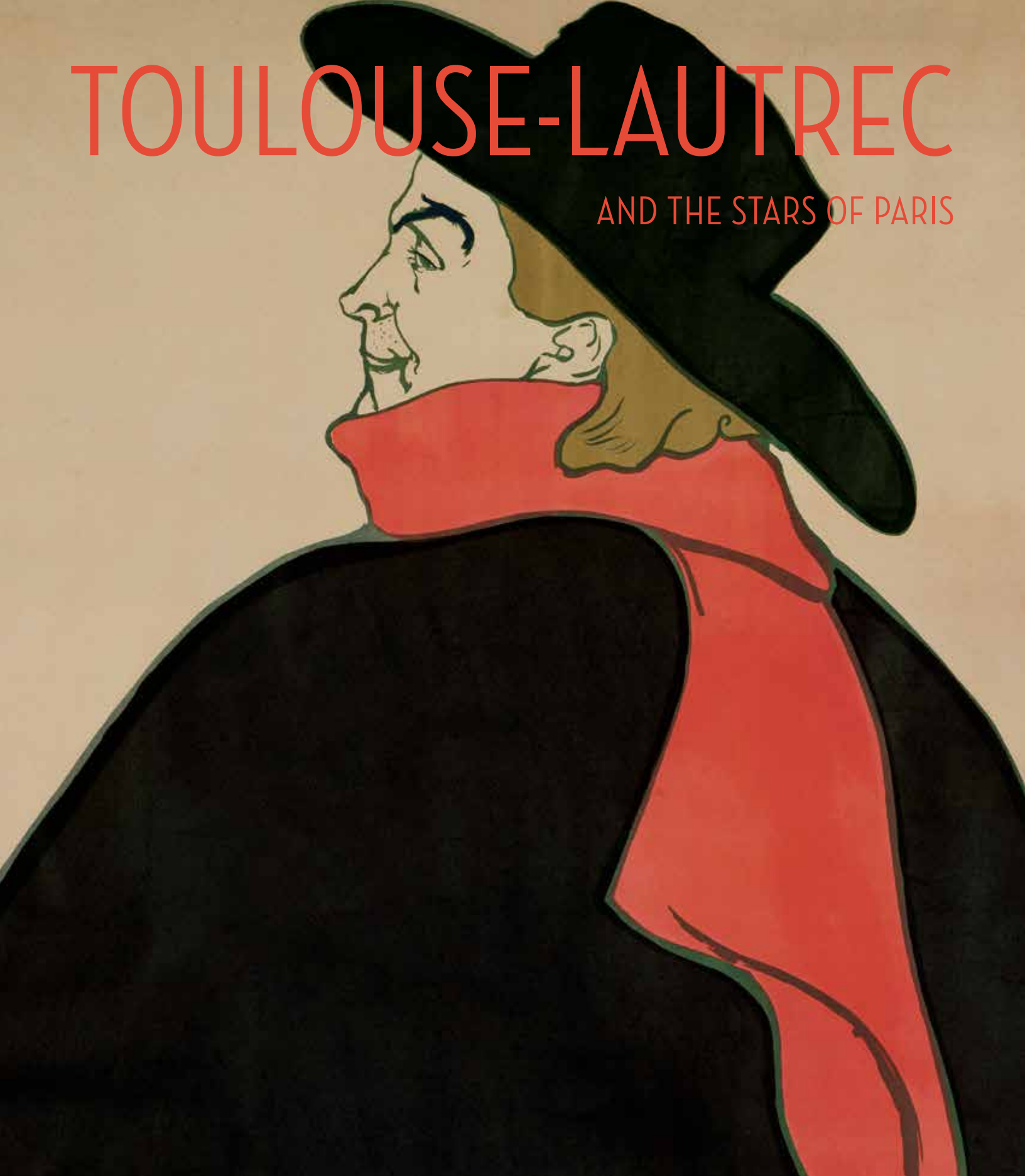


TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

AND THE STARS OF PARIS





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HELEN BURNHAM

with contributions by

MARY WEAVER CHAPIN

and JOANNA WENDEL



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JANE
Avril

Foreword

MARY WEAVER CHAPIN

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC was the right artist at the right time. The time was fin-de-siècle Paris, a moment when a vast array of entertainment options was springing up around the city, performers were attracting increasing attention and fame, and the color poster and lithograph were reaching new artistic and commercial heights. The artist was Henri-Marie-Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Montfa, the descendant of an old and distinguished aristocratic family from the south of France. Blessed with a quick and witty graphic talent, a keen understanding of performance, and an unusual degree of insight into human behavior, he captured the nightlife of Paris in artworks that are original, dazzling, and remarkably perceptive.

Although Lautrec's mature professional career lasted a mere fifteen years, he created approximately one thousand paintings and watercolors, nearly five thousand drawings, and more than three hundred and fifty prints and posters. Among this substantial oeuvre, his finest images, perhaps, are his depictions of the celebrities of the stage, "les stars." The burgeoning fascination with public celebrities had begun earlier in the century and was fed by new technology, such as lithography and photography. After the middle of the nineteenth century, images of actors, dancers, and

performers of all varieties could be seen in shop windows, purchased by fans, and viewed in three dimensions through stereoscopes. Collectors created albums focusing on particular stars or private portfolios of erotic poses by cancan dancers and circus performers, bringing the public performer into the private domestic world. The development of large-scale color lithography was another milestone; by the 1880s, bright posters dominated the streets of Paris, advertising everything from the most elevated opera to gritty *cabarets artistiques*. Publishing flourished following the Law on the Freedom of the Press of 1881, leading to a proliferation of journals, magazines, newspapers, and novels, many of which focused on the entertainers of the day. Niche publications devoted their pages to "les interviews" with stars, a