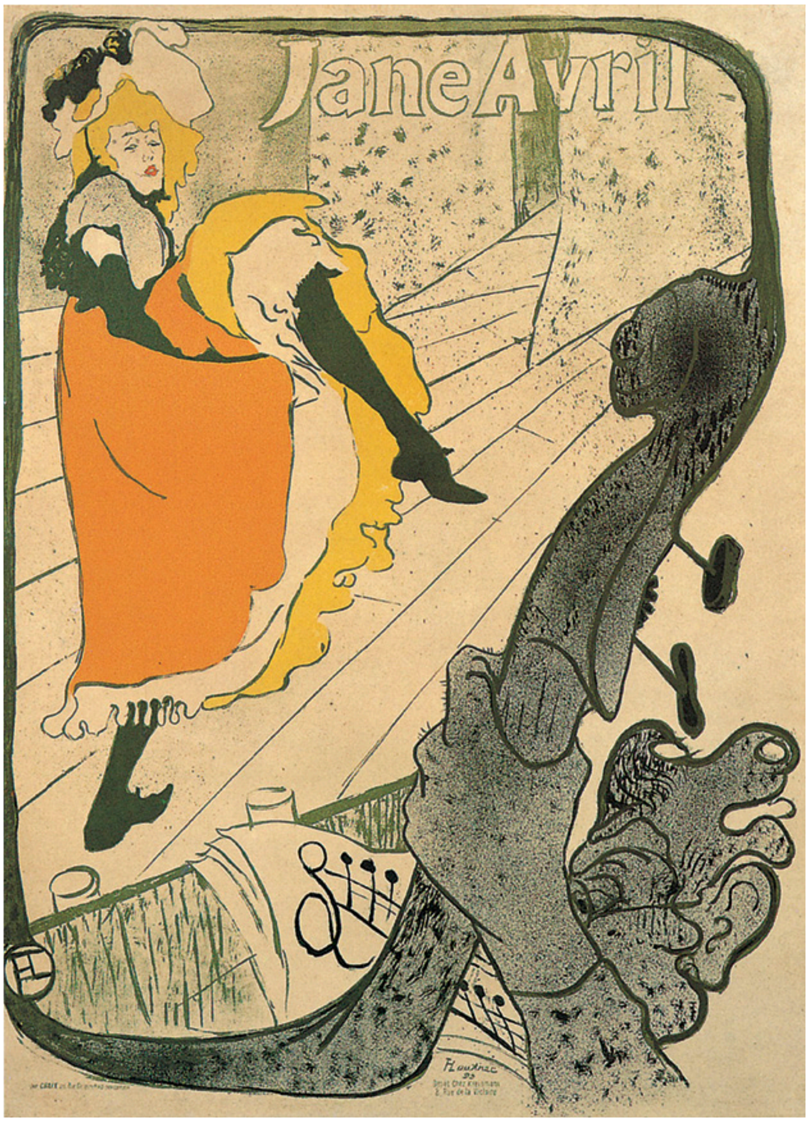
one or another of the women. If this was the case, then the familiar circuit of seeing and being seen—of men as disembodied possessors of sight, and women as passive and embodied objects of vision—was challenged, at least in painted fiction. Toulouse-Lautrec's pictures of lesbians may thus have confronted their spectators with something of the same vitality and disembodied confidence 16.13 we observed in Cassatt's *In the Loge* (1878, p. 396). Like the large decorative panels and oval portraits made by the artist for the brothel on the rue d'Amboise, their pictorial address is to sex workers as much as to their clients.

POSTER ART

At about the same time that he was working on lesbian and brothel pictures, Toulouse-Lautrec turned his attention to poster art. The posters are extremely audacious—flat colors, hard, clear outlines, exaggerated foreshortening, and bold repetition of shapes and words. They are remarkable as well for essentially disregarding the most commonly used erotic motifs in the advertisements of the day. There is nothing in Toulouse-Lautrec's poster oeuvre comparable, for example, to Chéret's *Le Bal du* 17.13 *Moulin Rouge* (1897, p. 421) in which *décolletage* and bared thighs tell the whole story. Instead, the artist combines an elaborate vocabulary of metropolitan styles, attitudes, and expressions into a complex and fetishistic elixir.

