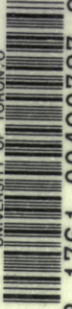


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Rich, Daniel Catton
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec:
"Au Moulin Rouge"

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TOULOUSE-LAUTREC



AU MOULIN ROUGE

WITH 17 ILLUSTRATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION BY D. CATTON RICH

GALLERY BOOKS

NUMBER 20

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HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC
"AU MOULIN ROUGE"

IN THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
DANIEL CATTON RICH
AND SEVENTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS



THE GALLERY BOOKS No. 20

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“AU MOULIN ROUGE”

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

by Daniel Catton Rich, 1904

“AU MOULIN ROUGE”, the painting by Toulouse-Lautrec in the Art Institute of Chicago, is not only compelling for its subject, which represents a group of the artist’s friends at his favourite night-spot, it is one of the most carefully designed pictures of a brief and brilliant career. Often Lautrec is to be admired chiefly for his draughtsmanship, that supple, expressive line which, racing across a bare canvas, turns it into a drawing, masterful in characterization and vivacious in rhythm. But here he set himself a major problem in *painting*, developing with extreme care and progressive changes a large and controlled composition.

Though Lautrec had sketched his first cabaret subjects in 1886, it was not until he discovered the possibilities of the Moulin Rouge, some three or four years later, that he really found himself. At that moment the Montmartre cabaret was at the height of its fame. The management had shrewdly hired the most popular and eccentric dancers in Paris; along with them appeared famous singers of ballads and sentimental songs. The place was thronged with artists, writers, Bohemians and tourists, and nightly Lautrec had a special table reserved, where he sat, sharply observing and setting down the effects of alcohol and depravity upon the haggard faces of the clientèle. “Ah, la vie, la vie,” he used to mutter as his hand traced the lines of a broken profile or captured, with inimitable swiftness, the splayed and awkward movement of some dancer’s leg.

From such data he designed paintings and drawings and posters of the Moulin Rouge, concentrating over and over again on a few characters like the plump and vulgar Louise Weber, nicknamed “La Goulue” (“The Glutton”), or the sinister Jane Avril, better known as “La Mélinite” from a popular explosive of the day. In the painting *Au Moulin Rouge* he has gathered together a group of his favourites. Seated round the table from left to right are Edouard Dujardin, La Macarona (“who”, according to a contemporary, “had the face of a toad”), Paul Sescou, the photographer, and Maurice Guibert, one of the

painter's intimates. Though the woman with the "psyche" of flaming red hair is not identified, in the background appear the tall, rangy form of Lautrec's cousin, Dr. Tapié de Céleyran, and the stunted figure of Lautrec himself, wearing his famous "melon" hat. To the right is La Goulue, hand on hip, while another dancer stands by, adjusting her hair. Above, in the glass partition, Lautrec has caught reflections of the gaslights and suggested figures beyond.

The Psyche

This was the painting as he first planned it (fig. 10). The original format stressed the horizontal. The group of figures, seen in half-length, is close to the spectator who is imagined as standing up and looking over their shoulders. This "snap-shot" view, inspired by the tilting perspectives of Degas and confirmed by Lautrec's own camera experiments with Sescou, was calculated to bring one intimately into the group, an effect heightened by the sharply cut railing in the lower left. If we compare it with *Au Bal du Moulin de la Galette* (fig. 2), painted in 1889 and also in the Art Institute, we see at once that Lautrec has adopted for *Au Moulin Rouge* a more integrated, solid approach. In the earlier picture the canvas is stained, rather than painted, with quick strokes of the brush which sketch the jostling crowd of dancers and touch in the main lines of the composition. Only certain heads are developed more broadly and even there the method of approach is that of a draughtsman. Indeed, the *Moulin de la Galette*, with its emphasis on Impressionist movement and palette of vivid blues, greens and violets recalling the colour theories of Seurat and Signac, is a picture which essentially belongs to Lautrec's style of the 'eighties. In the same way, *Au Moulin Rouge* is a product of the next decade. By 1892, when it was painted, he was in full command of his powers.

Lautrec was born in Albi in 1864, son of Count Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa, an eccentric sportsman whose passions were riding and hunting with falcons. Henri was destined to follow the family tradition of an outdoor life with occasional gay visits to Paris. Had not tragedy intervened he would probably never have become an artist at all, or remained at most a talented amateur. But much to his father's disgust the boy was frail. Sternly on Henri's eleventh birthday the Count presented his son with a book on falconry in which he wrote these significant words:

"Remember, my son, that life in the open air and in the light of the sun is the only healthy life; everything which is deprived of liberty deteriorates and quickly dies".

