



ROUSSEAU. PÈRE JUNIET'S CART. 1908.

Private Collection, Paris

he drew them he took their measurements, like a tailor. In 1907 he met Wilhelm Uhde (*), who wrote the first monograph on him (Paris, 1911). The following year his friends organized a banquet in his honour at Picasso's studio in the Batteux-Lavoisier (*). In 1909 he painted his two portraits of Apollinaire.

lion by Armand Queval, was set a tombstone on which Apollinaire wrote in pencil the famous poem-epitaph that Banausic and Orthiz de Zanite engraved in the stone the next year, following the poet's handwriting precisely. Rousseau's attention was drawn only by the

Luce, he exhibited at the Société des Artistes Indépendants, to which he sent work regularly from then until 1898, and again from 1901 to 1910. Beginning in 1903, he exhibited also at the Salon d'Automne. He associated with Gauguin, Odilon Redon and Seurat. Through the poet Alfred Jarry, also of the town of Laval, he made the acquaintance of Remy de Gourmont, who, in the magazine *L'Imageur*, published *Wm*, a lithograph based upon Rousseau's picture, exhibited the previous year. Having lost his wife, Rousseau remarried in September 1899 upon the completion of a drama in five acts, *The Revenge of a Russian Orphan*, which was unsuccessfully produced at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. In 1903 his second wife died. He lived in the rue Pernel, in the Plaisance quarter of Paris, and, to make a living, he gave lessons in painting, diction and harmony. He made portraits of neighbouring shopkeepers, and when

he died on September 2nd, 1910. Seven people, among them Paul Signac, followed the hearse. He was buried in a common grave at the Bagnoux cemetery outside Paris. The painter Delaunay and the aster Queval, owner of the house in which Rousseau lived, put up the money to buy a thirty-year concession at the cemetery, and the Douanier's remains were transferred to a decent burying-ground. Here, with a medal-



PHOTOGRAPH OF THE JUNIET FAMILY AND THE CART.

ROUSSEAU

Henri, called the Douanier (1844-1910). French painter; born at Laval in Mayenne; died in Paris. At eighteen he enrolled in the Army and was assigned to the 3rd Infantry Regimental Band, where he played the saxophone. After he left the Army he married, in 1869. In 1871, after having taken part in the Franco-Prussian war, he entered the customs service as a clerk; hence his name. He allowed people to think that he had participated in the Mexican campaign, but there is no evidence to support this idea. When he was about forty he retired and began painting steadily. In 1886, introduced by Signac and



ROUSSEAU. SELF-PORTRAIT

ROUSSEAU

freshness of things. For him dream was never severed from reality. The most everyday events were bathed in enchantment. In *Paisance* com-
 ceterges saw him pass by in his big art student's hat, violin-case or paint-box under his arm. In his tiny studio he lived on the hundred francs of his monthly pension, which he stretched out as he could. There he occasionally gave his *mitier*. The studio contained a table in unstained wood, three chairs, a chest for wood and a make-shift bed concealed behind a curtain. He interrupted his painting from time to time to eat bread soaked in wine or milk. He led the life of a forgotten man, a rather miserable one. He said he had 'suffered much in the heart'. But he was rich, alive with a world of colours and forms, a most appropriate idiom in painting. This idiom, springing from the very surge of life, from the beat of the heart, has its miraculous expression in his painting. He never had to make an effort to convey a sudden emotion. There is nothing reheated in his work. He gave himself totally, without a struggle. 'It is not I who paint,' he said to a friend, 'but someone else who holds my hand.' How did this essentially plebeian art achieve such distinction? Most of what we know

of folk art has a direct but often monotonous savour. There is nothing of the kind here. Rousseau had found instinctively the quality of the style that strikes us in those whom we call primitives. From all the Douanier painted emerges a unique form, a unique harmony of colour, a unique way of treating the detail of the foliage of trees and of subordinating even the tiniest fragments to the monumentality of the whole. A primitive intuition led him to paint weddings, family reunions, the old dreams of the *Dream Book*. He had the childlike gift of believing in the magic reality of his creations. Those who knew him assure us that he experienced sudden terrors while painting his tiger hunts. Rousseau's production extends over a period of twenty-five years. But works of his exist done before 1886, the year of his first appearance at the *Salon des Indépendants*. We know that in 1884 he was issued a copyist's card for the Louvre. What old masters could he have interpreted? We do not know. Of his work we know only a

part. Besides the 140 or so paintings exhibited at the *Salon des Indépendants* and the *Salon d'Automne* and the works recognized today, many canvases were destroyed through ignorance or ruined through neglect (they were in the possession of congeries or at the houses of workmen, who often took no care of them). Without expecting numerous discoveries, it may be hoped that other Rousseaus will still be found. The themes he treated can be grouped into six categories:

- (1) Scenes referring to the life of the Douanier or of his relatives, of people whom he knew: self-portraits, ceremonies, weddings, baptisms, family reunions (self-portraits, 1888-1890; *To Welcome the Baby*, 1903; *A Wedding in the Country*, 1905; *The Cart of Pere Justin*, 1908).
- (2) Landscapes of Paris and its suburbs, with strollers and fishermen, which often give off something euphoric (*View of the Foot Bridge of Paris*, 1895; *In the Parc Montsouris*, 1895; *Château de la Demi d'Auterlitz*, 1896; *The Chair Factory in Alsfortville*, 1897; *The Alley in Saint-Cloud*, 1903; *Malakoff*, 1905; *View of the Quai Henri IV*, 1909).
- (3) Exotic scenes: evocations of the virgin



ROUSSEAU. PORTRAIT OF PIERRE LOTI. 1891.

Kunsthau, Zürich

ROUSSEAU

forest, big game hunts, bloody fights (*The Negro Arrived by a Leopard*, 1904; *The Lion Denouncing the Ashlings*, 1905; *Practical Jobbers*, *The Apex*, 1906; *The Monkeys in the Orange Grove*, 1907; *The Snake Charmer*, 1907; *Exotic Landscapes*, 1908).

(4) Military, patriotic or sports scenes (*The Gunner's War*; *The Republic*, 1885; *The Centenary of Independence*, 1893; *The Football Players*, 1908).

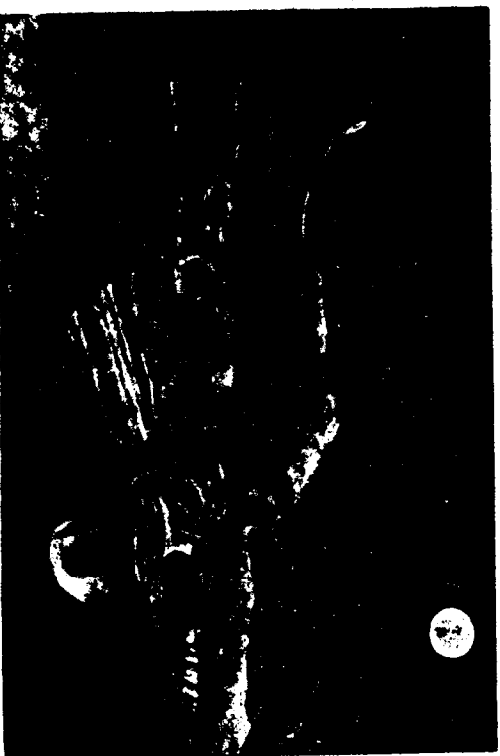
(5) Allegorical scenes (*Present and Paris*, 1907; *The Muse and the Poet*, 1909; *The Dream*, 1910).

(6) Bouquets of wild and garden flowers.