new feature borrowed from American popular culture (along with the name), and café-concerts and cabarets such as the Chat Noir published their own specialized periodicals to reach fans. Celebrity endorsements, so common in our twenty-first-century world, accompanied the birth of modern advertising, as stars of the day lent their names to such products as face powder and canned sardines.¹

This celebrity-mad world was the stage that Lautrec stepped onto when he settled in Paris,



Fig. 1. Paul Sescau
(French, 1858–1926),
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec,
about 1892

Spectacular and Subtle: The Art of Toulouse-Lautrec

HELEN BURNHAM

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC lived for much of his adult life in Montmartre, the bohemian center of Paris nightlife, where he socialized with friends from all levels of society (fig. 1).¹ Despite suffering from an affliction that kept him in nearly constant pain, he produced a great variety of accomplished and groundbreaking imagery that expressed a longstanding interest in the habitués of his raffish quarter. His posters and prints in particular focused on the stars of Montmartre nightlife,

capturing in pithy and unforgettable compositions the defining gestures, costumes, and expressions of performers whose eccentricities and transgressions were part-and-parcel of their appeal to an audience tantalized by extremes of emotion and behavior. Lautrec combined acute awareness of the visual cues of stardom with sensitivity to the idiosyncrasies of his subjects, many of them personal friends. His graphic work is renowned for bold colors and radical compositions, while retaining an unexpected level of delicacy and subtlety, and relaying a sense of the interior lives of public figures along with the spectacle of their often shocking performances.

Lautrec's interest in types representative of Montmartre counterculture characterizes his paintings of the late 1880s and early 1890s.² In two important examples, he posed friends in the guise of down-and-out characters in seedy drinking establishments. *At the Café La Mie* features Maurice Guibert, an amateur photographer and champagne merchant, with his mistress, Mariette Berthaud (fig. 2).³ The painting's title is a play on slang for lower-class women and for clients who fail to pay prostitutes.⁴ *The Hangover* (*Suzanne Valadon*) portrays Lautrec's mistress—who would later become an artist in her own right—posing as a woman nursing a drink alone in a café (fig. 3).





