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The Legacy of Henri de Toulouse Lautrec's Paris: A Queer Reexamination

If one word could be attributed to the persisting memory of Henri de Toulouse Lautrec's art, it would be cabaret. The French painter and lithograph artist is remembered for his time spent in these performance houses, drinking and sketching before returning to his studio to recreate the feeling of the night. Either that, or he was frequenting brothels, documenting the prostitutes who also happened to be his close companions. Because he is thought to so accurately embody the energy of *fin de siècle* (end-of-century) 1800s France, his works are plastered on the walls of modern-day Paris. "A hint of Lautrec is thought to bring with it a sense of light-hearted decadence, of acceptable wickedness," says David Sweetman, author of *Explosive Acts*.[1] But remembering Lautrec for his time at the famous Moulin Rouge or any other bar, café, or theatre he frequented in Montmartre misses an important, often ignored element of his work—one could even argue the keystone of his career. Between his depictions of sapphic sex workers and his willingness to experiment with gender both in costumes and illustrations, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's life and art documents the not-so-secret hub of queer culture alive in Paris at the end of the 19th century.

In 1864, Henri was born into a wealthy aristocratic family. The Toulouse-Lautrecs were conservative Roman Catholics. As a child, he was "small and slow to develop," and it quickly became clear to his parents that he was disabled.[2] It seems that his parents being first cousins was the cause of his dwarfism, a "genetic mishap that caused.. pain, deformation and weakness in the

[1] Sweetman, David. *Explosive Acts: Toulouse-Lautrec, Oscar Wilde, Félix Fénéon and the Art & Anarchy of the Fin de Siècle*. Simon & Schuster, 1999, pp. 281-282.
[2] Frey, Julia. *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*. Viking Penguin, 1994, pp. 31.

skeletal structure."[3] Because of this, he was bedridden throughout his childhood, spending much of his time inside drawing. His uncle Charles was an artist by hobby and encouraged Henri, who requested to learn in an atelier once he finished regular schooling at seventeen. Since he couldn't take on traditional roles such as diplomacy estate management expected of him by his family, his parents "began to look at his talent as a possible source of real happiness for a son who was not going to have many other options."[4] His desire to learn led him to Paris and soon to Montmartre, the district that would become his permanent home.

Montmartre was a village incorporated into Paris in 1860. It and other impoverished areas were ignored during Baron Haussmann's urban revamping of the city, only pushing them further into squalor. However, post-bourgeois renovation, many artists began to flock to Montmartre as a place of inspiration, one where subversive, seedy behavior was celebrated.[5] Such a place was the antithesis of what Henri's family wanted for him, but residing there allowed him independence from his overly doting mother and gave him access to plenty of models for his work. The district was filled with cafés, bars, brothels, and cabarets, which attracted Lautrec, as he had a penchant for drinking and performance. Here, he was introduced to a new world of sin, with one of the more pronounced deviant behaviors of the area being love between women. His 1894 poster *Eros Vanné* (Fig. 1) depicts performers Yvette Guilbert and May Milton and announces Guilbert's performance of *Eros vanné* (translating to Worn-out love), a song which includes the lyrics: "I preside over the Sapphic love of women without men."[6] In the bottom left corner of the poster, a small boy, presumably Eros, is seen on crutches with his leg in a cast, sticking out at a suggestively phallic angle. It is implied that Guilbert and Milton's sexual proceedings have

[3] Frey pp. 71.
[4] Frey pp. 116.
[5] Frey pp. 131, 185.
[6] Sweetman pp. 357.

caused these injuries. The *Eros vanné* poster could not be more clear in its intentions, and the fact that it is an advertisement for a performance implies this poster could've been seen in public locations across Montmartre. While homosexuality was still overwhelmingly frowned upon by a religious French populace, Montmartre was a unique haven for queer women, largely due to a male desire to sexualize lesbians for their personal pleasure. The owner of the cabaret Moulin Rouge "discouraged overt male homosexuality at his club," but "lesbianism was thought to be good for business."[7] Lesbian women were prominent community figures as well, running businesses like Le Rat Mort and La Souris, two bars that Lautrec frequented. He depicted the owner of La Souris, Madame Palmyre, multiple times in his art.[8][9] In the words of Phillipe Julian, "'It was no rarity to see women in men's suits… sitting on the café terraces. No one protested when two women waltzed together, as in Lautrec's painting.'"[10] Obviously, it was not an easy life for sapphic women; the district was heavily impoverished and rife with violent crime. Still, in a modern world where these actions by same-gender couples are frequently protested, it is amazing to imagine such an accepting place existing as early as the 1880s.