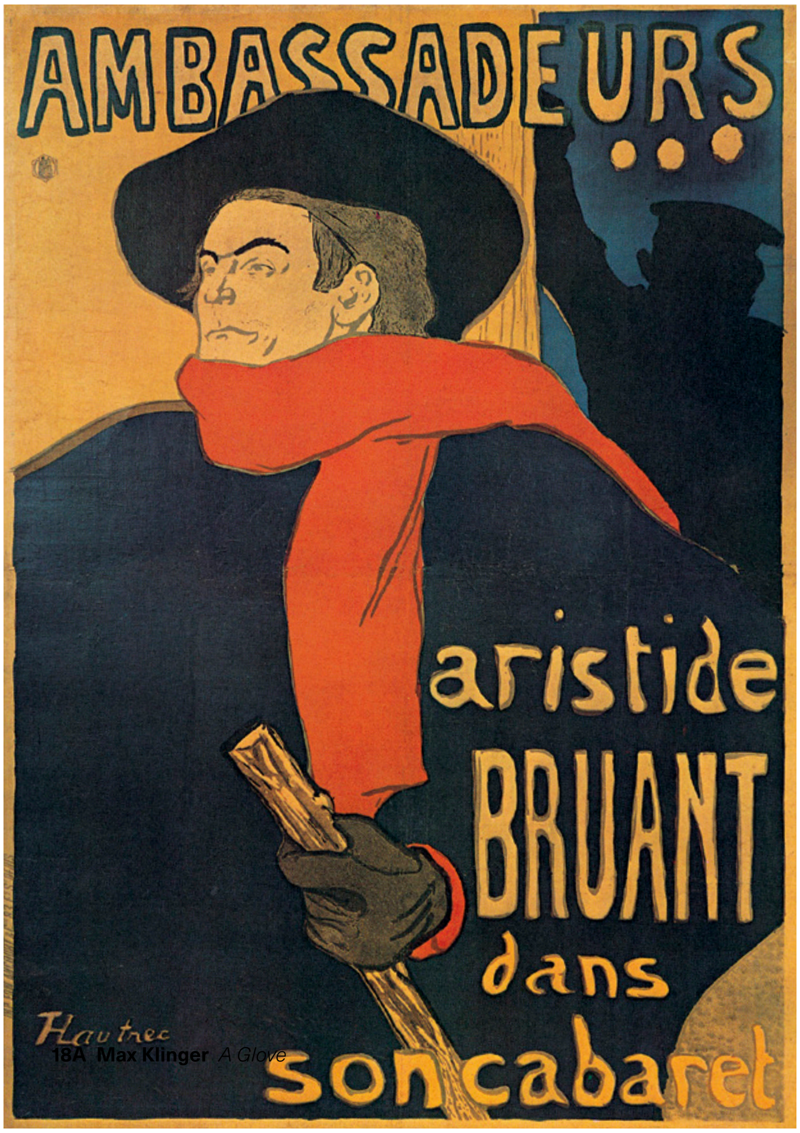
18.6 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec *Jane Avril*, 1893. Color lithograph, 48⅞ × 36" (124 × 91.5)



Jane Avril (1893) was created on the occasion of an 18.6 appearance by the celebrated dancer at the *café-concert* Jardin de Paris. The five-color lithographed poster reveals the full range of the artist's technique and style, including ink spatters, colors that overflow contours, and an expressive framing line, which meanders from foreground to back, unifying pictorial surface and fictive depth. The dancer herself accordingly occupies an ambiguous zone; her plumed bonnet caresses the background framing line at upper left, while her raised leg taunts the phallic bass viol neck in the extreme foreground. Thus, the dancer's legs seem to rise and fall, open and close, move forward and back in rhythm with the viewer's alternating perception of the picture as surface or depth. Jane Avril is like an erotic automaton who is operated both by the spectacled musician with the giant instrument and, imaginatively, by the spectator who stands before any public kiosk bearing her image. But like the lesbians in Toulouse-Lautrec's brothel pictures, Avril is not a mere passive object of sight. Her haughty expression suggests that she delights in controlling her audiences, in placing them in her thrall. Indeed, Jane Avril understood fetishistic desire and the casting of spells. She had been a patient of Jean-Martin Charcot at the asylum of Salpêtrière in the early 1880s when the doctor published his landmark study of fetishism, "Inversions du sens genital" in the *Archives de la neurologie* (1882).