But Henri was not to live "the healthy life". By the age of fourteen he had broken both legs and in spite of the best medical care, his limbs refused to grow. He was left a stunted cripple who for the rest of his life carried a man's



*draughtsman
impressionist
movement*

2 *Au Bal du Moulin de la Galette*, by TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

heavy torso on the feeble legs of a child. He did not, however, “deteriorate and quickly die”. Before he was ten he had become an ardent draughtsman, and while the Count rode away Henri remained behind to fill notebooks with sketches of horses and tandems. The father knew some of the best animal painters of the day. John Lewis Brown and especially René Princeteau, encouraged the boy when he lay ill in Albi. By 1882 he had entered the atelier of Léon Bonnat in Paris where he dutifully and unsuccessfully tried to follow the academic teaching of the master. “Your painting is not bad, Monsieur,” Bonnat once remarked, “but your drawing is simply atrocious!” From Bonnat Lautrec progressed to Fernand Cormon, a dull, historical painter. At Cormon’s his most stimulating contact was with Vincent van Gogh. But Paris, itself, supplied the best teaching. There was the discovery of the Impressionists and Degas in particular who could show him how a strong rhythmic approach

might be used to catch exciting aspects of contemporary life. There was Forain who was turning Degas into illustration and who could furnish broader suggestions as to subject matter and quick staccato line. Now he was ready for different, more painterly effects.

Though drawing remained first and last the basis of his art, he here conceived the composition of *Au Moulin Rouge* in larger, simpler masses. A central pattern of darks made by the figures surrounds a luminous core of the lighted tablecloth, which in turn throws light up into the faces. Colour is no longer scattered over the entire picture but is carefully spotted for its shock value, as in the knot of red-orange hair playing against mauves and lilacs in the costumes. Greater attention is paid to the laying-on of paint which here builds, rather than suggests, solid form. In short, this canvas is the result of a far more organizing vision than may be found in Lautrec's earlier work.

What occasioned this deepening of style? For one thing it was about this time that Lautrec began to design posters. In 1891 he made a coloured *affiche*, advertising the dancing of La Goulue at the Moulin Rouge. Here, and in the posters and lithographs that soon followed (fig. 9, *L'Anglais au Moulin Rouge*), the artist found that he must reduce his tangle and cross-hatching of lines to a few organic strokes. He learned to cut down many colours to a few striking hues, to mass and silhouette his once too-intricate shapes. Undoubtedly these lessons carried over into painting and account for part of the new compositional force in *Au Moulin Rouge*. But there is another influence, so far unnoticed by students of Lautrec. In 1888 Gauguin had painted a picture, the *Café de Nuit* (fig. 4), during the brief and tragic period when he had lived with van Gogh in Arles. The painting has remained relatively unknown due to the overwhelming fame of Vincent's picture of the same subject and to the fact that it belongs to the Museum of Modern Western Art in Moscow, but there is no doubt that Lautrec knew Gauguin's picture. He was acquainted with the artist and may easily have seen it in Gauguin's studio between the years 1890 and 1891. From this canvas Lautrec clearly appropriated the motif of several figures round a table which occurs in the background of the Arles picture, and brought it forward to serve as the main theme of *Au Moulin Rouge*.

Of course, Lautrec had a long tradition of nineteenth century pictures of figures grouped at tables to guide him. The "table-picture" had, in fact, a long development in European painting, going back as far as the sixteenth century where the scene of the prodigal son roistering at the inn in the company of thieves and harlots had been popular. The seventeenth century Dutch turned it into pure genre, retaining, however, some of its low-life elements. It



3 *La Serveuse de Bocks*, by MANET

was again revived by nineteenth century realists while the Impressionists often employed it. Among the most striking Impressionist examples are Renoir's *Le Cabaret de la Mère Anthony* (fig. 7) now in Stockholm, Manet's *La Serveuse de Bocks* (fig. 3), in the Tate Gallery, London, and Degas' *L'Absinthe* (fig. 6), in the Louvre. But the likenesses between Gauguin's group and the figures in



