Lautrec’s Legacy: Manifestations of Deformity & Synecdochical Depictions of Legs
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When seeking a comprehensive reading of a given work of art, it is not unusual to turn to the artist’s biography for clues into his intent and a specific perspective on his subject. The image of the artist, whether carefully cultivated or acquired by circumstance, often plays as important a role in the study of his work as does the work itself. The life and work of fin-de-siècle French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) demonstrate that such a connection can be made effectively, casting a new light on an artist’s expression and allowing for a work to reveal a fuller meaning with respect to its creator’s personal experience. A reading which takes an artist’s biography, or one significant aspect of it, into account, however, must refrain from being reductive, and recognize the nuances of an artist’s motivations and choices.

It is not my intent to present Lautrec’s physical deformity as the single motivating element in his work, nor to argue that representations of legs are central to the compositions which developed under the artist’s brush. Rather, I have examined the trends in Lautrec’s modes of representation only to find that a common predilection for movement and physicality of gesture consistently surfaces throughout his oeuvre, whether studied chronologically, by media, or by subject matter. Couching my readings of Lautrec’s work in his biography and his handicap, I hope to illustrate the ways through which frenetic activity and
physical mobility are much more central to his work than to the world of his colleagues. Lautrec did not invent legs on stage, nor legs in painting, but perhaps he had to invent them for himself and paint them to experience the world on horseback or on two healthy legs vicariously.

The works I have chosen to illustrate my points are representative of Lautrec’s variety of genres and media. I will examine these in relation to the trope of synecdoche, for I see Lautrec’s representations of body parts, especially legs, as synecdochical. One of four master tropes along with metaphor, metonymy, and irony, synecdoche defines a relationship wherein a part is representative of the whole and can stand alone in its representation of the whole.¹ In this relationship, a container stands for the contained, the sign for the thing signified (Burke, 507). In the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, the “cocked leg,” a term Griselda Pollock uses to describe the legs in Jane Avril (1893), and Troupe de Mlle. Églantine (1896), stands for the dancer’s entire body, distilling its sexuality and movement into a single limb which represents for the body as a whole. I will argue that, on a broader scale, the synecdochical use of legs is symptomatic of the artist’s recurring focus on legs, and this predilection’s

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¹ A distinction must be drawn between synecdoche and metonymy. Metonymy is the use of a name of an aspect of a thing, which may be substituted for the name of the thing itself, whereas, in synecdoche, “the similar distinction between parts and the whole is made only for the purpose of identifying the whole as a totality that is qualitatively identical with the parts that appear to make it up” (White, 73). Synecdoche makes a qualitative substitution while metonymy makes a nominal one (Hughes-Warrington, 354).
reflection of Lautrec’s own physical lack. This framework of analysis lends itself particularly well to the study of Lautrec’s work, for the artist himself saw and frequently described his subjects, especially women, in synecdochical terms: “It was not uncommon for [Lautrec] to refer in conversation to women as abstract parts: disparate limbs, organs and items of clothing which attracted him individually and collectively” (Frey, 308). What follows is a connection between the way in which Lautrec saw and spoke of his models, and that in which he depicted them.

Biography, scholarship, and criticism

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born in 1864 in Albi, fifty miles north-east of Toulouse, into one of France’s oldest families. His parents, Comtesse Adèle Tapié de Céleyran, and Comte Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa, were first cousins, which jeopardized young Henri’s health from conception. As a child, Henri suffered from frequent pains in his legs, and in his adolescence, he broke both of his thighbones in two accidents. These triggered the early onset of pyknodysostosis, a hereditary form of latent dwarfism which normally does not manifest itself until adulthood, but, in Lautrec’s case, it stunted the growth of his legs and curtailed his physical ability at an early age (Denvir, 9). In addition to

2 On a macrocosmic level, synecdoche is applicable to art as a whole. Burke posits that “artistic representation is synecdochic, in that certain relations within the medium ‘stand for’ corresponding relations outside it. There is also a sense in which the well-formed work of art is internally synecdochic, as the beginning of a drama contains its close or the close sums up the beginning, the parts all thus being consubstantially related” (Burke, 507).
horseback riding, hunting, and falconry, the Toulouse-Lautrecs had a family history and interest in and inclination toward art. The walls of the château at Albi were hung with family portraits done by generations of Lautrecs, and, in Henri’s childhood, the game and fowl brought back from the hunt was first sketched in the family den, then skinned and prepared in the kitchen (Sweetman, 30). Barred from his family’s athletic activities by his incapacitating injuries, Henri turned to art with encouragement from his parents and his uncle Charles. Drawing and painting provided an avenue for expression that was denied Henri in the social space of his own class, and what began as a distraction during long months of immobilized convalescence soon turned into a lifelong passion.³ Despite his limited mobility, which continued to affect the artist for the remainder of his life, Lautrec inhabited and worked amid the most dynamic settings in Paris. Although the artist’s chosen lifestyle was radically different from the one led by his aristocratic predecessors, he neither neglected his family ties, nor succumbed to his handicap, instead engaging in as much activity as his body would allow.

