TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

By A. HYATT MAYOR

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Works by Toulouse-Lautrec are being shown through November 25 in the print galleries in the south basement in order to commemorate the artist's death in 1901. The bulk of the exhibition consists of lithographs and lithographic posters, but it also includes loans of a gouache from Adelaide Milton de Groot and two pastels from Erich Maria Remarque and an oil, The Sofa, recently acquired by the Museum. Some of the finest of the lithographs were given by the estate of Alfred Stieglitz and many of the posters by Bessie Potter Vonnoh.

If Lautrec were alive today he would only be eighty-six years old. He was born half a year before Lincoln was shot and died in the same year as Queen Victoria. During his thirty-six years of stretched alertness he drew for over thirty, painted mature pictures for about fifteen, made all but one of his prints in ten, and almost all his posters in five. Such a heavy volume of work would have taxed a robust man laboring in the retirement of a studio, but Lautrec accomplished it among a jostle of people all day and all night. He could not bear to be alone. His broken, child-sized legs, that kept him from running fast or walking far, made him cling to the company of the lively. Outside of his art he cared for nothing but animals and people in action. He hated the formalities that separated people in the polite society into which he was born, he wasted no time in reading and saw no sense in landscape. Life lay all in meeting.

A painter so fascinated by people naturally felt most at home in quick instinctive likenesses, and Lautrec threw his whole intense personal-itic into his character sketches of a few lines. He would ask somebody: "Who was the girl who was here last week? You know, she looks like this..." And then a couple of pencil strokes on a restaurant menu flashed all that was needed to recognize—indeed to know—an individual. Lautrec has no equal in intuitions of character as terrifying as a child's. The agility of his line surprises like Hokusai's, though his insight penetrates instead of glancing off into routine caricature like the Japanese.

His interest in his sitters sustained him through the labor—which he never stinted—of studying and revising an oil painting. But oil painting is a deliberate art that usually yields its best results in a painter's middle age. This may explain why Lautrec's oils, vibrant though they often are, have changed the course of art less than his work on the lithographic stone.

Lautrec created the modern poster. He jumped to fame when his huge lithographs appeared on every billboard to startle Paris with their simplified colors and calculated design. When his posters first flared their yellows and oranges and blacks in the gaslight, they must have impressed themselves unforgottably, for nothing like them had ever decorated any street before. Even today they are apt to be the first pictures that spring to mind when we think of Paris of the 1890's. Lautrec made them the most memorable of all posters by the exactitude of his attack, not by the brutal smash that has become the commonplace of advertising and propaganda.

Lautrec's concentration hits home when he
lithographs a poster taller than a tall man or when he pencils a small stone with the delicacy of a mosquito probing for a bite. Many of his lithographs are a mere breath of suggestion that would fade from one’s attention if it were not for his terrible insight into his subject. He had a fellow feeling for the people who have to put on a good show whatever they suffer, like the actor, the prostitute, the lawyer, or the circus performer. The crippled painter himself had to put on a brave front because his historic lineage forbade his indulging in the modern vice of self-pity. Such an aristocrat, who shrank at nothing, had both a sense of detachment and a sense of being a member of the family whether he went in the glumness of the brothel at off-hours or in the honky-tonk and zoo stink of the old Moulin Rouge. He drew disturbing intimacies as knowingly as an actor in them and as candidly as a botanist. This combination makes him now—fifty years after his death from exhaustion—the artist of our day.

Awakening, lithograph from the series “Elles.” The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949
The Jockey, the first of a proposed series of horse-racing lithographs. Dick Fund, 1928
LEFT: Charles Edward Conder in the Box with the Gilded Mask, lithograph printed in colors as a program for “Le Missionnaire” at the Théâtre Libre in 1893. The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.

RIGHT: The café singer Aristide Bruant, lithograph, Dick Fund, 1925.

RIGHT: Night-club poster for le Divan Japonais showing Yvette Guilbert on the stage and Jane Avril in the audience. Dick Fund, 1931