4 *Café de Nuit*, by Gauguin

Au Moulin Rouge are too close for any explanation but direct influence. While there are only four people at the table of the picture in Arles, the man with the beard seen in profile at the right foretells the figure of Dujardin. Next there is a woman in full face to be compared with La Macarona. Next in Gauguin's picture is a man seen in three-quarter view and placed like Sescou, and a second woman with her back to the spectator like Lautrec's unknown model. He has even re-interpreted the shawl and strange cap of Gauguin's woman in the elegant fur-trimmed jacket and fantastic hat of his own red-haired heroine (fig. 11). At his table, Gauguin painted two chairs which are likewise taken over by Lautrec. In addition, the slanting white table in the foreground of the *Café de Nuit* and the oblique lines of the billiard table find echoes in Lautrec's composition. Colour, too, had its effect. Gauguin's unusual palette of cinnabar red, orange, tan and green—due perhaps to van Gogh's passionate harmonies—

is subtly felt in Lautrec's more modulated handling. The very subject of Gauguin's canvas, a night café, may easily have suggested the use of an arabesque of figures for Lautrec's similar subject of *Au Moulin Rouge*.

This is as far as the influence went in Lautrec's first version. Once the linear scheme had been detached from Gauguin he was free to develop it in his own unmistakable idiom. He had no use for the separated, frieze-like arrangement of Gauguin, feeling, no doubt, a lack of rhythmic flow and vitality in these stiffly patterned figures. The faint, enigmatic quality of Gauguin, found particularly in the few canvases he painted in Arles, Lautrec replaced by vigorous



Gauguin plus Lautrec

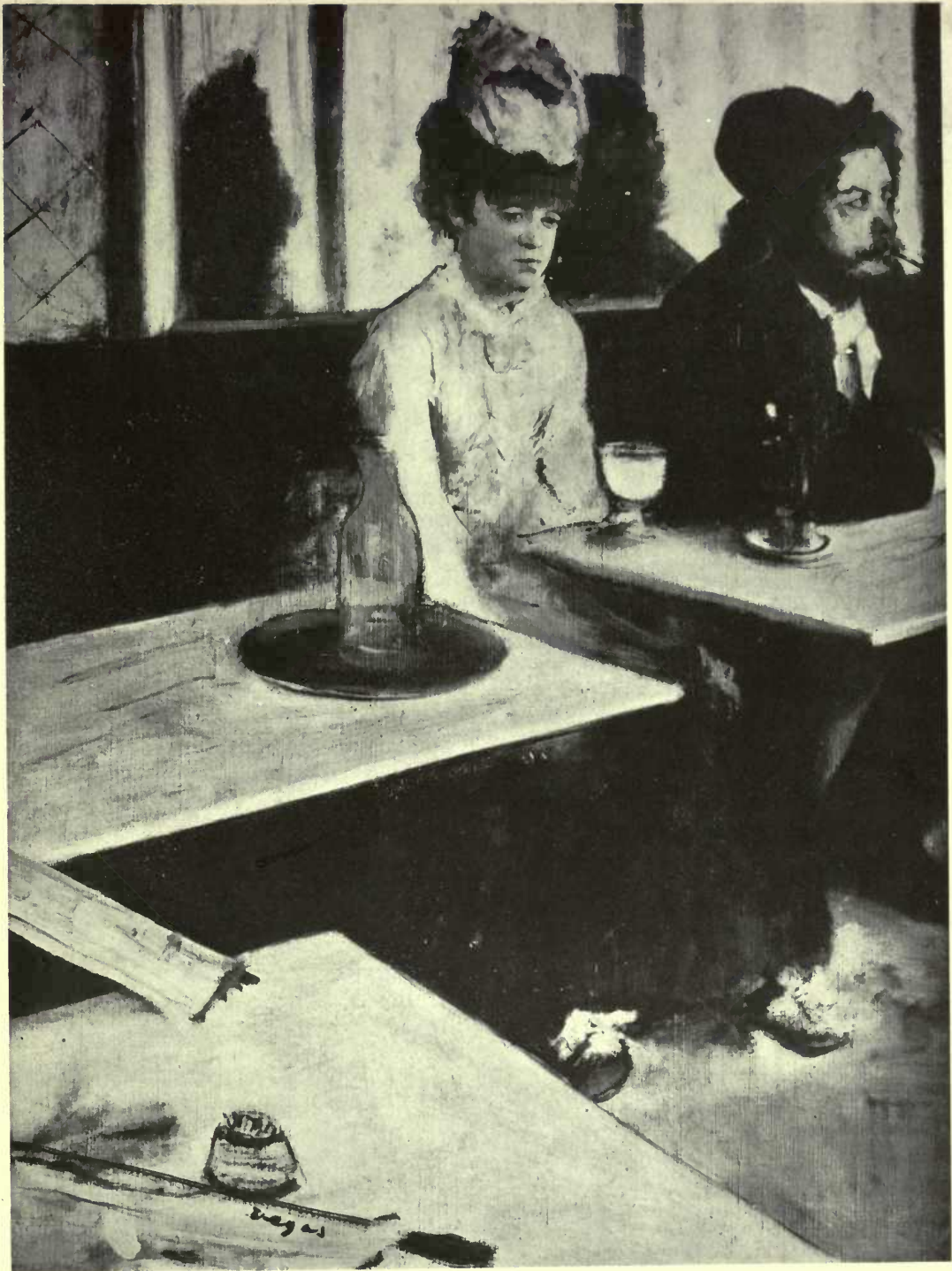
5 Portrait of the actor, Osagawa Tsumeyo II, by Sharakku

