

Bruno Delarue

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The customs officer
Rousseau in Paris

Monographies citadines



Studying Rousseau's work requires the historian to reconsider whether if not all his certitudes are correct, at least his method of analysis has merit, because nothing in this extraordinary man – a true extraterrestrial being in the world of art history – resembles the norms of painting, ever since, in the 15th century, Alberti defined the rules for solving the problem of rendering the feeling of space. To this window on the world, based on strict conventions, Rousseau made sweeping changes, well beyond what the Impressionists had recently done when this self-taught artist decided to start painting seriously.

Who really was Rousseau? Was he the fool that his first biographers sometimes described him as or rather the crafty, rather cunning and cultivated fellow that some people claim to have encountered? Because this salt-tax collector, who, never was a customs officer; this father who no longer really knew how many children he had since so many of them had died from tuberculosis; this poverty-stricken man who needed judges to make him pay his debt to his paint merchant, actually possessed many skills and, in addition to painting, he played music well enough to teach it (or at least perform in the street), and wrote nothing less than plays or accounts of Salons. In



short, he was not a commonplace fool and he was so interesting to be with, that modern minds sought to meet him, capable of real judgement, and, as Gaugin and many others were, able to produce a work of art, something which he did with great dedication and more or less an element of angelism.

Because Rousseau, and this is not one of the lesser paradoxes, dreamed of being able to paint just as well as academic painters, even claiming to have been advised at the outset by Jean-Léon Gérôme, an *art pompier* artist, whom it was highly unlikely he could ever have met. However, he was so incapable of doing so that he was forced to use other methods to force open the doors and, as a result, invented, probably unconsciously, a modernity that amazed the younger generation. “By wishing to copy a technique from the past, Rousseau tipped over into the future. He painted in the same way as in the 20th century, after Matisse”, wrote Dora Vallier. His work was such that it is possible to see signs of his influence in the works of Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger and, above all, Picasso, Beckmann and even Ernst and Miro, as elegantly illustrated by Carolyn Lanchner and William Rubin in the catalogue for the exhibition devoted to him at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in 1984.

Rousseau's Paris could not be that of beautiful neighbourhoods, and although he lived on Rue de Sèvres or Avenue du Maine, it was in miserable back shops or sordid rooms, sometimes sharing his only bed with his son. If Apollinaire gave him the attractive title of "Ange de Plaisance" (Angel of Plaisance), it was because Avenue du Maine and Rue Vercingétorix, where he stayed in an even less expensive place, was located in this working-class area of the present-day 14th arrondissement.

He realised that he was not going to paint Haussmann's recently created boulevards where the ruling population used to stroll in their beautiful clothes at the eminently bourgeois end of the century. Above all else, Rousseau liked the Seine and its bridges, the ones in the heart of Paris, Pont-Neuf and Grenelle, as well as Sèvres, Charenton and Alfortville. As we will see, he was not familiar with the traffic jams caused by hackney cabs and omnibuses, which were painted so much by Renoir and Pissarro, no more than the perspectives of the large avenues where his contemporaries gathered and who were unable to understand him. His Paris was reduced to the extreme simplification of a few houses on the river-side and a few rare walkers, but, more often than not, of factories with strongly defined chimney stacks. His Paris was, above all, that of the suburbs, places where people lived simply.

«I ALWAYS SEE A PAINTING
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SURE.»

OPPOSITE
Moi-même, portrait-paysage -
Myself Portrait Landscape, 1890
oil on canvas
146 x 113 cm
Narodni Galerie, Prague © AKG -Images



THE EIFFEL TOWER

Not having to comply with any dogma and beyond all forms of convention, he was the first, and this point is of great importance, to paint the new Eiffel Tower with which he became very fascinated after visiting it during the 1889 Universal Exposition which made a huge impression on him. There, he discovered the arts, and obtained an insight into civilisations and ideas, a completely new set of information for this man without any culture that provided him with food for thought throughout his life.