However positively Montmartre reacted to Lautrec's prolific advertisement career—he made over 300 lithograph prints and 5,000 drawings before his untimely death at age 36—the general Parisian public spared less sympathy for his subversive works surrounding brothel life. Henri became fascinated with depicting the intimate lives of prostitutes, spending hours, sometimes days, lodging in the brothel alongside the sex workers, sketching the women of the nearby red-light district before returning to his Montmartre studio to paint.[11] Many artists used

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[7] Sweetman pp. 362.
[8] Frey pp. 374-375.
[9] Sweetman pp. 360.
[10] Néret, Gilles, and Ingo F. Walther. *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1864-1901.* Benedikt Taschen, 1999, pp. 80.
[11] Néret pp. 135.

brothels as a source for models, but Henri had a unique relationship to the workers: "he listened to their confessions, read and corrected their letters, comforted them when they were tearful and made them laugh."[12] Just like the cabaret singers and dancers of Moulin Rouge, these women were his friends, and many of them were queer. Lautrec had gained more popularity for his work over the years and had learned quickly that his brothel paintings were not to be publicly exhibited—the police were called in 1893 when one was displayed in a gallery window. During his 1896 exhibition at the Manzi Joyant Gallery, the works were sequestered into their own room behind a locked door and only close friends were allowed to enter.[13] Many of the works the public has access to today were not for general audiences at the time, which makes all the more amazing the sheer number of sapphic-centered pieces he created. Search up one specific Lautrec and you are likely to find multiple iterations of the same piece, whether it depicts lesbian couples in public, kissing, or in bed with one another. His 1895 work *Two friends* (Fig. 2) makes it clear that Henri understood intimately the climate in which he worked. Women of his time were sexualized, objectified, and any suggestion of queer relationships were written off as friendship. This was especially true of prostitutes, whose connections were viewed as nothing more than a product of loneliness in a brutal industry. Yet the subject of the supposed *"Two friends"* looks at the viewer knowingly, her dress askew and her lover naked and asleep at her side. As Néret writes, "in spite of the fact that many of Lautrec's brothel pictures look like chance snapshots, likely to have a documentary rather than an artistic value, he did actually rearrange his figures and settings many times before he found the composition that satisfied him."[14] It cannot be denied that there was something to be said, a message to be conveyed, from a man who obsessively composed scenes in the studio rather than working objectively or 'plein air,' so to

[12] Néret pp. 133, 136.
[13] Sweetman pp. 354.
[14] Néret pp. 155.

say. In contrast to *Two friends*, the title of *The Two Girlfriends* (1894) (Fig. 3) hides nothing. While the former painting suggests sexual activity between two "friends," the affection shown between the two "girlfriends" is nothing of the sort. A romantic label is assigned to the pair embracing one another, while a platonic one is given to an intimate sexual moment. This shows women through the lens of a patriarchal, heteronormative society: they are either eroticized for men's pleasure or their queerness is erased because it would imply them to be inaccessible to the men fantasizing about them.

A lingering question remains for scholars about where Lautrec's deep empathy for queer and femme persons came from. Growing up in a deeply religious household that rebuked the leftist sentiment of the Parisian art scene, it seems unexpected that the artist would so sympathetically depict these groups. Besides, Lautrec's contemporaries, many occupying spaces similar to his, were hardly doing the same.[15] Some scholars, like Frey and Néret, feel that his outlook was strongly influenced by his lifelong struggle with disability. This has merit: Henri was 4'11" and once commented on the brothel he worked in: "'I have found girls of my own size!... Nowhere else do I feel so much at home.'"[16] However, a deeper analysis into Henri's relationship with gender throughout his life reveals additional sentiments worth considering that may have affected his outlook and work.