How did Rousseau work? As an embroiderer embroiders, say those who knew him. If the man sometimes had the excessive simplicity of naive persons, the artist was rather ingenious. He painted with a natural and graceful frankness, adding freedom to his native gifts. Thus his technique had nothing impairing the unity of the whole in his small canvases. Works of greater dimensions he treated differently, with large planes of even colours. Whence came the monumentality that his landscapes almost always possess? From his way of presenting the plant world. Like Poussin, the Douanier enlarged

greenery and branches, whose leaves he shows us as if through a magnifying-glass, taking care to distinguish every species. His palette of deep blacks, the colour of slate, is cut by yellows, browns, purplish greens; it has the delicate, almost acid, tones of the Christmas rose. Rousseau drew little, but with an extraordinary sense of plastic values. Usually he described contours directly with the brush, and in colour, but without harshness. Before painting with the very precise density that characterizes him, he sometimes made sketches that approach, though rather distantly, the Impressionist manner. This naive and gentle man, something of a mythomane, ridiculed, scolded by his wife, bullied by his daughter, that Nature is a jungle full of ferocity, that the child is not always good. But, with his whole being, he sided with the underdog, the defenceless animal, the victim. In his painting the quality of universal commiseration almost always impregnates the fruits of observation. Beyond reality, this ingenious man opened paths invisible to the naked eye and had a presentiment of encounters that escape logic.

There exist innocent beings to whom it is



ROUSSEAU. SLEEPING GYPSY. 1897.

Museum of Modern Art, New York

given to see farther than others who are of more complex organization but conform to the common measure. Nothing discourages these ingenious ones. In them hope springs eternal. Some day, they know, it will be different. The little painter, the 'angel' of the Plaisance quarter, belongs to their family. Rousseau put up with poverty, but without too much resignation. He acknowledged it. He courageously claimed his place, his right to woman and to art, to freedom and Sunday calm. No doubt at the bottom of his heart he vaguely felt joy in having freed himself from the slavery of assigned work.

With the resources granted him, the degree of intelligence fallen to his lot, this child, who had been given more love than knowledge, was conscious of his humble victory as a man who remained true to his first dreams. Hence the kindness of heart and mind that his painting often conveys. At the threshold of our century this 'simpleton' came as a pioneer. At a moment when humanity is wondering whether mechanical distortion has not stifled its creative capacity, the work of the Douanier Rousseau, an antidote to our technical civilization, is still as fresh as prophecy.



ROUSSEAU. THE SNAKE-CHARMER. 1807.

Lowry

SOMETIMES people think that artists are born to be artists, and that they know this even when they are children. Henri Rousseau (180 SOH) was different. He did not start to paint until he retired as a customs inspector for the French government. Even today he is mentioned as "Douanier Rousseau" which means "Rousseau, the customs inspector."

Henri was born in Laval, France, in 1844. His father was a tinker who mended pans and kettles. We do not know very much about Henri's boyhood, but when he was eighteen, he was drafted into the French Army. Because of his musical ability, he was able to get into the regimental band where he played the flute and clarinet. His regiment was sent to Mexico, and was stationed in that part of the country which is covered with thick tropical jungle.

When Rousseau left the army, he was twenty-three years old. He tried several jobs before becoming a customs officer where he checked on what goods people took in and out of France. We are sure that he did not like his job because he retired in 1885 at forty, the earliest age he could receive a pension.

He and his wife had no children and his small pension was almost enough to live on. His wife kept a newspaper shop to make a little extra money. No one seems to know whether Rousseau painted before he retired, or even whether he had been interested in art. Soon after, however, he was painting pictures and exhibiting them in Paris. He also taught drawing to the local school children. In his

home, he gave music lessons to children and held concerts where they could play for parents and friends.

Rousseau painted all kinds of things. He persuaded the people who lived near him to pose, and he painted their portraits. If they liked what he painted, they sometimes bought his pictures. Although Rousseau tried to paint exactly what he saw or remembered, as we can see in *Repast of the Lion*, his art was not what we see in real life.

Henri never had any art lessons, so whenever he had a problem about a part of a picture, he went to the great art museum in Paris called the Louvre. He would study the paintings of other artists, but by the time he arrived home, he had forgotten a little of what he had seen. Even artists have more difficulty remembering what they see than what they have heard or read. Thus, Rousseau's work was really not like that of any other artist that he might have studied.

As shown here, Henri loved painting in details. Every leaf on every plant is carefully joined to each branch. Every petal is joined to make a neat flower on a stem. However, his plants and trees are not real, but kinds Rousseau invented. He was never interested in the smoothness or roughness of leaves or clothes, nor in making shadowy kinds of pictures. He tried to make a clear picture of what he thought looked right.

This jungle picture was painted twenty years after Rousseau had retired, and forty years after he had been in Mexico. Henri remembered the large juicy green

leaves of the jungle plants and the enormous flowers. He remembered that some trees had large flowers on them. As a young man, these strange sights may have frightened him a little.

In the dense overgrown jungle scene, the tree trunks gradually get closer together until they make a green wall. Only the hills show over the tops to tell us that there is something farther away. Even if we can forget the lion who is half-way through eating the leopard, Rousseau does not show a friendly place. There is an unkind stillness about it, as though the jungle were waiting to swallow up anyone who was silly enough to wander in alone. We can imagine that when Henri was an old man his early adventures in Mexico were like dreams of a far-away world which sometimes scared him.

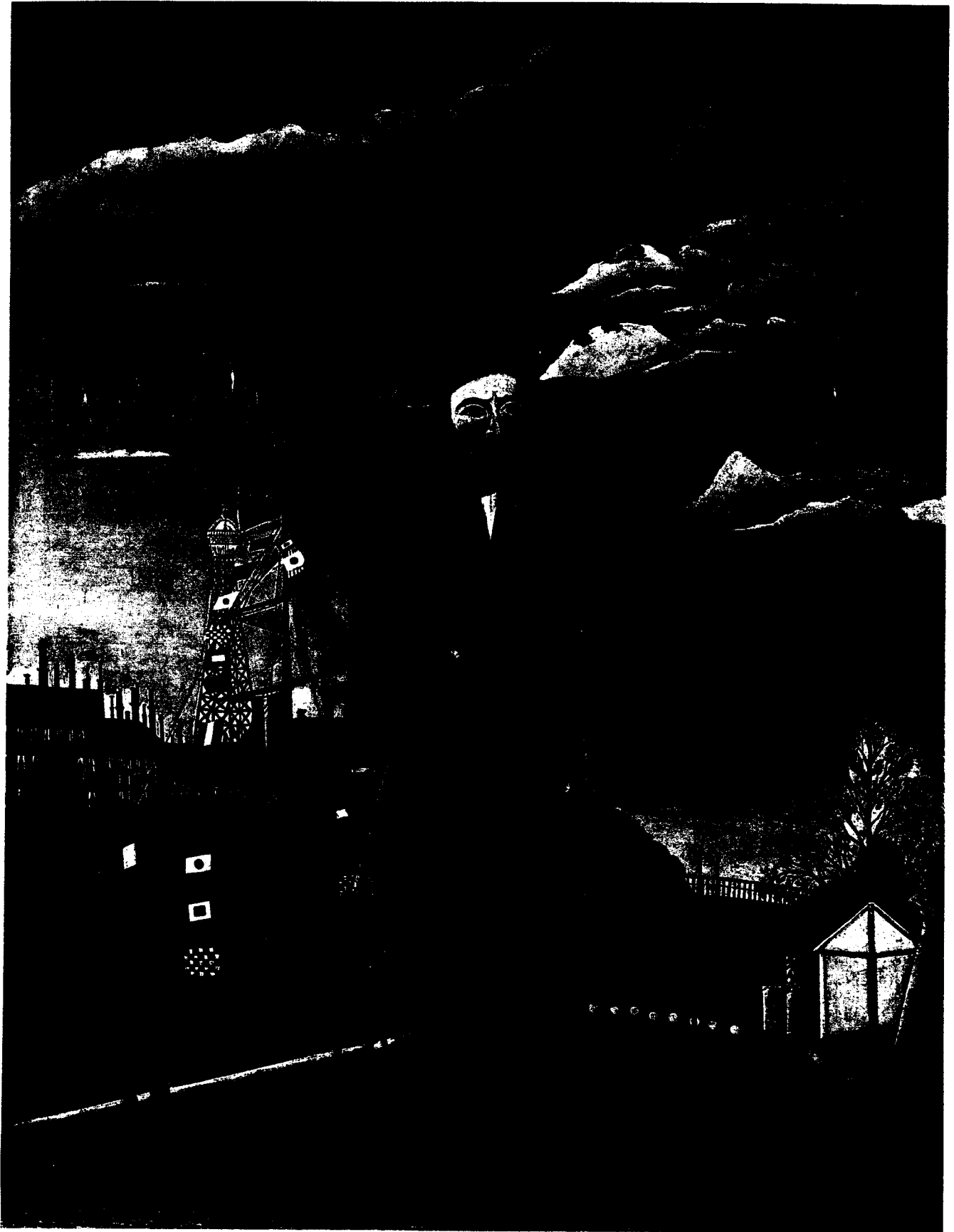
To fully enjoy Rousseau's paintings, we should try to understand the feelings they describe. Usually, they show simple things clearly painted. Sometimes they are happy pictures of people enjoying themselves, or serious faces of people who lived near him in Paris. None of the pictures he painted seem to belong to the real world as people know it.