anybody
and his escape

psychological portraiture, not limited to the faces, but felt throughout poses and gestures. When Yvette Guilbert complained that Lautrec had caricatured her, the artist replied, "Ma chère, I don't *detail* you. I *totalize* you!" It is significant that he felt the need of just such striking simplification of pattern and colour as he found in Gauguin, and which confirmed his experience with the broad, flat areas of poster designing.

The most important element in Gauguin's painting, the half-length *Arlésienne*, Lautrec at first suppressed. The large foreground figure which gives the *Café de Nuit* its asymmetrical balance was ignored in *Au Moulin Rouge* as the artist painted it in 1892. But soon afterward, perhaps in the next year or so, Lautrec returned to the composition, now dissatisfied with its original form. This was a period of his renewed interest in Japanese art which he found particularly fruitful for lithography. Prints and paintings by the masters of Ukiyo-e had been known in Paris since the 'sixties and had vastly influenced the Impressionists, particularly Degas and Manet. These painters had concentrated on the novel linear arrangements and flattening of space in Oriental art. Such elements they blended with their own realistic vision, to accentuate the unusual angle and fleeting view of nature. Lautrec, who collected kakemonos and prints and who certainly knew the collections of Count Camondo, Bing, Vever and Rouart, was further drawn to the expressive side of Japanese art. Where an earlier generation had preferred Harunobu and Hokusai, Lautrec was impressed by the portrait heads by Sharakku (fig. 5) with their amazing union of decoration and psychological power. Under the spell of Japan and probably conscious, too, that *Au Moulin Rouge* lacked the strong construction of Gauguin's *Café de Nuit*, he re-designed the whole composition of the picture and added a looming figure in the left foreground, identified by Joyant, Lautrec's biographer, as "Mlle. Nelly C..." (fig. 15).

X He first pieced the canvas adding $10\frac{3}{4}$ inches at the bottom and $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches at the right. Then he gained space on the other two sides by painting to the edges which had formerly been folded over the stretcher. This not only gave him more area round the central group but allowed him to adopt some of the traits of Eastern perspective. In the final version, the diagonal of the balustrade is greatly lengthened and meets at sharp angle certain lines of the floor only indicated in the original. The result of this meeting is to spread forth a fan-like movement from a point at the very bottom of the composition, radiating to the distant horizontals of the glass wall. So sensitive is Lautrec to the new movement that he re-designs the chair in the foreground, slanting it in terms of the diagonal. By pushing the main motif off-centre he is able to balance it



6 *Les Buteurs d'Absinthe*, by DEGAS

by the new figure, the enormous powdered mask and shoulders of Mlle. Nelly in strange head-dress and leg-of-mutton sleeves. She is evidently portrayed as seated at another table, for the gaslight reflects in her face, modelled by Lautrec in shadows of a vivid green.

The daring placing of this figure, cut by the frame at right and bottom, sets up an immediate interplay of forms which is highly arresting. Not only has space been suggested in an original fashion but a curious unbalanced balance results. The rather obvious intimacy of the first conception has been replaced by a new dynamic movement, and the flow of life which he always sought is completely realized. In the original version one could feel in the patterned blouse of La Macarona and in the peculiar hat of the central figure some reference to the brocades, kimonos and stylized coiffures of the Japanese. But in the large head and shoulders of the foreground dancer there is more than a hint of the surprising "close-up" effects of Sharakku. When we realize that Gauguin had employed his large Arlésienne for some of the same reasons we can appreciate Lautrec's further dependence on the *Café de Nuit*.

The final version is a combination of psychological penetration and formal power rare in Lautrec's work. The individual traits of his models in this *comédie inhumaine* are well observed, and the interplay of character strikingly suggested. Though each face at the table is a sardonic portrait, the group as a whole gains from the impersonality of the foreground head, which becomes a symbol of the whole disenchanted mood of the cabaret. Much more consciously than usual, Lautrec has divided the surface of his canvas into broad areas of tone, lapping and overlapping a series of curved shapes, in which the outline is less linear than is customary. Again he has consulted the Orient in the way he has stressed a zig-zag rhythm of straight lines, playing against such curves.