Playing with gender was not off-limits for Lautrec the way it was and continues to be for so many western men. His father Alphonse was an eccentric man who greatly enjoyed dressing up in costume and posing for pictures, and Henri continued that tradition with his friends; it was not an uncommon fad among Parisian artists to attend flamboyant costume balls.[17] However, Alphonse wore imported clothing from across the world, not so much feminine dress. Henri

[15] Sweetman pp. 366.
[16] Néret pp. 135.
[17] Frey pp. 17, 302.

started dressing up as his cousin Madeleine at age four, according to his mother's letters: "'He is very good when he is dressed up like that and speaks as softly as he possibly can.' 'He refuses to be called anything but Madeleine, and corrects us all when we say Henry, or refer to him in the masculine.'"[18] Henri was not simply just dressing up, he was performing femininity for his family; this "game," as it was referred to by his mother, continued for at least another month if not longer. In 1892, he was photographed by a friend in feminine dress for a "transvestite ball" at the Moulin Rouge, for which he wore a boa, cape, and feather hat (Fig. 4).[19] Frey, who documented these life events and alleged there to be even more photographs of him in feminine dress, called his "relationship to femaleness" "complex and ambiguous."[20]

This ambiguous relationship carried over into his art as well. A prime example of this is an illustration of transvestite performer Mary Hamilton from his lithograph series *Le Café Concert* (Fig. 5). The word transvestite refers to a person that dresses in clothing opposing their assigned gender, but it could be argued, especially considering Lautrec's depiction, that perhaps Hamilton had a gender-expansive identity. It cannot be resolutely determined who at this time was dressing in a manner to claim independence from men, signal their sexuality, or express their gender, but certain clues can help determine what sets Hamilton apart from numerous other depictions of masculine-dressing women by Lautrec. A comparable lithograph included in the *Café* series is *Paula Brébion (from Le Café Concert)* (Fig. 6). The line composing Brébion's top follows the contours of her bust. In contrast, the line of Hamilton's chest is perfectly flat. Their hair is not only cropped short, but is styled (or drawn) in a way that suggests sideburns. Brébion has hair coming past her ear, but it creates a smaller curl. The most intriguing detail of Lautrec's depiction of Hamilton is the emphasis on their groin. When viewed side by side with *Cycle*

[18] Frey pp. 27.
[19] Frey pp. 302.
[20] Frey pp. 381.

Michael (Fig. 7), a lithograph made three years later, one can see a similarly shaped line that seems to suggest a male body. Together, these physical details point towards gender affirmation in a way that feels intentional. Even in the background of *Cycle Michael,* the man on the far left is given obvious pectorals, with curved lines representing the sides and another the bottom of the bust. Why would Lautrec choose to forego any suggestion of an anatomical detail that he typically would draw on both men and women? Sweetman writes that in Henri's artwork, "dress is used only to highlight character" rather than sexualize; its primary use was to reveal things about his subjects' personalities.[21] It would not be shocking to assert his empathy towards sapphic women extended out to other groups of queer people as well. Possible gender-expansive people and women alike in the late 19th century who wanted to dress in a masculine manner had to obtain a "permission de travestissement:" a license from the police permitting their behavior. Some women sought these licenses because it kept them from getting harassed by men in the streets.[22] It could be argued that Lautrec is simply faithful to Hamilton's "costume," but he had drawn plenty of women in suits with conspicuous bosoms visible (*Woman in a corset, a study for "Elles,"* 1896; *Dance at the Moulin Rouge*, 1897).[23] A gender-expansive reading of Hamilton allows audiences to imagine the transgender experience of people living in a time without the language or space to express their identities authentically.

Queerness is treated as a fad of the 21st century by its detractors, despite scholars proving time and time again that its historical evidence is overwhelming. In 19th century France, it was associated with sin and sequestered into impoverished districts, clear demarcations that could be avoided by the bourgeois and faithful. This separation gave queer people a rare opportunity to

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[21] Sweetman pp. 360.
[22] Sweetman pp. 358.
[23] Stuckey, Charles F, Naomi E Maurer, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Toulouse-Lautrec: Paintings.* Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1979, pp. 258.

live more authentically as themselves, even while forced into dangerous conditions and sexualized by onlookers. It also allowed artists like Toulouse Lautrec to privately record such events, allowing evidence of their existence to survive into later centuries. It is when queer people attempt to enter public life that outcry occurs. Whenever steps forward are made, socially or legislatively, fresh backlash seems to reverse decades of steady progress. But slowly, as time advances and opportunities for expression are increasingly democratized, the reality becomes clear that queerness cannot successfully be limited to any particular social boundary or class strata. Henri de Toulouse Lautrec created work over a century ago that continues to resonate with modern viewers, and as queer artists of today face what is shaping up to be a violent and bloody backstep, their work will inspire future generations. Queerness lives and dies with humanity; it will not be erased.