The dancers, circus performers, jockeys, and cyclists which make up the majority of Lautrec’s oeuvre take the viewer on a whirlwind tour of Belle

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³ Henri was the oldest child in a family in which the consanguine union of his parents’ siblings produced four younger cousins with genetic defects. There had been no precedent nor framework to help treat or grapple with physical imperfection. Among the Toulouse-Lautrecs and Tapié-de-Céleyrans, “handicaps were ignored if at all possible,” (Frey, 251) denying the suffering child an emotional outlet or context for coming to terms with the limited possibilities of his deficient body, and leaving him unaided in a search for a niche in his sports-oriented family.
Epope Paris. Central to Lautrec’s experience in this brightly-lit, ever-moving world are the pistons which set it all in motion: legs of athletes, high-kicking dancers, and flexible circus acrobats whose movements the artist was only able to mimic on paper. Scholars of Toulouse-Lautrec have produced an exhaustive body of writing on his style, use of color and economy of line, contributions to lithography, discrepancy between his chosen lifestyle and subject matter and his aristocratic upbringing, and his faithful representation of turn-of-the-century Paris. Although descriptions of Lautrec’s unprepossessing appearance and retellings of his unfortunate life story are also routinely figured into accounts of the artist, in-depth analyses of his handicap and its manifestations have appeared only recently in the body of scholarship on the artist.

The majority of sources are monographs, or tributes to Lautrec’s life and work, compilations of best-known pieces with supplementary introductions, essays, and illustrative anecdotes peppering concise commentary on individual plates. These usually commend Lautrec’s technique and ability to refrain from moralization and judgment in his work. In contrast to contemporary critics, late twentieth-century art historians view Lautrec as an honest painter of life, one who depicted the ugliness he saw without sentimentality or amendment.4 “C’est

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4 Jacques Lassaigne writes, “The secret of Lautrec’s art was its power of piercing through the surface of anecdotal, seeming-trivial, sometimes even ludicrous appearances, to the heart of the matter, the vital human core, and depicting human nature as it basically is,” (Lassaigne, 9) while June Rose writes in her book on Suzanne Valadon, *Mistress of Montmartre* (1998), “his affliction had made him acutely sensitive to other people’s reactions and he saw through pretensions and sham” (Rose, 68). In the imaginations of scholars, Lautrec has taken on the characteristics of a blind prophet, one whose physical limitations were somehow compensated
le plus grand crime de Lautrec d’avoir montré laid ce qui est laid,“5 wrote the art
ritic Arsène Alexandre in an article about Toulouse-Lautrec in Le Figaro in 1890
(Gassier, 55).

Lautrec’s grotesque appearance looms large in the memories of his
contemporaries. Without fail, detailed physical descriptions play a part in their
first impressions and recollections of the artist, as if his friends and colleagues
challenged themselves to reconcile the fluidity and dynamism of Lautrec’s work
with his own unprepossessing appearance. Lautrec’s biographers, too, have used
details of the artist’s appearance to convey his peculiarity, drawing a connection
between his faulted physique and his art. In Toulouse-Lautrec (1991), Bernard
Denvir paints a standard picture of the artist:

During his adult life he was a little under five feet high, with a normal-
sized head and torso but short legs, with knock-knees, short, thick arms and
hands which seemed even larger than they actually were, with club-like fingers.
He was marked by other symptoms of the disease: large nostrils, a receding chin,

thick, protuberant and unusually red lips, an enlarged tongue which made him
lisp and salivate excessively, accompanied by a persistent sniffle (Denvir, 9).

by a penetrating perceptiveness of the human condition. Friends and contemporaries, too,
attribute a sensitivity to his work which they perceive as recompense for a physical lack.
Among the first impressions of friend and collaborator Jules Renard in 1894 was this statement:
“This little man who calls his cane ‘my little staff’, who undoubtedly suffers because of his size,
deserves by his sensitivity to be a man of talent” (Frey, 401). Such evaluations of Laturec’s life
and work illustrate the conflation of the artist’s handicap with the tone of his work beginning
in his lifetime.