The strange colour gamut, which does so much to convey the overtones of the scene, is conscientiously studied. The costumes of the figures are carried out in a series of reddish browns and violets, varied from area to area, and forcibly contrasted with the tannish orange of the balustrade and the deader tan of the sloping floor. Notes of brilliant orange and red give animation to the entire surface and vibrate with the harsh green of the background. Here and there the artist has painted in a touch of black or deep, neutral blue, not only forcing the brighter colours but lending a bizarre decorative note to the entire pattern.

Lautrec has avoided the rather casual movement which occurs in many of his more Impressionist canvases. Here the movement is of bigger forms, built in diagonal arrangement. The repeated shapes of the hats on Guibert, ✓

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7 *Le Cabaret de la Mère Anthony*, by RENOIR

✓ Sescou, Lautrec and de Céleyran not only lead the eye into space but carry the two last figures towards the left, and the opposing shapes of La Goulue and the dancer with upraised arms complement one another. Throughout, Lautrec varies and repeats a line or a quirk and sensitively gauges the intervals of his pattern. Over the whole picture he weaves a system of short, ornamental curves which foretells the rhythms of Art Nouveau. All these devices lead to unifying the various pictorial elements into a single effect.

Most of the picture is painted in broad washes of colour, but in the background the artist allowed himself a return to Impressionist ways of seeing. The glass walls shimmer with colour laid on in broken streaks of green and orange, lending variety to the simpler textures of the foreground. At one spot, Lautrec has swiftly touched in a suggestion of a waiter with a tray (fig. 16). This bit recalls the handling of Manet in his celebrated painting of *Un Bar aux Folies Bèrgères* in the Tate Gallery, but Lautrec has replaced Manet's lovely and subtle colour with hues calculated to convey the trenchant overtones of *Au Moulin Rouge*. Now and again, he builds up forms in paint which suggests that he is also familiar with early works by Bonnard and Vuillard, who about this time began to exploit a new, exquisite handling of pigment. Lautrec's ✓ broad dramatic lighting of the whole composition, however, has little to do with the closed, *cloisonné* effect of his young contemporaries. Nevertheless one should not underestimate *Au Moulin Rouge* as decoration or refuse to relate it to this important striving in *fin de siècle* art. *1874-1880 decorative*

There remains the question of the artist's attitude towards his extraordinary subjects. In the past Lautrec has suffered from two types of criticism. When his work first appeared it was judged as "decadent" and vigorously attacked or as vigorously defended on that ground. The painter of *Au Moulin Rouge* was called "perverse" or "satanic" because he dared to depict Parisian life at the close of the century in other than flattering terms. There was still lingering in France a tradition which insisted that art should embody a moral precept and critics who followed Lautrec in his work through the cheap bars or *maisons closes* were horrified to find the facts of existence set down with such pitiless insight. Lautrec's unswerving realism in treating women of the period shocked them; there has long been a superstition of gallantry in French painting which "this little monster" clearly violated. On the other hand a different class of critics gloried in his "morbidly". Chiefly men of letters, they seized upon Lautrec's approach as illustrating in art what they themselves were advocating in literature. Gladly they related the details of his disorganized life and created a Lautrec legend of drunkenness and depravity. More recently, now that the



8 *Artiste in a Restaurant*, by VAN GOGH

artist's subjects have taken their place in the larger view of the period, there has been a somewhat unsuccessful attempt to connect with him the neo-classic strain in Gallic art.

But a close examination of the artist reveals that Lautrec thought of himself as a realist. He had no use for the academic artificialities of his day; one of his most amusing parodies is a painted satire on the *Bois Sacré* of Puvis de Chavannes where the posturing gods and goddesses find their paradise invaded by a group of Lautrec's friends in street dress. Along with a batch of sketches sent to a friend when he was only seventeen the boy wrote: "I have tried to make them *real*, not *ideal*". His enthusiasms were for Breughel, Cranach and Brouwer and in Spain he would stand for hours before the portraits of Goya and Velasquez.