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Appendix

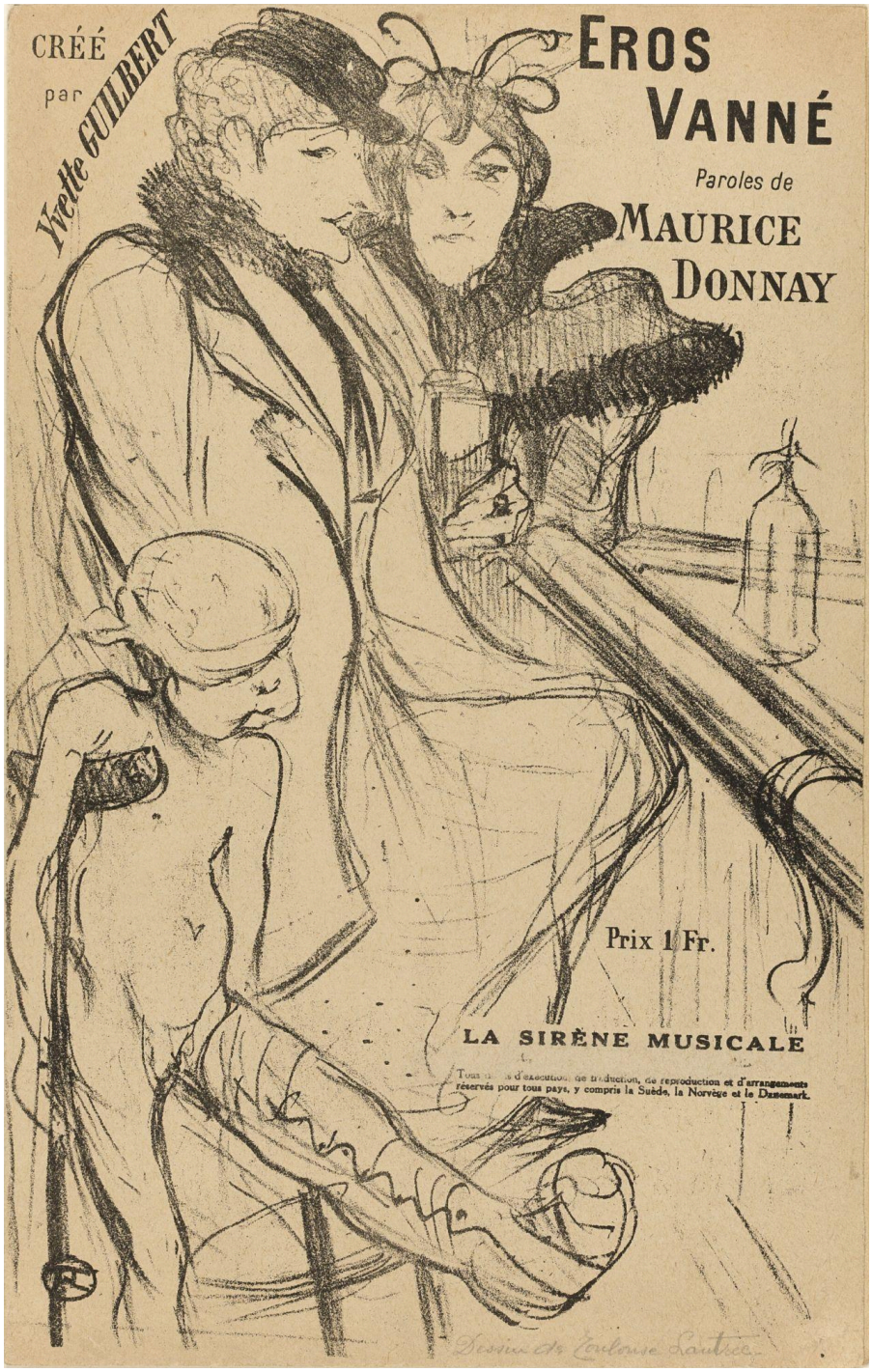

Fig. 1. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Eros vanné*, 1894.