5 “It is Lautrec’s biggest crime that he showed as ugly those who were ugly.”
In more recent art historical writing, such a detailed description of this artist’s physical shortcomings undermines the earlier nearly sacred status accorded to an artist, thus tempering ethereal genius with the question of human susceptibility and mortality. The emphasis on the artist’s biography portrays the artist himself as human and vulnerable, and places him on par with his models.

The debate on beauty and ugliness, concepts to which Alexandre alluded in his 1890 review, plays a large part in the discussion of Lautrec’s work. While many of his contemporary critics see unnatural ugliness and exaggeration of faults in his work, more recent scholars have praised him for finding beauty where others only saw ugliness, or for his acceptance of the world as he saw it — beautiful or ugly, represented without excuse, judgment, or moralization. Whether or not these depictions of marginalized Parisians are tied to Lautrec’s view of his own deficiency remains a matter of opinion. Frey posits that, whether brutal or sensitive, Lautrec’s images of women were ultimately tied to his own deformity (Frey, 373). This claim resonates with critics of Lautrec’s time, whose reductive view of Lautrec’s work centered on style and aesthetics. Their discourse, characterized by blanket statements dismissing Lautrec’s work as ugly and reflective of his own deformity, left no room for a more nuanced discussion of composition, technique, motivation, or intent.

In Paris, and later in London, where Lautrec exhibited alone in May of 1898, his work met with accusations of ugliness and deformity similar to his own, his subject matter was found offensive and his representations of women
repulsive or frightening (Abbott, 4). After a visit to the preview of the Elles drawings in 1896, art critic Edmond de Goncourt, writing in his Journal, dismissed Lautrec as “a ridiculous homunculus whose caricatural deformity is reflected in each of his drawings” (Frey, 420). While Lautrec enjoyed the support of a small group of friends and critics, and his works sold, a considerable opposition was voiced with each showing of his work, and the artist’s success was more notable in the popularity of his posters and illustrations than in the reception of his paintings. In 1899, shortly after Lautrec was committed to a health facility following an attack of delirium tremens, critic Alexander Hepp wrote in Le Journal:

The conversation of Toulouse-Lautrec seemed to spring from an all-embracing desire to destroy...The world contained only idiots, knaves and rogues...I do not deny that these opinions are sometimes justified. But what a strange conception, what a consistently gloomy outlook, what a determination to suspect, disparage, and degrade everything, or rather what a persecution mania! (Frey, 462).

English writer Arthur Symons, who frequented the Moulin Rouge and moved in the same circles as Lautrec, also saw satire and bitterness in Lautrec’s work: “Lautrec — when he most hated himself — created deformed monstrosities” (Frey, 263).
Twentieth-century scholarship has shifted away from this reductive view of Lautrec’s oeuvre, and has used hindsight to evaluate Lautrec’s style and subject matter in the context of other art movements. Some, however, still argue that the artist’s unflattering portrayals of his models result from personal vengeance on a world that had burdened him with a grotesque body. Denvir, for instance, posits that “In part this vehemence may have been motivated by his own ugliness, as Freudian commentators on the arts have emphasized the degree of sadism which tends to underlie the impulse to caricature” (Denvir, 59). More recently, works like Julia Frey’s biography Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life (1994) flirt with the idea of direct connection between Lautrec’s handicap and specific themes in his work, but fail to bridge the two and leave no definitive word on Lautrec’s imagery as a manifestation of an anxiety with a specific part of his body.