Henri Rousseau exhibited in Paris year after year until he died in 1910. He was so sure about the way he painted that he would not change even though people said unkind things or laughed at his art. Fortunately, some of the young artists could see that Rousseau had some very good ideas, and they made friends with him. Today, many people enjoy the paintings of Henri Rousseau.





National Gallery, Prague



By Robert Wernick

Rousseau: the customs clerk who created a world of wonder

The Paris art establishment made gentle fun of his eccentricities, but his visions of Man and nature have been part of us ever since

They gave a banquet for the old man in Picasso's studio, and all the young Paris art world was there, Gertrude Stein and everybody else. They set him up on a chair perched on a packing case like a throne, and he sat there stoically while wax dripped on his head from a lantern. They toasted him and recited poems in his honor and cheered wildly while he played a waltz of his own composition on his violin. They hugged him and praised him and made fun of him while they drank the place dry. (Picasso, who was in charge of the food arrangements, had given the caterer the wrong date. The guests had to go out and forage for food.) When the lantern caught fire they told Henri Rousseau it had been planned as an ultimate tribute to his glory. As the party broke up in the far hours of the morning, he lurched up to the host. "Dear Picasso," he said, "we are the two greatest painters of our time—you in the Egyptian style and me in the modern style."

It was the kind of sublimely silly thing which dear old Henri Rousseau was supposed to say. When he didn't produce a phrase like that, his young friends were glad to make one up for him. Every one had stories to tell about him and no one was interested in historical exactitude. So most of the information that has been handed down about his life, both before and after that banquet of 1908, has been mythological. It has helped build up an image the world cherishes, of a sweet childlike old simpleton who happened to create

In *Myself, Portrait-Landscape*, Henri Rousseau portrayed himself—prophetically—as a towering figure.

beautiful pictures as artlessly as a bird trills its song.

A show opening this month at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the most complete survey of his work ever brought together in one place (sponsored by the Paine Webber Group Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts), makes clear that, whatever elements of truth there are in this picture, it is incomplete. Simple Rousseau certainly was, but he was no boob; he was a shrewd old bird at his moments, perfectly capable of pulling Picasso's or anyone else's leg. The Rousseau myth was largely of Rousseau's own making. It was he who got his admirers to tag him Douanier (customs inspector), though that was many grades up the bureaucratic ladder from the post he actually held. He was an "ambulatory clerk," just about the lowest rung of the ladder, in the *octroi*, a service which from the Middle Ages through World War I collected tolls on merchandise being brought through the gates of Paris.

It was Rousseau who provided his biographers with tales of his military service in Mexico, and it was not until many years after his death that research revealed he had never left France. Nor was there a word of truth in his story of how he had "saved the people of Dreux from the horrors of civil war" in 1870, and how they had carried him around town on their shoulders shouting "*Vive le sergent Rousseau!*" The pale light of history shows he never made it beyond the rank of private and that he wangled a release from the army at the start of the Franco-Prussian War.

Rousseau was the first of what has become a long line of artists called naive or primitive to be taken up by the intelligentsia and hailed as untutored geniuses. He differs from the others, like America's Grandma Moses—first, in his immeasurably greater native talent, and second, he did not work as they did, in lonely isolation. He lived in Paris at a time of unparalleled artistic ferment, when every few years or months saw the dawn of a new artistic revolution. He was acquainted with many of the revolutionaries, including such painters as

The painter the world caught up with

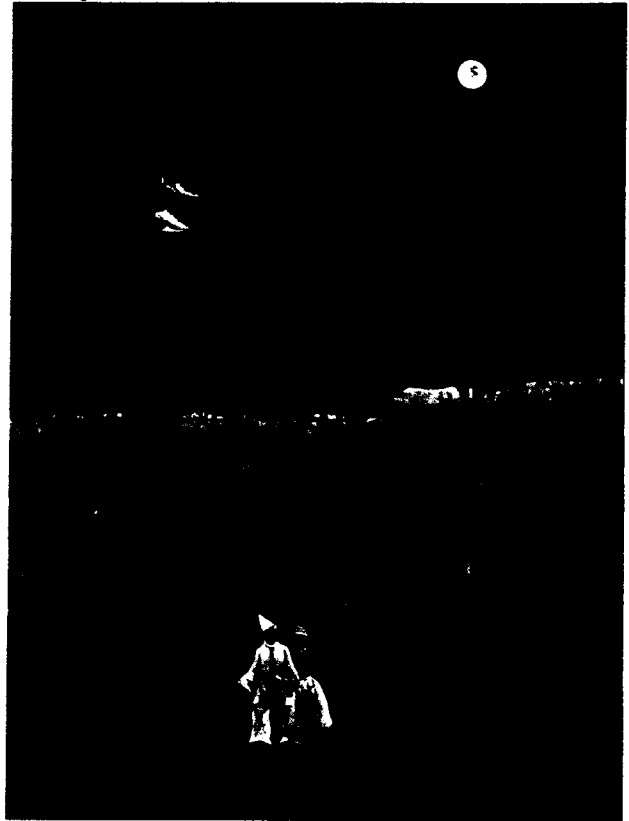
Gauguin. Pissarro and Odilon Redon knew his work and admired it. Robert Delaunay was to write encouraging comments about his accomplishments. Picasso and Georges Braque came to the musictheatrical receptions he gave in his studio. He was a well-known figure in the art world; the paintings he exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants attracted crowds of visitors and extensive comment in the press.

It is true that the crowds often came to laugh uproariously at his creations, and the press clippings which he pasted faithfully in a big scrapbook contained exercises in cruelty and contempt. "Monsieur Rousseau paints with his feet, with a blindfold over his eyes," said one critic. And another said that nothing could be more grotesque than Monsieur Rousseau's *Suicide* and his portraits, unless it was Monsieur van Gogh's *Starry Night*.

As biting as such words were, there was an even more savage physical demonstration of contempt and what must be described as hatred for the man's work. In 1885 when he first publicly showed his work at the official Salon des Champs-Élysées, and you can imagine what this meant to him, both of his paintings were slashed with knives, presumably by critics who couldn't get their opinions before the public in any other way. The paintings then were removed from the show and put in with other *refusés*. And this was how Rousseau was to begin his new life as an artist. There were newspaper stories about the slashings, and Rousseau, in his implacable manner, cut them out and pasted them in his scrapbook along with other items of interest.