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Jane Avril (Jardin de Paris)
1893

Avril's dances were a highlight of evenings at the Jardin de Paris, an enormously popular club that opened in 1885 on the Champs-Élysées. Avril commissioned this poster from Lautrec, who suggestively pairs her pose of a high kick with the upright neck of a double bass.

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Cover of the portfolio
The Original Print
(L'Estampe Originale)
1893

Avril appears here as a connoisseur of prints. In the background, the elderly master printer Cotelle turns the star-shaped wheel of a Brisset press at Ancourt's studio, presumably at work on the portfolio.



Aristide Bruant

Fig. 17.
Unknown photographer,
*The Chansonnier Aristide
Bruant*, about 1890

IN THE PANTHEON OF STARS whom Lautrec depicted, the *chansonnier* Aristide Bruant (1851–1925) stands apart (fig. 17). He was the only male performer with whom Lautrec had a long successful relationship, and he was also the most adept at self-promotion and marketing. Bruant's self-fashioning and Lautrec's brilliant artistic abilities were perfectly suited to the medium of the color poster; combined, they produced some of the most revolutionary and iconic images of fin-de-siècle Paris.¹

Lautrec and Bruant shared a number of attributes: both displayed a remarkable talent for image-making and a keen understanding of celebrity and performance. They were also adept at exploiting the frisson between high and low, artifice and reality. The artist's powerful lithographs of Bruant amplified this unique and savvy performer while skillfully masking their own contradictions: marketing a man who became rich by impersonating the poor; appearing spontaneous and unproduced, when in fact they were carefully studied and executed; and masquerading as insightful portraits while functioning as highly effective commercial advertising tools.

Bruant first made his name performing at the Chat Noir, a cabaret that was the haunt of artists, poets, writers, and other denizens of Montmartre. Soon Bruant founded his own café, Le Mirliton, where he performed songs he wrote about the lives of pimps, thieves, prostitutes, and thugs who eked out a living on the margins of the great city. Although Bruant himself was from a bourgeois background, he assumed the persona of an outsider, adopting the colorful slang of the lower classes and dressing in a simple costume often topped with a black cloak, red muffler, and wide-brimmed hat.² He hurled insults at the patrons of his café, a tactic that proved surprisingly popular with his audience and furthered his

authenticity as a dispossessed poet railing against the injustices of life. His bellicose manner, poignant and original songs, and personal charisma made him a star not just in Montmartre but also across Paris and throughout Europe. By 1892, the year of Lautrec's first poster of Bruant, the performer was already a wealthy man. Yet he maintained his carefully honed pose as an outsider, parlaying his raffish persona into invitations to perform at the upscale Ambassadeurs and Eldorado café-concerts in the heart of Paris.

To market this audacious performer, Lautrec seized upon the most salient aspects of Bruant's costume and appearance. What sets Lautrec above his fellow artists, however, is his ability to create images that transcend the mundane and enter the realm of the symbolic, rather than relying on a mere photographic likeness (fig. 18). He began by making detailed





Homage - May Belfort
as I can't remember
her name I drew
Lautrec

41

**May Belfort at the Irish and
American Bar, Rue Royale**
1895

Lautrec inscribed this print:
"Homage to May Belfort after
having tormented her for an
hour." The Irish and American
Bar was a popular spot for
racing fans and expatriates
like Belfort, as well as for
Anglophiles like Lautrec, who
enjoyed speaking English and
eating roast beef.



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May Belfort
1898

This print is from the lithograph
portfolio *Portraits of Actors
and Actresses*. In the glare
of stage light, Belfort's face
and costume appear as a
series of dramatic shapes,
punctuated by squiggly lines.
Lautrec sketched the shadowy
background with broad strokes
made using the side of the
lithography crayon.