Henri Rousseau
1844 – 1910

Note to Presenters:

Please bring the following with you to the classroom:

- Self Portrait, Juniet’s Cart, Virgin Forest (Jungle Scene with Setting Sun)
- Elements of Art posters
The Big Picture: Henri Rousseau

Personal Data:

Name: Henri Julien Felix Rousseau  
Nickname: Le Douanier  
Birth: 1844 in Laval, France  
Death: 1920 in Paris, France  
Family: He was married twice and had nine children. It was after the death of his wife and 7 of their 9 children that he devoted himself to painting.

Professional Data:

Type of Artist: The first “modern primitive” or naïve painter. He had no formal training.

Style: Used bold colors, flat designs, decorative style  
Often repeated patterns  
Imaginative subject matter  
Lacked traditional drawing techniques such as perspective

Subject Matter: Portraits, Parisian life, patriotic subjects, and exotic scenes such as his famous jungle paintings.

About the Artist:

“Rousseau’s lack of formal art education freed him from academic convention and permitted his instinct to take full reign. His unerring sense of pattern, his imaginative use of color and his taste of lyrical and exotic themes provided a wealth of work to influence upcoming generations of artists.”

“Rousseau arranged the elements in his pictures according to what suited him rather than recording what he had seen.”

“…Rousseau’s work has been considered a forerunner of surrealism because of its dreamlike sensibility…Rousseau’s fantastical paintings bridge the transition from the realistic and academic art of the nineteenth century to the modernist directions of the twentieth century.”
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Quote from the artist: “Nothing makes me happier than to contemplate nature and to paint it. Would you believe that when I go out in the country and see all that sun, all that greenery and all those flowers, I sometimes say to myself: ‘All that belongs to me, it does.’”

The Life of Henri Rousseau

Henri Rousseau, a French painter, was a controversial figure of early 20th century art. He was both mocked and admired as the first “modern primitive” or “naïve” painter. He is known for his portraits and for the tropical jungle paintings he produced in increasing numbers toward the end of his life. His bold colors, flat designs, and imaginative subject matter were praised and imitated by modern European painters.

Henri Julien Felix Rousseau was born in Laval, France in 1844. He enlisted in the army at the age of 18 as a saxophonist and claimed to have served briefly in Mexico. After his discharge, he worked in a customs post, collecting taxes on goods brought into Paris. This is the origin of his nickname “Le Douanier.” He began working seriously as a painter in his spare time. After the death of his first wife, he retired in 1885. He supplemented his small pension by giving lessons in music and painting.

To some, his paintings were the laughing stock of the exhibitions. However, beginning in 1886, he began showing his work at the Salons des Independents. Here he soon won the admiration of such notable contemporaries as Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Pablo Picasso. Others, including Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas, began to recognize a new direction in Rousseau’s work, moving away from the naturalization of the impressionists. After painting mainly portraits and Parisian scenes, he turned to highly original depictions of fantasy during the 1890’s. These pictures are typically tropical scenes with human figures at rest or play and with beasts mysteriously charmed to stillness.

Rousseau was entirely self-taught. He had a natural talent and a style that constantly improved. His personality was delightful. He gave intimate evening parties at which his music students performed. He sent out hand-printed invitations that were eagerly accepted by Parisian writers and artists.

His final years were clouded by an arrest for fraud. When he died in 1910 of gangrene from a neglected leg wound, only 7 people attended his funeral. Most of his artist friends were out of town, in the country for the summer months. Though he was laughed at early in his career, there is little doubt that Rousseau was a major artist of remarkable originality and power. His earliest work displays
characteristics of all primitive art: flat surfaces, minute detail, and stiff, frontally posed figures of odd proportions. His painting gradually improved and he was known to labor over his work. His composition was careful, with broad planes and monumental forms that he achieved by magnifying the pants and trees he represented. One of he most important aspects of his work is his depiction of tropical flora, with people and animals usually reduced to silhouettes.