Rousseau was aware that he could not talk to his fellow artists on their own terms, as he was wholly uninvolved in the artistic theories over which they were continually wrangling. He was very much a man of the people, with no formal training in art or anything else.

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stern Collection



As evocative and poetic as many a Rococo fantasy, *A Carnival Evening* is an enchanted personal reverie.

He had been born in 1844 at Laval near Angers in western France. He followed various odd jobs, spent four years in the army (and a month in jail for having misappropriated 25 francs when he was working in an attorney's office) before he got the job that took him, 70 hours a week, in dark uniform and with a useless sword at his side, to the tollbooths of the *octroi*. He was in his thirties when he began to devote himself to painting, first on Sundays, then full-time when he gave up his job in 1893 and determined to live on his modest pension, plus what he could make giving music and art lessons to his neighbors in the Plaisance quarter of Paris.

The two wives that he dearly loved died. So did eight of his nine children. He found it hard to make ends meet. What kept him going was a solid, simple faith, not in Catholicism, which, with his Masonic beliefs, he despised, but in art and beauty and nature and progress, and the French Republic which allowed all these others to flower. Above all, he believed in the unique genius of Henri Rousseau. And this was strong

Robert Wernick has written on subjects as disparate as goats and pepper for SMITHSONIAN. He wrote about Prince Eugene of Savoy in last month's issue.

enough to allow him to disregard the wicked barbs of the critics and the clamor of the bailiffs demanding payment of his bills for paints and brushes.

He realized from the start that he was a painter different from other painters. He admired the fashionable Salon painters, men like Gérôme, Bouguereau, Clément, painters of high polish and fantastic skill in capturing the rippling surfaces of the world. But his vision was at odds with this traditional approach to painting. Although he had an exceptional sense of color and a sure eye for design, he abandoned the techniques that were the heart of 19th-century academic painting. He chose to ignore the devices developed since the Renaissance to establish visual accuracy in painting, including perspective and the use of light and shade to simulate a third dimension. If he put several figures in a canvas, he distorted their scale, much as Picasso would do later. He saw no need to set the feet of his humans or the bases of his trees firmly on the ground, and he occasionally covered feet and roots with a band of green grass. He could draw a

figure in profile, or staring straight at the viewer, and give it an impressive hieratic monumentality. But when he drew a figure in motion—a jaguar attacking a native, a tiger attacking a buffalo, a gorilla attacking an Indian (it would take later scholars to point out that gorillas and Indians do not live on the same continent)—he would often turn to an illustrated brochure of wild beasts put out by the Galeries Lafayette department store and sometimes copy them with the aid of a mechanical device called a pantograph.

Perhaps he could have learned these techniques. He had, after all, won a prize for drawing when he was a schoolboy. As a copyist in the Louvre he learned how to do creditable imitations of clouds by 17th-century painters, and he scattered them through his skies. The preliminary versions of landscapes that have survived show that when he was outdoors looking at nature he could turn out very accomplished impressionist sketches. But when it came to painting the final version, another hand—on one occasion he said it was the hand of his deceased first wife—seemed to take over.

Private Collection



Rousseau took ideas from many sources; *Flamingos* may derive from a 17th-century Dutch painter.

The painter the world caught up with

Kunstmuseum Basel, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung



The Muse Inspiring the Poet is a portrait of painter Marie Laurencin and poet Guillaume Apollinaire.



Neighbor Claude Junier (holding reins) and family are subjects of a puzzling picture, *Old Junier's Cart*.

The forms stiffened, shapes swelled or shrank or skidded across the surface to assume the pattern of awkward inevitability which is the hallmark of all Rousseau's work. The paintings became primitive—primitive in the way the word was understood in the late 19th century, meaning the style of painting before the Renaissance, before the discovery of perspective and other illusionistic techniques.

The authors of the catalog for the MOMA show suggest that this primitivism was a conscious strategy on Rousseau's part. "If I have kept my naiveté," he wrote in a letter, "it is because Monsieur Gérôme as well as Monsieur Clément always told me to keep it."

If they really gave him this advice, he was wise to follow it. He could never have painted like Gérôme and Clément because he did not see the same things they did. While they were content to reproduce what



Rousseau may have portrayed himself in figure at right—and portrayed Junier with Rousseau's features.

was under their noses, the things Rousseau saw were rearranged and transformed in his mind into intensely personal visions which he then transferred to canvas with a directness, a freshness, a "lyrical exaltation" as one of his Italian admirers put it, that rarely fails to arouse enthusiastic admiration or ribald laughter—sometimes the two together—from his bemused and delighted spectators.

He transferred these visions as literally as he could—that is why he could refer to himself quite seriously as "one of the leading realistic painters of the day." When the creative sap was running strong, he could be so sure of his final effect that he would put his colors in one at a time—first green, then red, then blue. He often painted his backgrounds first, leaving spaces for the figures. When his friend the American painter Max Weber asked him if he wasn't leaving too much space

for the dog in one painting, he replied, "No, that is the way it has to be."

When he looked at himself in his mind's eye, what he saw was not a seedy old man with a drooping white mustache but a noble figure with a black bushy beard and great floppy artist's beret, a decoration in his buttonhole which had really been given to another painter named Rousseau but which the Douanier assumed was intended for him, holding a paintbrush like a sword of justice and a palette inscribed with the names of his two wives. There was no need to anchor this figure's feet to the ground, so there was no protective band of grass; the artist seems ready to float upward toward the balloon in a sky filled with beret-shaped clouds—a giant looming over the Eiffel Tower and all Paris and a couple of Lilliputian strollers on the quay. Most artists of that day regarded the Eiffel Tower as an abomination, but Rousseau in his grand simple way took it as a triumphant symbol of that modern style of which he himself was the leading representative.