Source: The Art Institute of Chicago, artic.edu/artworks/67141/eros-vanne.

Fig. 2. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Two Friends*, 1895.

Source: Artstor, *JSTOR*, jstor.org/stable/community.18137543.

Fig. 3. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *The Two Girlfriends*, 1894.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, *Media Wiki,*

commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Toulouse-lautrec_two_girlfriends.jpg.

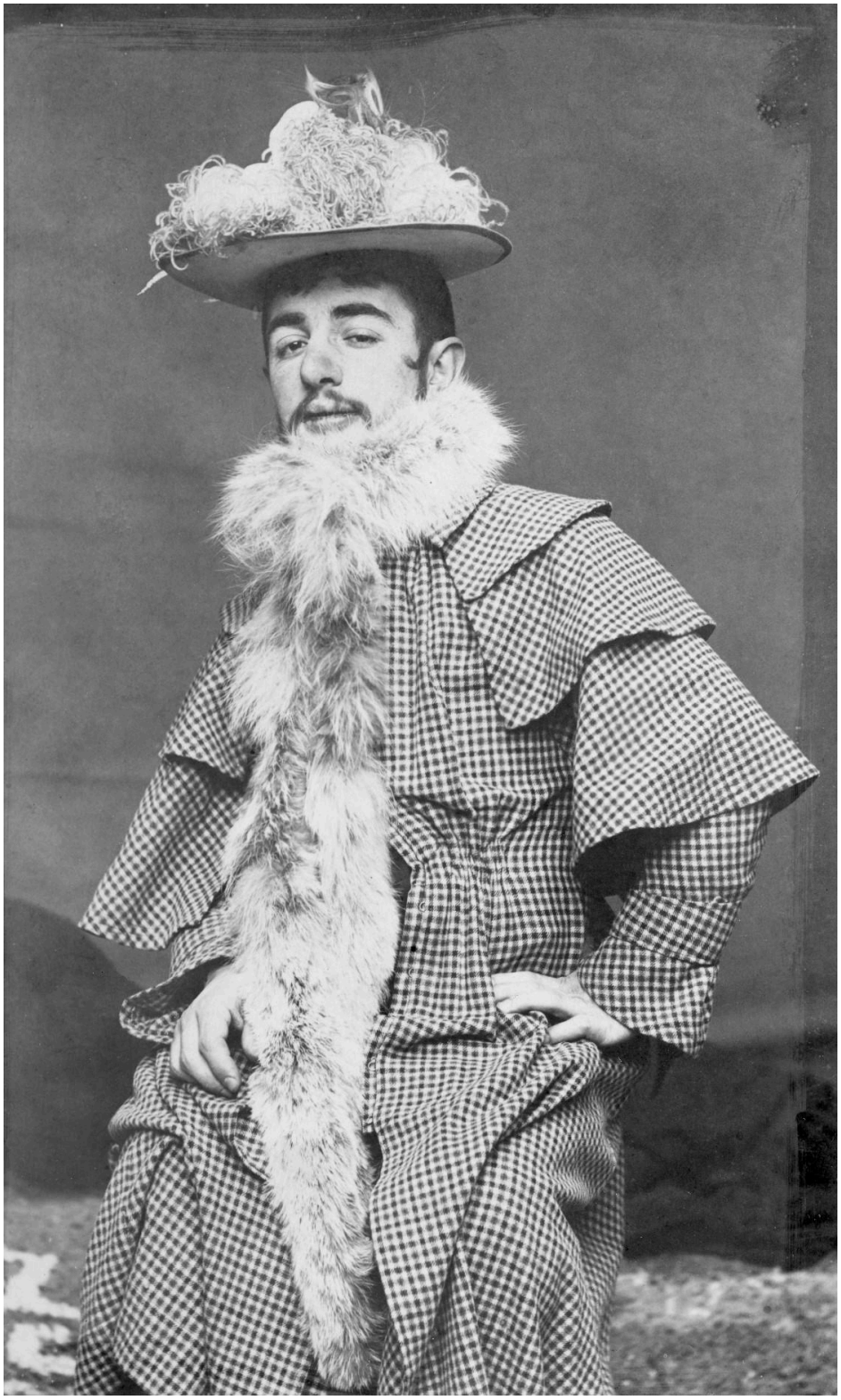

Fig. 4. Maurice Guibert. *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in Jane Avril's hat and boa,* 1892.