**Featured Works:**

**“Self Portrait” (1890)**
Rousseau’s original title for this work was “Myself: Portrait-Landscape”. The portrait dominates the symbolic landscape for it is, in proportion, more than life size. Rousseau wears a Rembrandt cap, sports in his lapel the button of the Palmes Academiques (awarded for his teaching of drawing in a city school), and has inscribed across his neat palette the names of his wife and daughter. The scene is a Paris quay, and we see lined up in the background a row of barrels outside a toll house to remind us that Rousseau was a douanier, or customs official. Directly beside the painter a sailboat, the tall masts brightly adorned with real and imaginary flags, becomes part of the view of the Pont (bridge) des Arts that connects the Beaux-Arts and the Louvre, almost directly across the Seine. Beyond the bridge is a group of houses, identifiable as French by the slim black chimney pots, and the top of the Eiffel Tower. It is sunset, and a balloon floats gently among the pink-tinged clouds. Like his other works, this portrait combines the elements of fantasy and reality.

**Juniet’s Cart (1908)**
Many of Rousseau’s paintings were of horses and carts or buggies, almost invariably with bright red wheels and horses so well equipped with blinders that one wonders how they could see at all. Perhaps none is more charming than this painting of an entire family stuck tightly together like paper dolls or mannequins, out for a walk with the family pet in the dusk of a pleasant summer day. Sunset glistens on the leaves of the trees, the suburban street is deserted, and this frozen moment, with great details, captures a romantic way of life.

**“Virgin Forest” or “Jungle Scene with Setting Sun”**
For this painting and others like it, Rousseau drew on a variety of experiences as well as his imagination. He was a frequent visitor to the botanical gardens where he spent hours studying and drawing jungle plants, and to the zoo where his subjects were wild animals. In this painting he also invented his own plant types and mixed jungle and forest foliage. Several elements give this the dream-like quality typical of many of his paintings, ie. the flowers stand taller than the leopard, the red sun seems pastel in the sky and the tropical grasses are higher than a man’s head. It is as if Rousseau is giving us the jungle dream of childhood.
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Discussion Topics and Questions:

Characteristics of Primitive Art:
- Outside mainstream of academic art with little or no formal training
- Artists are frequently from a simple background
- Works are very original
- Numerous details are carefully delineated
- Surfaces seem flat, proportions are inconsistent
- Decorative sense of bright color and pattern

Rousseau's style as a painter was based simply on what pleased him. He was recognized as the first primitive artist, and the American primitive movement began shortly after his death, in the 1930’s.

Discuss the Elements of Art: (Because of time, you may want to focus on only one of the prints.)

1. What kinds of colors did Rousseau use? Are these colors warm or cool? Which colors grab your attention first?
2. Is color used to balance the composition?
3. What shapes do you see?
4. Are the lines sketchy or clean and crisp?
5. Look for different textures. How would you describe them?
6. Where is the light coming from? What time of day do you think it is?
7. What takes up most of the space? How is the space divided?

Compare and Contrast the three paintings:

1. Discuss the three types of paintings – portrait, a scene depicting daily life in Paris, and a jungle landscape. What similarities can you find? (All show outdoor scenes, all combine elements of reality and fantasy, all demonstrate a similar sense of proportion.) Do they look like they were all painted by the same artist?
2. One characteristic of Rousseau’s work is his use of pattern. A pattern in art is defined as a design used over and over. The design might be pictorial or simple lines, shapes, or colors. Look for patterns in the paintings. (The chimneys, flags, barrels and round supports under the bridge in “Self Portrait”; the repeated leaf shapes in “Virgin Forest”; the cart wheels, the use of black and white, the use of identical leaves on the trees in Juniet’s Cart)
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3. Rousseau arranged the elements in his pictures according to what suited him rather than by according what he had seen. Look for elements in each painting that demonstrate this aspect of his style.

4. Do you like these paintings? Would you want any of them in your room?

5. What does the term self-taught mean to you?

For “Self-Portrait”

1. A portrait is a picture of a person. Rousseau painted this portrait of himself. What can you learn about him from this portrait? (Discuss details such as where and when he lived, his cap, the palette with names of his wife and daughter, his paintbrush, the pin on his lapel.)

2. Does the painting have detail or does it give an impression of something? What details do you notice? (Draw attention to the elements in the background such as the barrels being unloaded from the ship.)