It has often been said that by associating himself with these "parasites" and "repulsive night birds", Lautrec surrendered the aristocratic traditions of the Counts of Toulouse. But in spite of mixing cocktails and preparing fantastic banquets for companions of the Moulin Rouge and Divan Japonais, he remains, in his art, curiously withdrawn. One could not forget Albi entirely, even in the frenzied night life of Paris and part of Lautrec's success is his objectivity towards his material. "One must know everything", he once remarked and as enthusiastically as his father rode to hounds, Henri-Marie-Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa stalked human character wherever it showed itself in its strangest, most flamboyant forms. In *Au Moulin Rouge* it is significant that Lautrec portrayed himself and his cousin as separated from the other *habitués*. They are not seated with them round the table, and in no painting does Lautrec inject himself into the centre of action. He stays outside, sharply observing.

Lautrec, however, ended by casting a somewhat poetic brilliance over the life he so vastly enjoyed. There are photographs of La Goulue and her companions in existence. Study their faces and see that though the artist exaggerated the vices and weaknesses of his models, he endowed them at the same time with a curious elegance. As they drift across his canvas they are transformed by colour and movement until Paris night life takes on the character of a vast decorative screen. Though Lautrec, with his crippled body and monkey-like features may have looked like a dwarf by Velasquez, he was by no means a court jester. Rather he was always the nobleman, commanding entertainment from his troupe. Whatever personal concessions of kindness he made towards them were made in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*.

Social historians, looking for the truth about Paris during the 'nineties, will not find it in Toulouse-Lautrec. For in *Au Moulin Rouge* he portrayed not life as it was, but as it might have been, a vision of ugliness touched with authentic glamour.

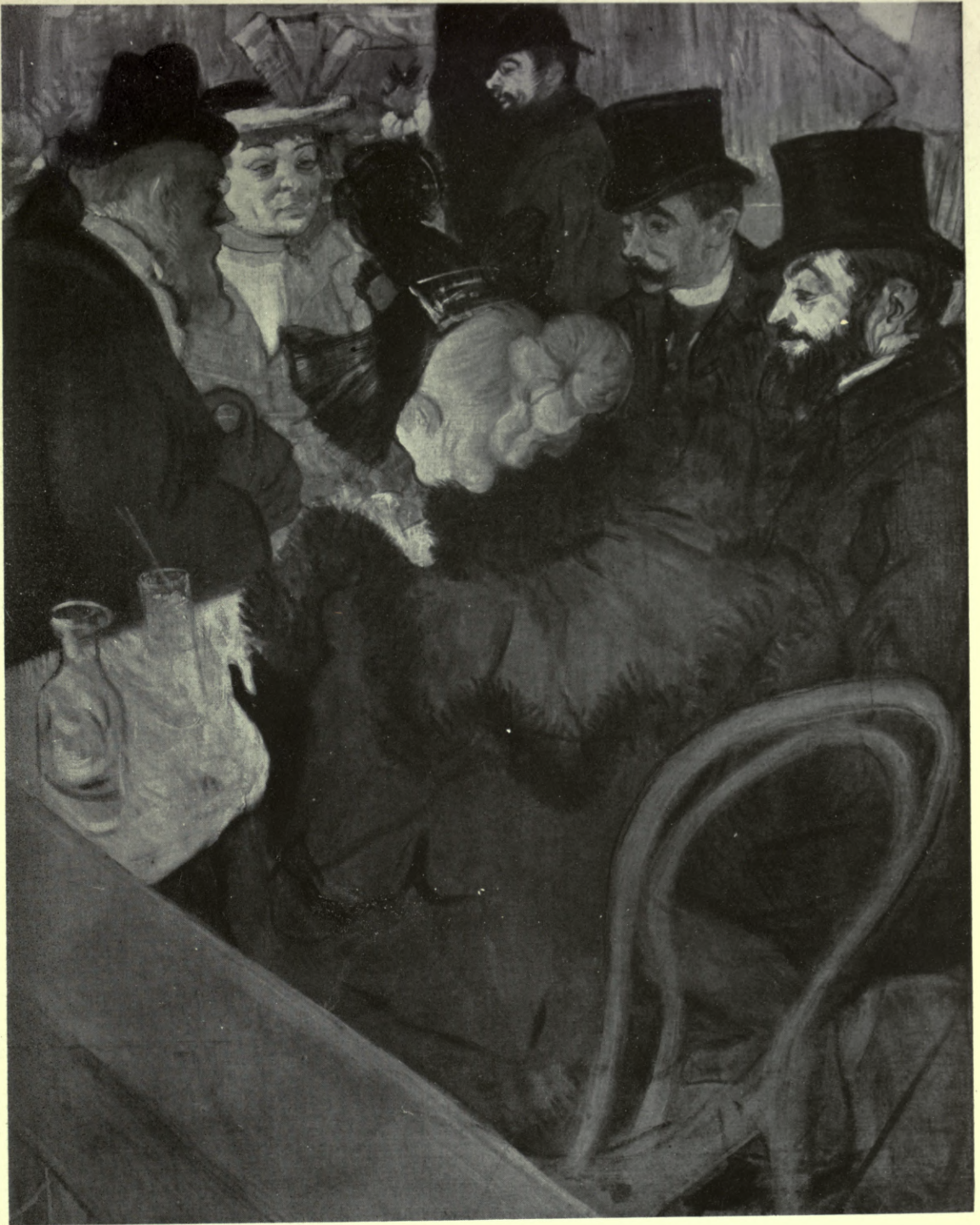
The objectivity of his work is a result of
* his withdrawal 16