Source: Elisa Brunet, *Institut Catholique de Paris*, mastersfdl.hypotheses.org/1247.

Fig. 5. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Mary Hamilton (from Le Café Concert)*, 1893.

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/333857.

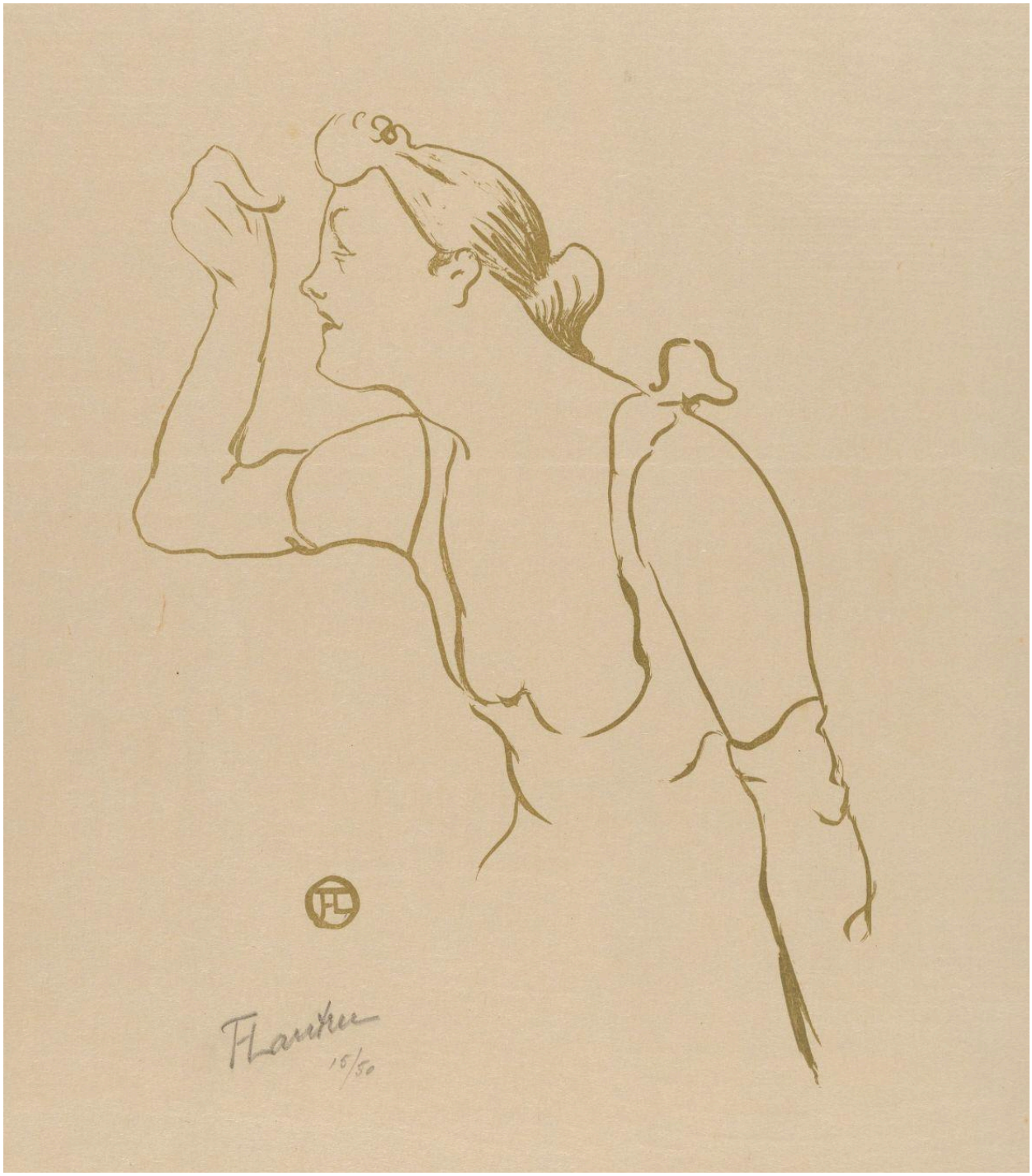

Fig. 6. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Paula Brébion (from Le Café Concert)*, 1893.