He was so fond of the Tower that it already appeared in March the following year in *Moi-même, portrait-paysage – Mysself: Portrait-Landscape*, a powerful self-portrait which he presented at the Salon des Indépendants in which he takes centre stage, standing upright, sporting a beard and a hat, namely with all the accoutrements of the painter, standing up to the mockery of the critics. The Tower can be found again, marking the centre of this view over the Seine towards which all the lines converge, in the canvas *La Tour Eiffel*. In his Vaudeville in three acts and ten paintings *Une visite à l'exposition de 1889 – A Visit to the 1889 Exposition* -, one of the paintings depicts “the Champ de Mars with the Eiffel Tower”. It amazed the intrepid Lebozeck who asked the guard: “Kind Sir, I have something to ask you. Could you tell me how to get to the top of that tall ladder?” In the same spirit, he painted the replica of the Statue of Liberty by



Auguste Bartholdi, recently installed on the Ile aux Cygnes (while it was still facing upstream of the river so that President Carnot did not have to inaugurate it from a boat) with the original in New York having been installed with the help of Gustave Eiffel; with the skies of Paris filled with all the flying objects which the mad inventors from the blossoming world of aeronautics were testing in front of enthusiastic crowds: hot-air balloons, airships and airplanes. All these signs of modernity can also be found in the works of Robert Delaunay.

Rousseau's chance may have been the fact that he had left Paris and its suburbs so little since arriving from Laval. When there is no geographic other, the imagination forces the present to become an entity charged with all the wonders of the world. In actual fact, apart from a few rare views of the countryside, all of Rousseau's works contain Paris, unless it is Paris itself that contains Rousseau.

Therefore, there is a question about his position with regard to his work because this state does not appear to have posed him any specific ethical problems. Many events raise this question because is it really possible to believe someone who found himself decorated twice, because of a case of mistaken identity, and who, without saying anything, wore these decorations ostensibly, even pinning

«MR ROUSSEAU
PAINTS WITH HIS
FEET AND WITH HIS
EYES CLOSED.»
IN THE PRESS

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**La Tour Eiffel -
The Eiffel Tower, c. 1898**
oil on canvas
52,4 x 77,2 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA
© Bridgeman Images

OPPOSITE
**Quai à Ivry -
Ivry Quay, c. 1908**
oil on canvas
Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japon
© Awesome art





one of them to his buttonhole in *Moi-même, portrait-paysage* (p 5) when he depicted himself as a grandiloquent artist? Can we believe, without a shadow of a doubt, in the integrity of this man who, in 1907, was caught out in such a ham-fisted financial trap that he spent one month in prison and declared these words to his lawyer, which are almost too outrageous to be true: “If I am found guilty, it would not be an injustice for me, it would be a loss for art.” What of this man’s naivety when, during the famous banquet organised by his friends in 1908 in his honour at Bateau-Lavoir in Picasso’s studio, he said earnestly to the young Catalan: “We are the two greatest painters of our time, you in the Egyptian genre and I in the modern genre”? Rousseau’s ambiguity, which does not take anything away from his huge talent, resides in the fact that we can never really completely believe him and the fact that he was much smarter than he appeared to be. A masterpiece of this hidden naivety can be found in a letter to the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, which is extremely well written and free of any mistakes, but in which the word dessin (drawing) is written dessein (voluntarily). I would say that he did this intentionally because he repeated it several times. Does the same apply in his painting?

OPPOSITE
Vue du pont de Sèvres -
- View of the Bridge at Sevres, 1908
oil on canvas
80 x 102 cm
Pouchkine Museum, Moscou © AKG-Images



In *Quai d'Ivry*, a painting in which the bridge is so badly painted that it is not even on the water, it might be asked whether Rousseau did not insist a little too much in order to remain “within the original genre which he had adopted”, and as he describes it himself in his autobiographical note, “very economical”, as he wrote in 1895 in a letter to the President of the Republic? Did Thadée Natanson also not have some doubts when in *La Revue Blanche* he spoke of “his relentless naivety”? Indeed, Rousseau himself did not hesitate to declare often that this or that great academic painter had advised him to preserve his naivety. Therefore, he was fully aware of his manner which, although it was certainly intuitive at the beginning soon became something that he tended to cultivate. The great difficulty — but is it really important ? — is knowing the level of control over his primitivism. It should be noted that this term, which, in this case, refers to Rousseau’s self-taught origins, does not have the same meaning that Cubist painters would soon give it. Ultimately, is it really important that, in order to compensate for his lack of technique he used a pantograph to position the elements of his first jungle scene in *Surpris!* considering that the result was so remarkable that Vallotton, one of whose paintings was exhibited alongside it at the 1891 Salon, declared that it “crushed everything else”.

«HIS THOUGHTS
WERE OCCUPIED
SOLELY WITH ART.»
ROBERT DELAUNAY

OPPOSITE
Vue de l'Île Saint-Louis prise
du quai Henri IV -
View of the Ile Saint-Louis
from the Quai Henri IV, 1909
oil on canvas
33 x 40,6 cm
Phillips Collection, Washington, USA
© AKG-Images