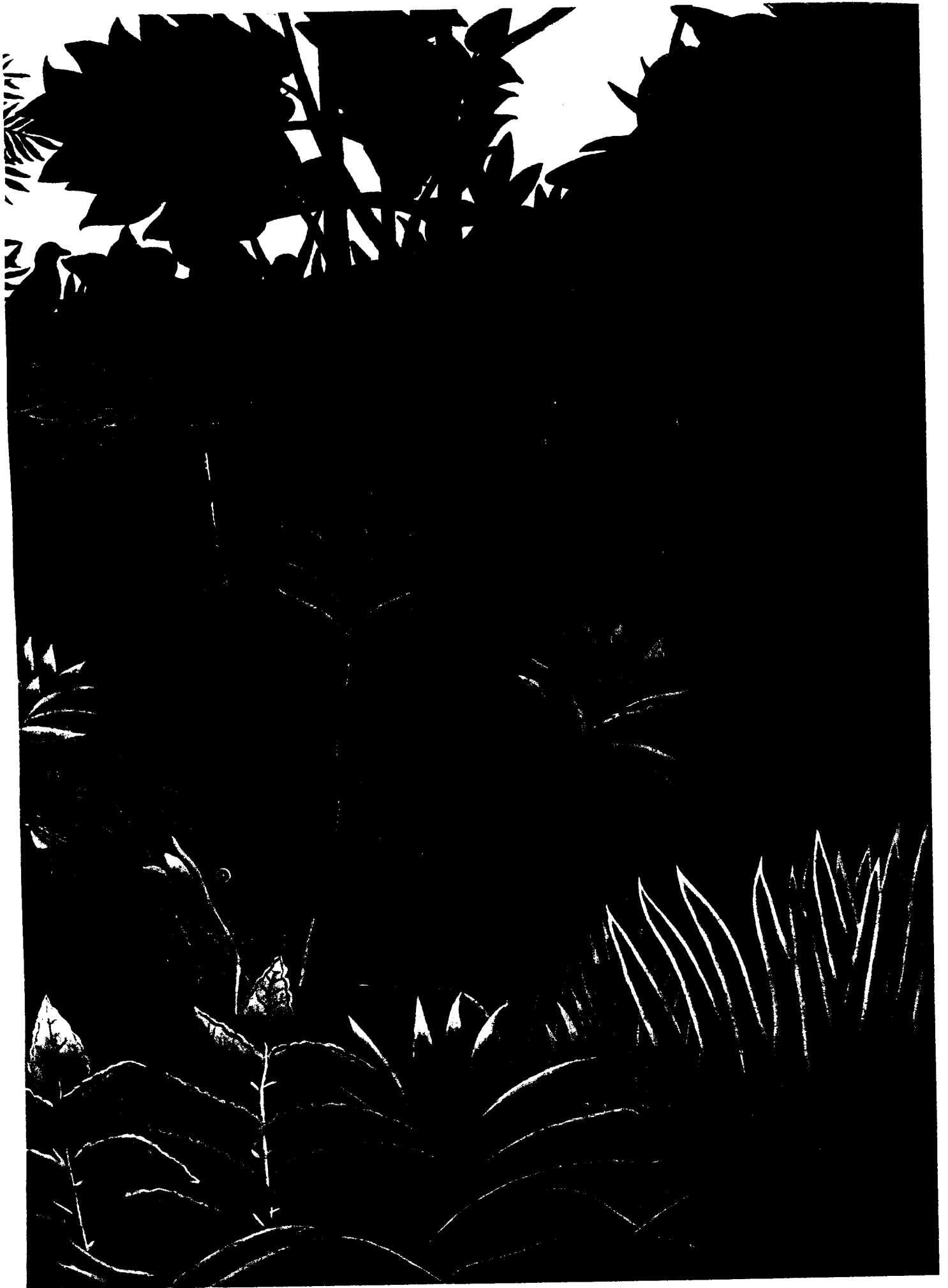
A great poet needs a big Muse

When he was doing the portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire for *The Muse Inspiring the Poet* (opposite), he used to hold a tape measure up to the poet's face to make sure to get the right measurements between mouth, eyes, chin and so on. For all that, the result was at many removes from a photographic likeness (although Apollinaire insisted that everyone recognized him when the picture was exhibited). When it came to the Muse—Apollinaire's mistress, the painter Marie Laurencin—all thought of likeness must have been abandoned early on. Marie Laurencin was proud of her figure, sylphlike as any of the charmingly decadent girls whose portraits made her reputation. When she saw herself bloated up to the size of a Wagnerian Valkyrie, holding up an impossibly long arm in the gesture of a priestess invoking prehistoric gods, she was indignant. Rousseau brushed off her complaints: "Apollinaire is a great poet, so he needs a big Muse!"

Ambroise Vollard, the prominent Parisian art dealer, asked him once how he got the effect of air circulating between the plants in one of his jungle paintings. "By the observation of nature," he replied simply. He loved nature, he used to spend hours sketching trees and meadows and flowers. But nature took a curiously crooked path getting onto his canvases. A young writer named Yann le Pichon was taking music lessons from the Douanier's granddaughter in Cherbourg. One day she showed him an album of engravings of wild animals, published by the Galeries Lafayette, and he was amazed to find jaguars and tigers and spoonbills which were perfectly familiar to him because he had seen them in her grandfather's paintings. His sub-

Overleaf: *The Dream*

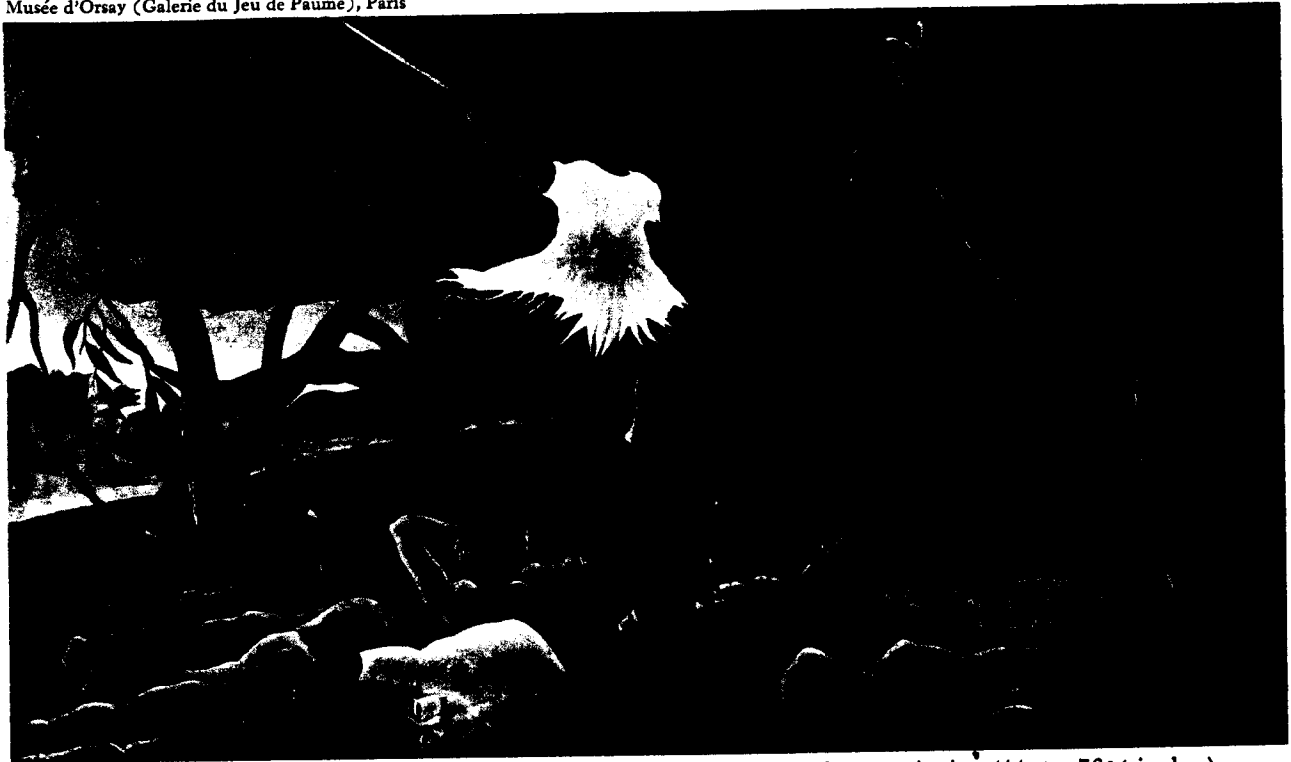






Locked into the botanical extravaganza he called *The Merry Jesters* is a welter of symbolic figures that

remain inexplicable to this day. Although the title is lighthearted, the painting itself is unsettling.



"War (terrifying, she passes by, leaving behind on all sides despair, tears, and ruin)," wrote Rousseau.

War, his first large painting (44 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 76 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches), was first shown in 1894 and was then lost for 50 years.

sequent investigations turned up a treasure trove of 19th-century illustrations which Rousseau had employed as a visual repository for subject matter in his canvases: postcards, advertisements, magazine illustrations, almanacs, photographs, reproductions of paintings by famous artists. He rarely took over any one of these resources by itself. His imagination preferred to fuse them together, no matter how wildly incongruous they might seem to the prosaic eye, and freeze them in a trancelike state which can exercise a hypnotic effect.