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/334389.

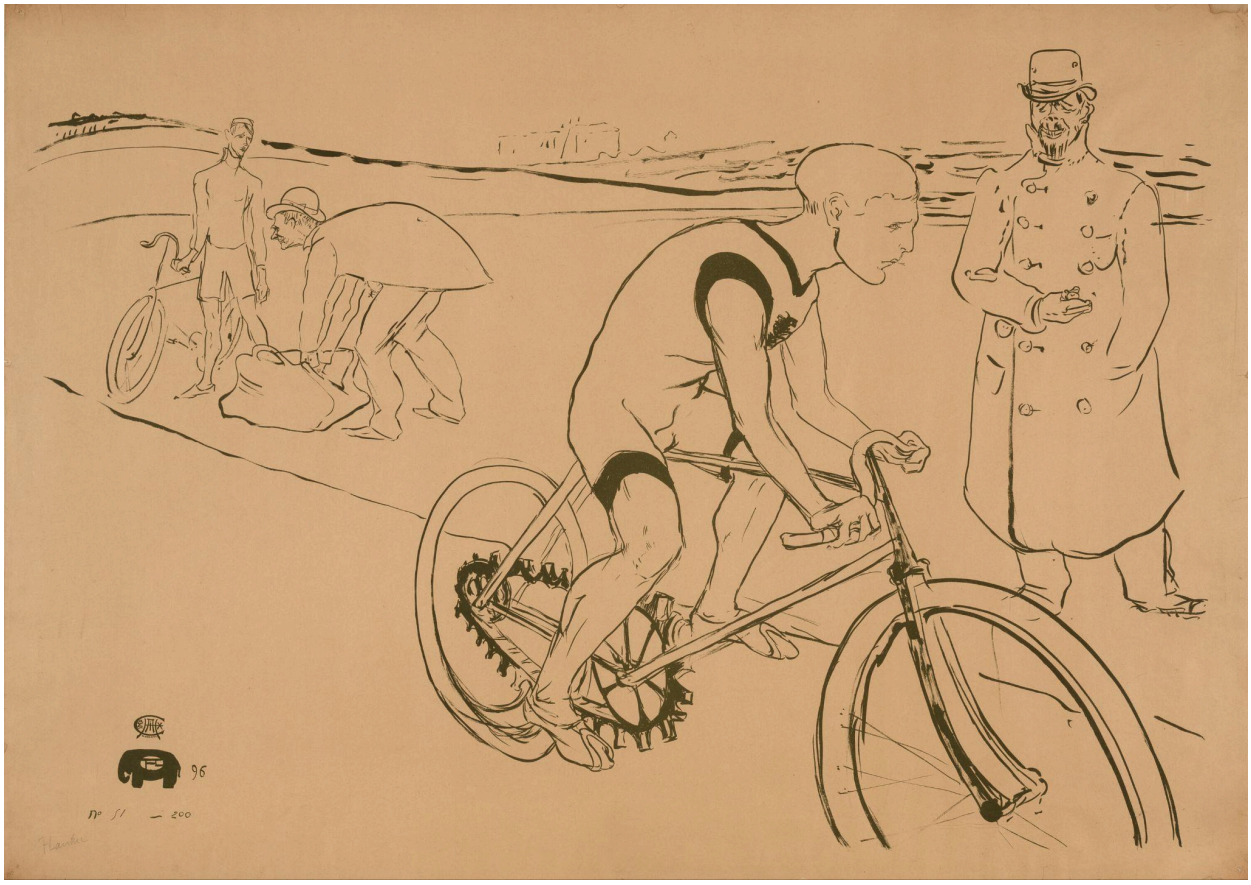

Fig. 7. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Cycle Michael*, 1896.

Source: The Art Institute of Chicago, artic.edu/artworks/67203/cycle-michael.