In the poster *Ambassadeurs, Aristide Bruant* (1892), a 18.7 slightly different erotic game is played, but once more the working-class and bourgeois viewer is dominated by a celebrated entertainer. Known for his lusty gestures, crude *double-entendres*, and for abusing his audiences, Bruant was a star from the 1880s until after the turn of the century. The sign outside his Montmartre cabaret read "Le Mirliton, for Audiences that Enjoy Being Insulted." In 1892, Bruant moved from Le Mirliton to the tonier Café des Ambassadeurs on the Champs-Elysées. Still favored by the masses, but now, too, according to Edmond de Goncourt, by unblushed society women eager to hear his "purulent slang," Aristide Bruant commissioned his friend, the artist, to represent him in his unique and instantly recognizable attire: wide-brimmed hat, Inverness cape, and long, red scarf. Bruant fills the poster, squeezed between its four borders, and between the spectator and the seductively posed sailor who gazes out from the upper right. The silhouetted sailor may have been a sly reference to the *corvette*, a term used in the French Navy both for a small, fast battleship and for someone who is *courbé*, or "bent," that is to say, queer. (He thus anticipates the sailor named Querelle from Jean Genet's novel of 1947 and R. M. Fassbinder's film adaptation of 1982.) Aristide Bruant actually revived and popularized this slang, and other non-nautical synonyms, including *jésus*, *mignon*, *pédé*, *rivet*, *sonnette*, etc. (Most of these are found in Bruant's *Dictionnaire Français Argot* from 1901.) The viewer of Toulouse-Lautrec's poster, and Bruant's performances, was thus required to submit both to verbal abuse and to a homosexual come-on! Toulouse-Lautrec, like Bruant, observed the gay subcultures of France and England. In England in 1895, he painted a portrait of Oscar Wilde while the esthete was in the midst of his disastrous lawsuit. In addition, he undoubtedly witnessed the parade of gay men who sought their *petit jésus* in the relatively secure precincts of Montmartre brothels.

At the request of Bruant, the poster was displayed on both sides of the stage of the *café-concert* Ambassadeurs, as well as on hundreds of walls and kiosks throughout Paris, transforming the city into one man's image. "Who will rid us of this picture of Aristide Bruant?" wrote a columnist in *La Vie Parisienne*. "You cannot move a step without being confronted by it. Bruant is supposed to be an artist; why then, does he put himself up on the walls beside the gas-lamps and other advertisements? Doesn't he object to neighbors like these?" Here was the new art intended for the metropolitan crowd: it was cheap, public, and democratic; it spoke in the argot of working men and women; it chastised the bourgeoisie while giving them an erotic charge; it derived its authority from the brothel, the vaudeville stage, and the alienist's laboratory.



18.7 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec *Ambassadeurs, Aristide Bruant*, 1892. Color lithograph, 51 × 39⅜" (150 × 100)

THE METROPOLITAN FETISH

The posters and paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec, we may conclude, were at once deeply manipulative and highly incendiary. Whereas nineteenth-century urbanization and industrialization, in Eugen Weber's phrase, had "turned peasants into Frenchmen," advertising and mass culture during the fin de siècle turned Frenchmen into consumers. The working-class and petit bourgeois crowd was encouraged to believe that its most fervent desires could be gratified by visits to the new *grand magasin* and by the purchase of commodities. It was led, too, to believe that passive spectatorship at circuses and cabarets was somehow the same thing as sharing and participating in a common culture. And, finally, they were persuaded that they could receive sexual gratification from individual acts of consumption and spectatorship. Toulouse-Lautrec and his friends—Jane Avril, Aristide Bruant, and the others—were especially good at making this latter case. "Bruant, La Goulue, and most recently the Divan Japonais," wrote Gustave Geffroy in *La Justice* in 1893, "have taken possession of the streets with an irresistible authority." This very evident erotic authority is the basis of the unsettling power and popularity of Toulouse-Lautrec's art.

For Toulouse-Lautrec was a fetishist, and fetishism is a form of unreason or madness: the displacement of easel paintings from the walls of the Salon to the walls of the cabaret; the desire of a wealthy bourgeois man for a dissipated bareback rider; the imaginative identification of a straight man with a lesbian prostitute; the castigating glance of Jane Avril; the willing insertion of the heterosexual male spectator into a circuit of homosexuality. In each instance, the fetishistic object of desire is evidently of lesser social or economic value than the thing it replaces, and yet the exchange is made in any case. In Guy de Maupassant's classic story "La Chevelure" (1884), a rope made of hair is more alluring to the story's protagonist than any mistress. Surely it is cold company on the streets of Paris, in a theater box, or a boudoir, yet for this