This is the way he painted when he began, and he never varied in any significant way. In one of his earliest known paintings, *A Carnival Evening* (p. 82), which was shown at the Salon des Indépendants in 1886, the clown may reflect the influence of Watteau, the clown's girlfriend perhaps was taken from an advertisement for chocolates, the lacy tangle of branches in the trees possibly echoes a postcard photograph of the Bois de Boulogne. They all fit together in a moony atmosphere which is the Douanier's own.

In his last painting, *The Dream* (pp. 86-87), finished the spring before he went to the hospital to die in 1910, the nude on the couch may have been inspired partially by Félix Vallotton's painting, which had hung next to one of Rousseau's own in 1905. The couch came from the artist's studio. He drew on illustrated

natural history sources for the lions and birds and monkeys, the snake and the elephant. Rousseau used to spend whole days soaking up tropical atmosphere in the hothouses at the Jardin des Plantes, but the spiky leaves and monstrous flowers of this painting are derived from plates in encyclopedias or botanical books.

Yet he was never the prisoner of his sources. He reserved the right to modify or transform them at any time to fit them into his formal or emotional design. The huge picture *War* (above), which hung at the Indépendants in 1894, may derive its conception from a drawing advertising a novel called *Le Tsar*. But the bearded Russian rider of the original has been turned into a demented figure in a white robe, riding side-saddle on a crazed black horse, brandishing a sword and a torch that streams black smoke. The figures may have come out of classical sculpture, the horse is perhaps copied from a painting by Géricault, except that its head has been flattened until it looks more like a reptile's. The naked bird-pecked corpses on the battlefield below may have their source in memories of the 14th-century tapestries of the Apocalypse, which he would have seen in the cathedral at Angers when he was a child. The blighted landscape, the broken trees, the sulfurous reds and blacks, came out of the artist's imagination. All together, they form an extraordinary

whole, partly ludicrous, partly terrifying, as vivid an emblem as has been devised of the folly of war. Gauguin once commented that no one had ever used black as effectively as Rousseau—the merit of his opinion is clear when one looks at the flying tail of the death horse and the flying tail of the rider.

Many other of the great names of modern art—Degas, Pissarro, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Robert Delaunay, Kandinsky—expressed approval or admiration. Yet it cannot be said that Rousseau ever achieved the recognition in his lifetime he would have liked. No crowds ever carried him through the streets shouting “*Vive le sergent Rousseau!*” Most of the shopkeepers to whom he gave paintings to cover unpaid bills rolled them up in their attics and sold them to junk dealers when they cleaned out their houses. When dealer Wilhelm Uhde put on the only one-man show Rousseau was ever to have in his lifetime, not a single person came, because Uhde had forgotten to put the address on the invitation.

But there was also Picasso, who might joke about many things and cast a sardonic eye at society at large, but who always took art seriously. To his acute eye Rousseau was an artist. As told by Roger Shattuck in *The Banquet Years*, Picasso wrote that “Rousseau is not an accident. He represents the perfection of a certain order of thought. The first of the Douanier’s works that I had the opportunity of acquiring took hold of me with the force of obsession. I was going along the rue des Martyrs. A bric-a-brac dealer had piled up some canvases outside his shop. A portrait head protruded from the pile, the face of a woman wearing a stony look, with French penetration and decisiveness and clarity. The canvas was immense. I asked the price. ‘Five francs,’ the man said. ‘You can paint on the back.’ It is one of the most truthful of all French psychological portraits.”

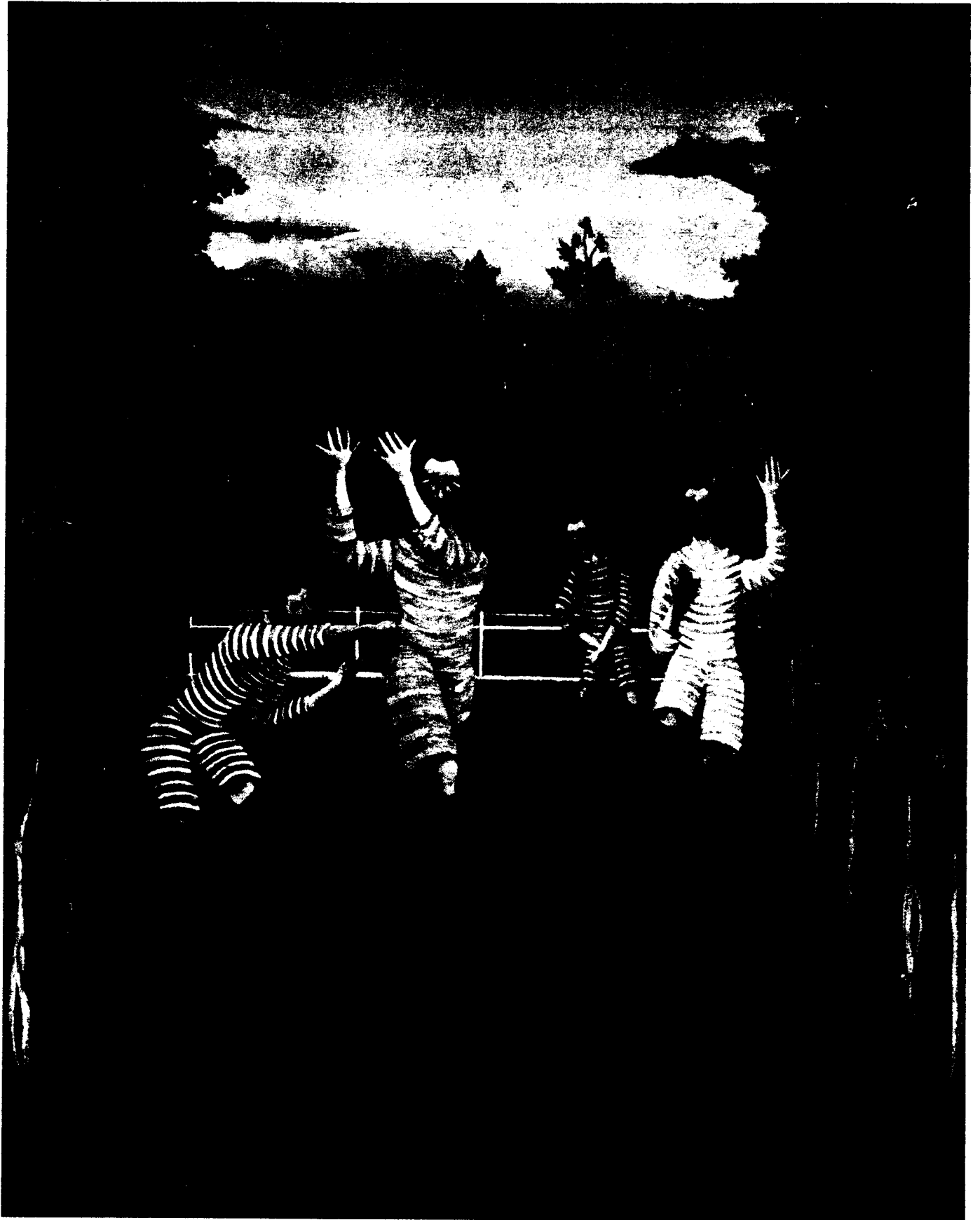
He was getting a good income from sales toward the end, in addition to a modest pension and fees for lessons, but he was always broke, or said he was. He was always ready to aid a needy neighbor, and he squandered considerable sums buying gifts for Léonie, “a coarse dirty shopgirl” said his friends, in his vain efforts to persuade her to become his third wife. He received a thousand francs from a friend who sent him fake identity papers and a forged draft to withdraw 21,000 francs from a bank. He spent a month in jail, but got off when his lawyer passed around reproductions of his works to the jury and convinced them of his defendant’s hopeless naiveté. Perhaps Rousseau didn’t know what he was doing; but one story has it that he invested his thousand francs thriftily and sensibly enough in a government bond.