9 *L'Anglais au Moulin Rouge*, by TOULOUSE-LAUTREC



10 *An Moulin Rouge, The first version*



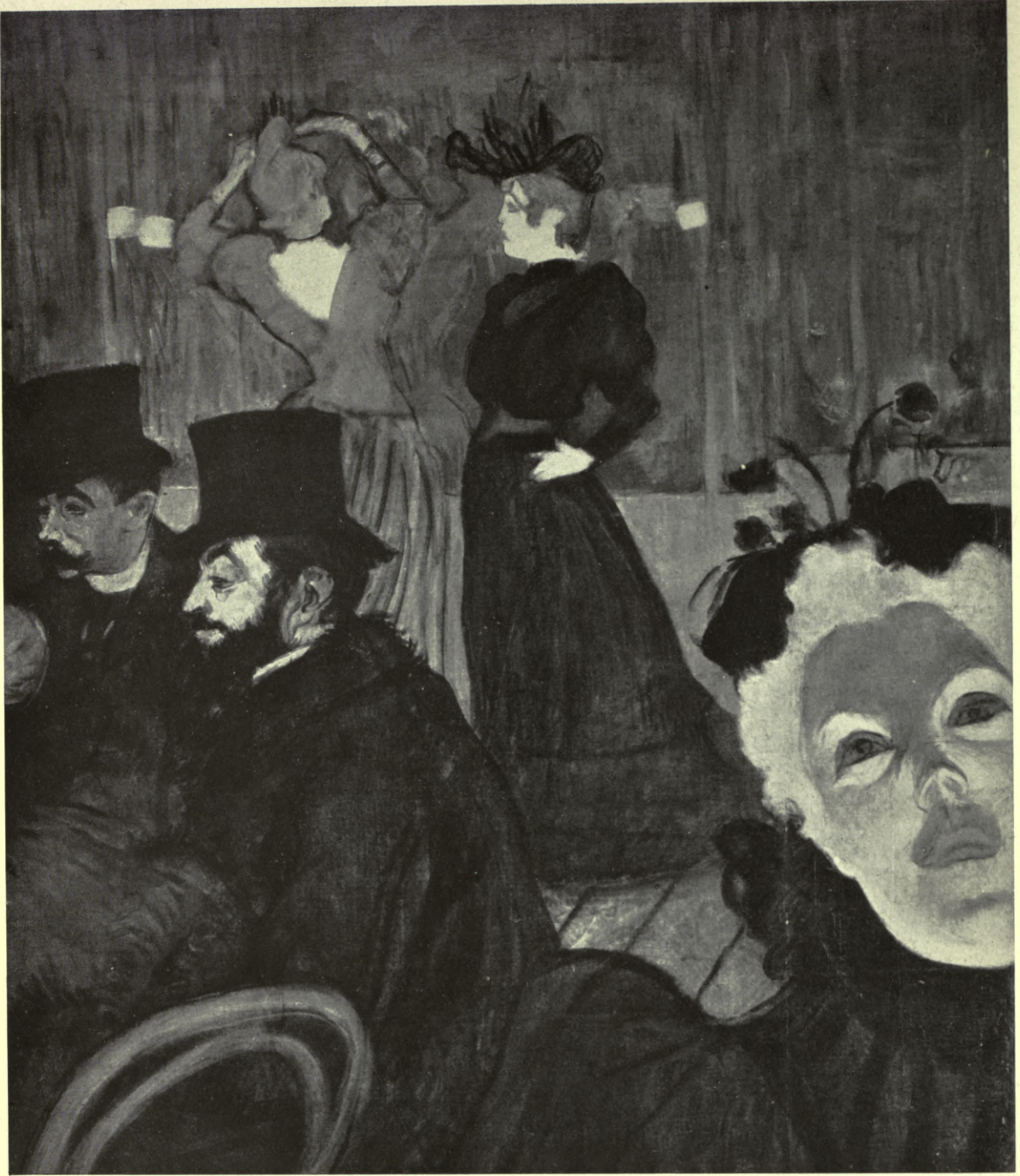
11 Detail of *Au Moulin Rouge*



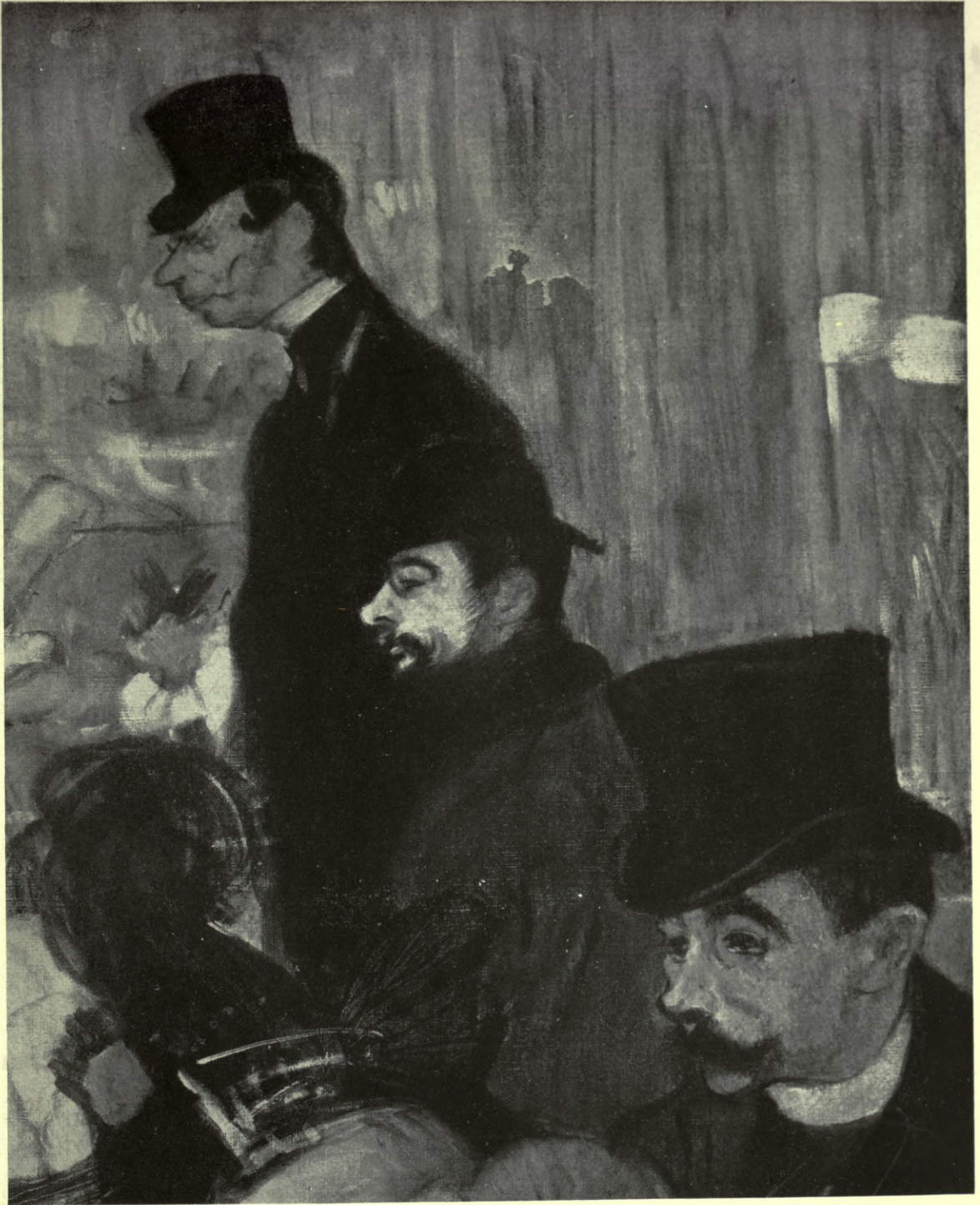
12 Detail of *Au Moulin Rouge*



13 Detail of *Au Moulin Rouge*



14 Detail of *Au Moulin Rouge*



15 Detail of *Au Moulin Rouge*



16 Detail of *Au Moulin Rouge*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- 6 Courtesy of the MUSEE DU LOUVRE
- 7 Courtesy of the ROYAL MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM
- 8 Collection of V. W. Van Gogh, Amsterdam
- 9 Courtesy of the ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
- 10 From a photograph taken in 1892

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