6 While Denvir and Symons are quick to introduce the idea of sadism into readings of Lautrec’s work, others have come to the artist’s defense, crediting Lautrec’s personal experience and powers of perception of the human condition, and not his desire to retaliate, with the tone of his work. “He was never actuated by any predilection for ugliness per se, and the distortions in his art are not a ‘transfer’ of his own deformity. Nor is there any repression, abnormal or pathological, in his work...In a word, he was a tireless observer of the world around him and trained his vision so effectively that he spares us no blemish on a model’s face and achieves a truth to nature richer than nature itself” (Lassaigne, 10). When compared to the opinion of art critic Jean Lorrain, who wrote of Lautrec’s work on the Yvette Guilbert album in an October 15, 1893 issue of L’Echo de Paris, “No one has the right to push the cult of ugliness so far....It goes without saying that Monsier de Toulouse-Lautrec sees everything as ugly, but that you, Yvette, accepted these drawings...printed in goose-shit green and with those shadows that spatter your nose and chin with shit!” the shift in criteria for evaluation and attitudes towards Lautrec’s work between his time and ours becomes evident (Frey, 390-1). The criticism of Lorrain’s time seems to concern itself with beauty and aesthetics, rather than with style, innovation, or meaning.
It is not specific enough to state that Lautrec’s physical deformity affected the nature of his art. Unlike the dismissive attitudes of contemporary critics, who reduce all of Lautrec’s work to a generic reflection of personal ugliness, which operates under the assumption that Lautrec was vain enough to take vengeance on the world with his depictions, I posit that the manifestations of his biography are most apparent specifically in representations of legs on women, men, and even animals. While views like those of Symons and Hepp proffer evaluations of ugliness, ignoring the specifics of subject matter, color, style, and composition, my reading of Lautrec’s oeuvre is done through the lens of his physical lack, the inadequacy of his legs vis-à-vis the athletic ones of his male relatives, and the implications of this shortcoming both in his own class and in his chosen milieu. Given Henri’s upbringing, which had prepared him for a life of rigorous physical activity until the cessation of the boy’s growth led him to abandon hopes of an active future, it would seem that of all the unattractive irregularities Lautrec’s body suffered from pyknodysostosis, his stunted legs were its most debilitating and obvious symptoms. The resulting ill-proportioned, vulnerable body was barred from the chase of women and game, both of which had traditionally characterized the lives of the Lautrec men. Thus, Lautrec’s own trauma manifests
itself throughout his work, informing his self-image both in private sketches and commissioned work.

An example is the lithograph Worn-out Love (1894) (Fig. 1), an illustration for the sheet music of a same-titled song about lesbianism’s decadence. In this sketch, a small naked boy with bandaged head and leg accompanies two women sharing an embrace. In his depiction of the injured Eros, the artist revisits a time in his childhood when, at an age close to that of the boy drawn here, his own critical injury occurred, forcing him to rely on crutches. Eros’ bandaged leg replaces the phallus and bespeaks the artist’s anxiety about his physical ability and sexual performance, a message which is reinforced by the superfluity of the male figure, excluded from the lesbian love that was common among Lautrec’s models. With its allusions to leg injury, phallic imagery, and lesbian love and male impotence, this work is considered one of Lautrec’s “most self-revelatory lithographs” (Frey, 377).

With no writing to clearly indicate the artist’s intent or meaning, scholars have looked for answers in a combination of such revelatory imagery and correspondence. Most recent is a compilation of six hundred and eight letters by Toulouse-Lautrec, published by Herbert Schimmel in 1991. Beginning in April 1872, these are addressed primarily to the painter’s mother, grandmothers, cousins, and other relatives, with a shift around 1887 to almost exclusively professional correspondence. Lautrec’s letters attest to the artist’s involvement in all aspects of his art’s production and distribution, devotion to his family, and an
especially close relationship with his mother, to whom Henri wrote regularly, filling his letters with reports of daily life, social gossip, and frequent requests for wine and money. Despite the consistency of his correspondence, a reader is able to catch only occasional glimpses of Lautrec’s self-reflective thoughts and emotions. It is clear that, for Lautrec, letter writing was a social exercise rather than a space for personal introspection, or for the revelation of his work’s intent. Discussion of his own art fails to go beyond practical details of commissions, models, prices, and exhibition schedules. However, poignant references to his abnormality pepper the artist’s letters, which reveal, from an early age, Henri’s awareness and preoccupation with his body, feelings of impotence, physical awkwardness, and longings for health, all of which are only thinly veiled by the humor and lightheartedness with which he writes of them.

In December 1872, Henri signed New Year’s greetings to his mother with “Your Mushroom” (Schimmel, 7). Henri’s retarded growth did not become an undeniable fact until his adolescence, but the six-year-old boy may already have been aware of his physical disproportion, of a head which was large compared to his underdeveloped body, especially next to the bodies of his cousins and playmates. Three years later, Henri wrote, “Well, dear Godmother, I just had a silly notion that if I could leave my legs here and go off in an envelope (just to kiss Mama and you), I’d do it” (Schimmel, 12). It is clear that the boy saw his legs not as the key to mobility, but rather as a physical impediment, as if their removal would guarantee him speed. These early references to his legs as a
hindrance undermine the notion held by biographers like Huissman and Dortu that Henri’s shortness resulted from two childhood riding accidents, unfortunate isolated episodes rather than symptoms of a larger hereditary problem.