In 1910, during summer vacation when nearly everyone was out of town, he neglected a scratch on his leg. It became infected and finally gangrenous, and he died miserably in a hospital, attended by only a few friends, and fretting because his young friend Delaunay, following one of the latest art theories, was breaking up the Eiffel Tower on his canvases. A careless clerk in the hospital marked him down as an alcoholic, and he was buried in a pauper’s grave.

His faith in himself, unmoved by ridicule or neglect, had remained solid to the end. Hold on to the paintings I have given you, he told his grandchild, “they will be worth a hundred thousand francs.”

He was much too modest a prophet. These days when a Rousseau is fished out of an old attic, it sells for millions and ends up in the Louvre. Generations of painters have revered him as one of the pioneers of modern art. The public has learned to take in its stride the distortions, the bizarre scale, the childlike fixity of vision, the arbitrary colors which used to move the viewers at the Indépendants to laughter and now have become the commonplaces of painting. People have learned to respond directly to the Douanier’s directness. “I like to make my paintings smile,” he said, and art lovers tired of the intellectuality and solemnity of much 20th-century art enjoy smiling back. More people, one thinks, have stopped to look at Rousseau’s *Sleeping Gypsy* in MOMA than at Picasso’s *Guernica*, now in Madrid. Maybe the old man was right after all. For the newer generations, Picasso is already receding into a classical, you might say an Egyptian, past. Henri Rousseau keeps his freshness. He is both up-to-date and timeless, a genuine Old Master of what we call the modern style.

Catch as catch can: late work, *The Football Players*, shows a game only Rousseau could have dreamed up.



from MAINSTREAMS OF MODERN ART
by John Canaday
a Holt-Dryden Book,
New York, 1959
Riverside Library #709.03 CAN

"Douanier" Rousseau

Within the complications and intercomplications of nineteenth-century painting, the idea of giving concrete expression to supernatural mysteries or to mysterious yearnings crops up persistently. Blake, Friedrich, and Runge held it; Böcklin held it when he tried to bring the world of fantasy and dread within our grasp by representing fantasies in objectively realistic detail. The Pre-Raphaelites held it in their odd way when they tried to recapture the spiritual essence of the Biblical and medieval worlds by reproducing them—they thought—explicitly. Böcklin and other fantasists might have

said that they wanted to make "improbable beings live humanly according to the laws of the probable" or to "give the illusion of life to the most unreal creations." But these two quotations are from Redon, whose art is more conventionally visionary, in its luminous, apparitionlike quality, than the precisely defined painting of his companions in their voyages of exploration into hidden realms.

The century's most curious revelation within this shadowy territory was made half by chance, like so many discoveries, by Henri Rousseau (1840-1910), who first set about reproducing the real world as photographically as he knew how, and then discovered that he had created a world of enchantment instead. While Böcklin and Redon theorized about the interchangeability of mystery and reality, about how to make the real unreal and the unreal real, about how to dematerialize the world around us or to materialize the one we cannot see, Rousseau did not theorize at all. Yet he materialized the promised land of mystery for searchers who were more knowledgeable about it than he was.

Rousseau was a minor official in the French Customs, hence "Douanier" Rousseau, as he is most frequently called. He began as a hobby painter, the nineteenth-century phenomenon of the "Sunday painter" who might take his cheap paintbox out into the park for an afternoon's relaxation or copy a favorite postcard at home on a rainy day or try a portrait of a friend or a member of the family, preferably from a nice clear snapshot. His earliest paintings [469] have all the characteristic naïvetés of style inherent in the work of beginners feeling their way with intense interest but technical innocence. The most usual of these characteristics include extreme carefulness of outline, a smoothing out of the paint, a finicky blending of one tone into another, and a fascination with fine detail to whatever extent technical limitations may permit its execution. All of this is combined with the stiff, simple forms, the inaccurate proportions, and the skew-wise perspective of the beginner.

By most standards, these are not only shortcomings but fatal shortcomings—but



469. H. ROUSSEAU: *Village Street Scene*, 1909. 16¼ x 13". Philadelphia Museum of Art, Arensberg Collection.

not by quite all standards. A picture may have all these characteristics yet may combine them in a pattern of great charm or expressiveness. From the beginning, Rousseau had a sense for the agreeable or expressive placement of objects in a composition, and especially for the patterning of natural forms, such as the leaves of plants or the silhouettes of trees.

A "primitive," which in this sense means self-taught, artist may also paint with an honesty, a naïve directness, which is a transmutation of his own intensity and pleasure as he goes about the unfamiliar and exciting act of creation. This quality is inherent in Rousseau's early work to a surpassing degree. To some extent it is an intangible, yet its presence can be explained by closer examination of a painting (again [469]) which on the surface looks only "amateurish." Paint which in the run-of-the-mill picture of this kind would be thin and dry, is

applied with rich body in spite of its smoothness. Forms which are rigid and ill drawn by conventional standards are solid and well drawn by the standard of meticulous observation and careful selection. Color that would be harsh and raw or bleached and anemic or discordant and muddy in the ordinary primitive painting, is clear and harmonious in Rousseau.

As a result of these virtues, a picture with many acute technical limitations by conventional standards may be an expressive work of art, even when the expressive quality is half accidental. Rousseau's individual deviation from the general field of primitive painting, the one that sets him apart even from such honest and expressive primitives as Hicks with his *Peaceable Kingdom* [303] is the air of enchantment that permeates his work. Every figure, every leaf, every blade of grass, seems magically transfixed within a vacuum or a crystal, magically revealed to us in its smallest element.

The unreality of Rousseau is a paradoxical combination of fantasy and factuality; the painter offers each object in his street scenes and country landscapes with unquestioning acceptance of their perfect ordinariness, yet not one of the objects is ordinary after he paints them. The human figures are so isolated and so immobile, the trees are so neatly patterned and their foliage so meticulously rigid and delicate, the streets, houses, walls are so pristine, yet so familiar as elements of daily life—everything, in short, is so commonplace and yet so uncommonly revealed, that reality and unreality reach perfect fusion and one is indistinguishable from the other. We cannot say that Rousseau shows us a new world, for we have seen all these things many times; yet we cannot say, either, that this is a world we know, for these things exist in new relationships and even in new shapes. It becomes a world of dream, whose reality the dreamer accepts without question, and whose fantasy he recognizes only upon awakening. But instead of fading, the dream is preserved like a fly in amber. And it is a curious fly, not quite like the ones we are familiar with, not quite like any other fly we have seen before.

To some extent all of this applies to primitive painting in general. It applies to a very large extent in exceptional primitive paintings where lucky accident is luckier than usual in transforming mere naïveté into a kind of magical vision. The difference is that in Rousseau's art it applies consistently.

Rousseau was an industrious painter and he began to show his pictures wherever he could. At the exhibitions of the *Indépendants* he began to attract the attention of sophisticates who recognized the decorative quality and the poetry that distinguished his work from that of the armies of other Sunday painters who resembled him superficially. He left his comfortable position with the Customs to live on a small pension and spend his time painting. This was a dangerous point for Rousseau; upon the point of becoming a professional painter rather than an enthusiastic amateur, he was ready to study under conventional teachers and to master the techniques of realistic drawing and painting, which if he had mastered them, would have cost him the original style he had developed for himself. But he was lucky enough to receive good advice. The painters and literary figures who were beginning to make something of a darling of him were not the only ones who recognized the exceptional nature of his work. According to a later statement by Rousseau, even old Gérôme, the academic tyrant who was professor at the *École des Beaux Arts*, advised him to guard his naïveté.