3. Given the size of the items in the background and the people to the left of Rousseau, he is disproportionately large. How does this impact the painting? (Rousseau looks “larger than life”, representing himself as the most important part of the painting.)

4. What time of day do you think it is? How is this shown? (Early evening, by the streaks of sunlight in the sky.)

5. What is in the foreground? The middle ground? The background?

For “Juniet’s Cart”

1. What do you see in this painting? What are they doing? Where are they?

2. Do their poses look natural or comfortable? (Flat, stiff frontally posed.)

3. What time of day is it? How can you tell? (Sunset, by the light glistening on the leaves.)

4. Which colors are the boldest? What effect do these bold colors have? (Red, black, and white. They draw your eyes to the cart and the people.)

5. What do the clothes and other items in the picture tell you about when this picture was painted? (Early 1900's)

6. What other details are common in the primitive style of painting? (Flat surfaces, minute detail, odd proportions.)

For “Jungle Scene with Setting Sun”

1. What do you notice first? Where is this scene?

2. What do you notice about the plants? Would a cactus grow alongside the other plants?

3. Some of the plants are realistic of jungle foliage and others are not. What effect does this have on your view of the painting?
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4. Look at the size of the leopard. What do you think about that? What about its shadow? (The shadow seems to belong to a person.)
5. How does this painting make you feel?
6. Notice the lightest green and the darkest green. How many shades can you see? Why do you think he used so many?
7. What dream-like qualities do you see in this painting? (mixture of plants, size of flowers and plants relative to the leopard, shape of the leopard’s shadow.)

Suggested Activities:

1. Using “Self-Portrait”, ask the students to look very carefully at the painting, noticing as much as possible. Turn the painting around, Record a list of everything the class can remember. Then see what’s missing when you look at it again.
2. Using “Juniet’s Cart”, how might a modern version of this painting look?

Bibliography

Books:

A Weekend with Rousseau by Gilles Plazy
Henri Rousseau: Art for Children by Ernest Raboff
Art Safari: An Adventure in Looking from the MOMA
Come Look with Me: Exploring Landscape Art with Children by Gladys Blizzard
Stories by Philip Yenawine/MOMA

Websites:

Webmuseum, Paris:Rousseau, Henri
www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rousseau

Encarta Encyclopedia: Rousseau, Henri Julien Felix
www_Encarta.msn.com/find/Concise.asp

The Imaginary World of Henri Rousseau
www.nga.gov/education/schoolarts/rousseau.htm
Art in the Classroom

Program Goal:

The foremost goal of this program is to help children to enjoy and appreciate looking at art, whether it be that of a Master or a contemporary artist. We want them to develop their natural talents as observers and to feel free to articulate what they think without the impediments of "right" or "wrong." We believe an effective art appreciation program should encourage children to:

1. Look at art and be inquisitive about it;
2. Learn the fundamentals and vocabulary of art;
3. Think visually to look and analyze what they see;
4. Become familiar with famous artworks, artists and art history;
5. Appreciate different styles of art.

Helpful Hints and Reminders

Length of Presentation: Your presentation should be half an hour.

Materials for the Presentation: The artwork and materials from the bin in the AIC closet area marked “do not remove from school” should be removed only when doing a presentation, and returned immediately thereafter. Sometimes presentations are scheduled back to back, and the next presenter will need the materials – there is only one set.

Materials That May Be Signed Out: Materials in the closet and materials in the bin that are not labeled “do not remove from school” may be borrowed overnight. Please sign out the materials on the Sign Out Sheet after 3:30 p.m., and return by 9:00 a.m. the next morning. The whole bin can not be signed out – only individual materials in the bin. Please be respectful of other presenters who may also wish to review the provided materials.

Tailor the Presentation: Practice with your child at home to see how the interest level holds. You may find that you need to adjust your presentation and the content for your class’s age level and appropriateness.

Activities: This program is a general overview of the featured artwork and artist. Activities for the classroom are designed to be group-discussion-related, and not an actual art project. Some art activities may be suggested for the students to try at home.

Siblings: There is only a limited amount of time for the presentation. We ask that siblings not join you for the presentation – it can be overwhelming to the younger sibling, and disruptive to the students, the teacher, and you.

Have Fun!