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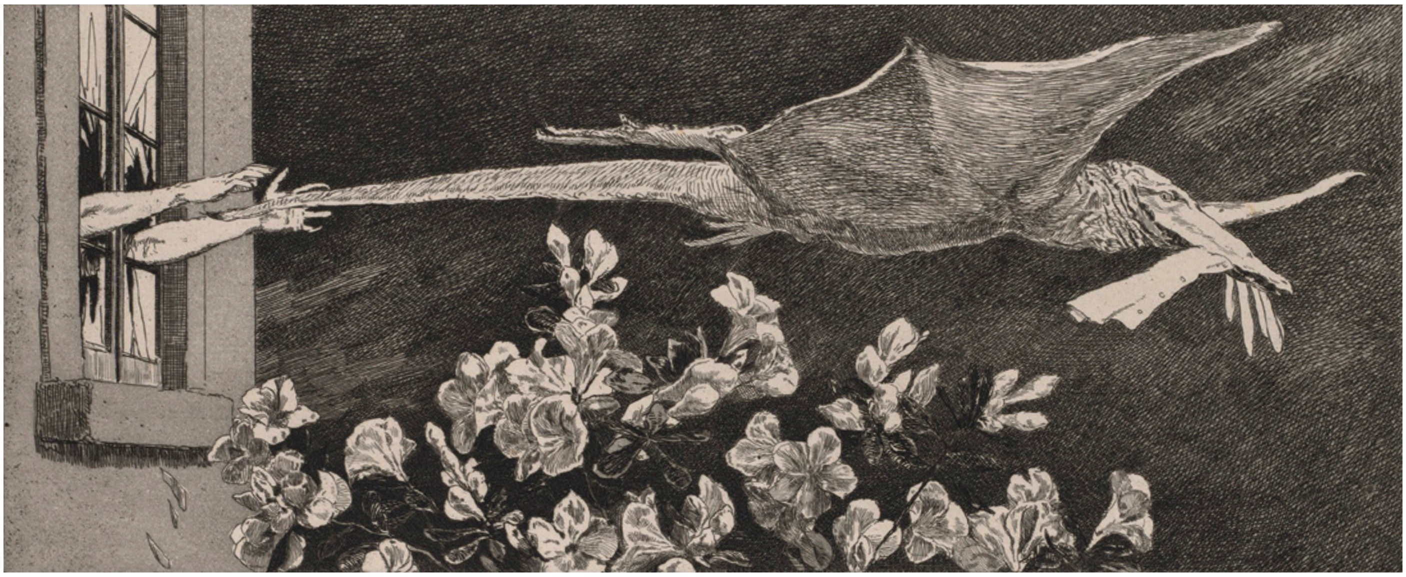

18.8 Max Klinger "Abduction" from *The Glove,* 1881. Etching and aquatint, 4⅝ × 10⅝" (11.75 × 26.99)

fetishist, the blond tresses induced transports of "superhuman delight." Such fetishes as hair, hands, gloves, feet, and shoes, Krafft-Ebing wrote, provoke such powerful "*optical* and *emotional* impressions" that they have the power to arouse "visual memory" and "sexual excitement, even orgasm." The gloves of Yvette Guilbert highlighted in *Le Divan Japonais* and in an important album of lithographs of 1894 are images of fetishistic madness, foreshadowed in 1881 by Max Klinger's haunting suite of etchings titled 18.8 *The Glove*—in which the desired glove is the protagonist and assumes a life more vivid than its human pursuers.

In Toulouse-Lautrec's Paris—a modern city, a city of immigrants, workers, paupers, and prostitutes; a city governed by the reason of cold cash—in that metropolis, the fetish had especial authority. It seemed to uphold or celebrate individualism in the midst of anonymity, imagination in a world of routine, personal autonomy in a political culture that prized obedience, and intrinsic worth in an economy based upon exchange value. This, in any case, was Toulouse-Lautrec's proposition—his particular artistic gambit. For a time, in fact, he—along with Seurat and Vincent van Gogh—seemed to be remaking popular culture along modernist lines, and his posters stand at the beginning of an advertising tradition that extends to this day. But after 1887 the paths of these artists diverged. Van Gogh, as we shall shortly discover, could not abide the speed, anonymity, and extremism of metropolitan life and its new mass culture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Toulouse-Lautrec's work arose from an emergent mass society. What were some of the political and social hallmarks of that society? What was one of its artistic innovations, championed by Chéret, Steinlen, Grasset, Mucha, Bonnard, and Toulouse-Lautrec?
2. What does it mean to say that Toulouse-Lautrec's art was "popular" in its own time? Was it the result of his peculiar subjects, style, or media? All three?
3. The term "fetish" was used in this chapter to describe Toulouse-Lautrec's strategy and one basis for his art's appeal. Briefly define the word. What works by the artist seem to you "fetishistic"?

Eisenman, S. F. (2020). Nineteenth-century art : A critical history. Thames & Hudson, Limited.
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