Rousseau did guard his naïveté. But naïveté obviously stops being naïveté once it is guarded, and false naïveté can be a most offensive affectation. Rousseau set about creating for himself a personal style based on the forms that had been spontaneous to him as a beginner. This style, as he developed it, is the paradoxical one of a highly cultivated manner based on primitive simplicities, a dangerous combination and one that has never come off very well for Rousseau's imitators. Nor have any other "modern primitives," even those who begin as genuine ones, approached Rousseau's stature. Dealers and collectors continue to scout hopefully to ferret them out, but at



470. H. ROUSSEAU: *The Young Girl*, c. 1894. 24 x 18". Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. Sturgis Ingersoll.

their best they usually turn out to be charming but inconsequential, bizarre but only bizarre, or sincere yet somehow at once ponderous and shallow.* Rousseau may be charming, bizarre, and even sometimes ponderous. In *The Young Girl* [470], for instance, he is all of these. But these are secondary characteristics in a painting where the primary ones are monumentality and magic.

Rousseau was a late bloomer. His first signed pictures are from 1880, when he was already thirty-six years old, and he did not begin to exhibit with the *Indépendants*

* Some exceptions are Louis Vivin (1861-1936), Camille Bombois (1883-), and André Bauchant (1873-), all French. The Americans John Kane (1860-1934) and Horace Pippin (1888-), especially the latter with his intimately observed genre scenes and his engaging historical pictures, are close to the tradition of American folk art (although Kane was born in Scotland).



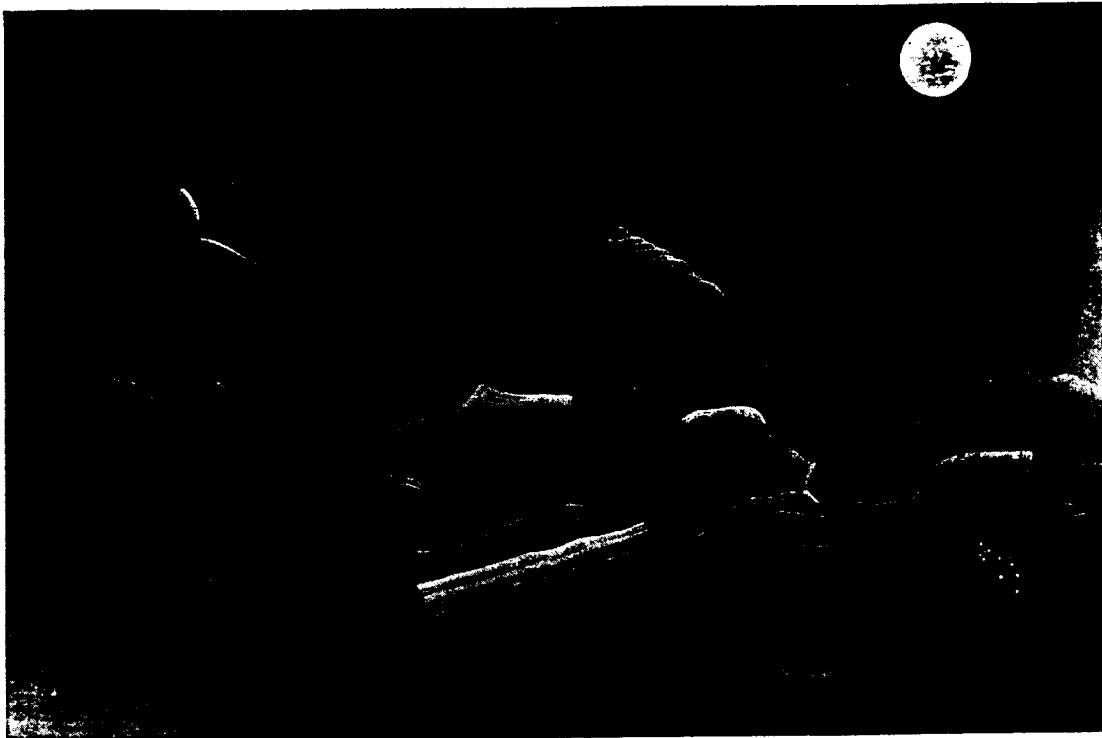
471. H. ROUSSEAU: *The Dream*, 1910. 80 x 118½". Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller.

until he was forty-two. In the interim he possibly copied pictures in the Louvre; at any rate, there is a record of issuance of a copyist's permit to him. The jungle fantasies for which he is most widely known did not appear until 1891, when he was approaching fifty. He was a happy eccentric, part visionary and part *petit bourgeois*. He eked out his pension by giving lessons in painting, music, and harmony, and he even wrote a five-act drama, *The Revenge of a Russian Orphan*, which was produced, but demonstrated that his unusual qualities as an artist were limited to painting, even though his naïveté was not.

According to his own story, Rousseau did military service in Mexico as one of the troops in the half-hearted expedition to keep Maximilian on the throne there. If this was true—there is good reason to doubt it, since there is no proof and Rousseau was given to fabrications which he half believed himself—he would have been twenty-two at the time, and might have carried back with him the memory of exotic foliage and exotic people. But as a matter of fact he could not

have seen the wild parrots, monkeys, leopards, and other beasts, or the particular plant forms he painted, for the good reason that they did not exist in the parts of Mexico he would have seen. His experience there would have been limited to the cities and the actually not very exotic countryside in which cacti, palms, and other semitropical plants did exist, but not in the profusion of jungles and not too frequently of the types Rousseau painted. His reference sources were the zoo, the botanical gardens, and postcards and photographs of exotic creatures and places. The references are not especially important since the true source of his pictures was his own imagination, whatever actual or secondhand experience he may have had with exotic places.

In the jungle pictures [471] he is free to give full indulgence to his passion for the design of leaves, blossoms, and branches. They grow in luxuriant and unnatural profusion, ordered into clear and unnatural patterns, combining the most fantastic imagery with the most unquestioning defi-



472. H. ROUSSEAU: *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897. 51 x 79". Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim.

dition. Their existence is impossible, yet undeniable. Reason tells us that these are fantasies or apparitions; our senses tell us that they are tangible fact. The conflicting halves of this paradox, formulated as a theory by Böcklin and Redon, were balanced and harmonized by Rousseau because the paradox existed in his own personality.

Rousseau was fifty-three when he created *The Sleeping Gypsy* [472], the climactic painting of his total work. In its own area, the area of fantastic and visionary art, *The Sleeping Gypsy* occupies a position comparable only to those occupied by Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*, Cézanne's *The Great Bathers*, and van Gogh's *The Starry Night*.

The Sleeping Gypsy cannot be accepted as a "primitive" painting except in the stylistic sense of the word. There is nothing unconsidered in its expressive effectiveness, no "lucky accidents," no groping, and no compromise. The pattern of the lion's mane, running in serpentine rivulets, the odd backward turning of the tuft of hair at the

end of the tail, the careful sprinkling of stars in the sky, the patterned lines of hills on the horizon, the dune where the gypsy lies and the lion stands, the gypsy's robe—whatever elements, instinctive or theoretical, account for the creation of these forms, they are the creation of a born artist who has matured as a creative designer through observation and experience. Rousseau paints each of the fantastic parts of this fantastic combination with the apparently objective innocence of his streets, houses, and ordinary city trees; fantasy or nightmare are accepted as unquestioningly as the everyday world, and represented as uncompromisingly. In Böcklin, and sometimes even in Redon, the real and the unreal may still be identified as incompatible elements brought into a kind of truce with one another, but in Rousseau they cannot be separated because it was never necessary for him to combine them in the first place. In his conception of *The Sleeping Gypsy* they must have existed together, as one, from the beginning.