In a letter written to his grandmother Gabrielle on March 1, 1877, Henri complains of being “awfully tired of limping with my left foot now that the right one is cured” (Schimmel, 18). Letters written after the two major breaks, although humorous as usual, reveal Henri’s identification with his handicap, as he signed several of them with names such as “Henry-Broken-Paw!” (Schimmel, 22). A letter to an unidentified correspondent, written from Albi in June 1878, offers a telling account of how thirteen-year-old Henri viewed himself and his prospects of romance:

I draw and paint as much as I can, so much so that my hand gets tired of it, and when it starts to get dark I wait to find out whether Jeanne d’Armagnac will come near my bed. Sometimes she comes, and I listen to her speak, not daring to look at her, she is so tall and beautiful and I am neither tall nor beautiful (Schimmel, 23).

Henri signed this letter with “Monsieur cloche-pied,” or “Mr. One-foot,” revealing simultaneously his growing dedication to art, insecurity and resignation toward his physical shortcomings beside his attractive cousin Jeanne, and the effect of his injured body on his self-image. Never again would Lautrec be so this explicit about his insecurities in his letters, but the feelings recorded at
age thirteen would continue to characterize Lautrec’s feelings toward women throughout his adulthood. From his youth, Henri’s legs hindered not only his mobility, but his ability to feel attractive around a woman, for they deprived him of his height and left him partially incapacitated.

At age fourteen, Henri wrote to his great-aunt Joséphine in a letter illustrated with a sketched self-portrait: “Look at that shape absolutely totally lacking in elegance, that big behind, that potato nose...He is not good-looking, and yet, after knocking at the door....it climbed the stairs as fast as its legs (broken twice, poor legs!...) allowed him” (Schimmel, 36). Here, Lautrec takes an alienated and reductive view of himself, writing of himself in the third person neuter, denying himself gender and human status, and forming his own identity from a few unflattering physical characteristics. We will see him using a similar approach in his art, observing himself from outside the painting by including a view of his own profile or back.

Although problems with his legs varied in intensity during Lautrec’s adult life, their abnormality continued to color the artist’s self-perception. After his legs and arms ceased growing, Henri’s torso continued to develop to normal size. Moreover, as we have already seen, the hereditary dwarfism triggered by his parents’ consanguinity would manifest itself in protruding purplish lips, large nose, and receding chin, which elicited repulsion from strangers and new acquaintances. Henri’s “growing pains,” which had afflicted him throughout childhood, at times immobilizing him and confining him to a health facility
where he underwent treatment to fortify and encourage his physical development, had subsided by his teenage years. The cessation of these ailments is reflected by a decrease in the number of allusions to his legs in later correspondence.

In his depictions and manipulations of the human form, Lautrec simultaneously stages his own experience, accessing on canvas that from which he was excluded in real life, and shows the body as he sees it through the lens of his anxiety in the surrounding world. Henri’s feelings of impotence were rooted in his childhood, when, unable to partake in the hunt and falconry that were so important to his father, he was denied the masculine rituals of his class.7 A pair of sketches, one entitled Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec, à cheval (1896), the other of his own ill-proportioned body astride a drawing pencil (c. 1882) (Fig. 2), juxtaposes the traditional pursuits of a Toulouse-Lautrec with the activity which became the vehicle for Henri’s self-assertion. Eighteen-year-old Henri’s hunchbacked self-portrait, with a large head and tiny legs, reveals his recognition of art as the activity into which he would now channel his energy, the pencil taking the place of the horse, and which replaced the sport he had aspired to as a child.8

7 Frey’s view of the implications of Lautrec’s deformity in his art relates the artist’s physical condition to his perception of himself as artist: “His deformity may have been the image which afflicted him most, and certainly drove him to accept the passivity of the artist-observer rather than the physically demanding life his relatives led as sportsmen” (Frey, 237).
8 “Henri found himself in the position of being forced to watch much of a life for which he had considerable enthusiasm but in which little was left that he could enact. His was to remain apart from all this, the hunting, the horses, the hounds and with this early isolation he cultivated a
In at least two instances during Lautrec’s life, art provided a supportive structure in times of adversity. In his teenage years, it was not only a distraction, but also a new outlet for Henri, and was encouraged by his parents when the effects of his deformity became too pronounced to ignore. Years later, this passion would again become a centering force for Lautrec, now enfeebled by alcoholism. During his recovery at the clinic in Neuilly, Lautrec would prove his sanity, functional memory, and ability to control his tools to his doctors, earning his release with the lucidity demonstrated in a series of circus scenes drawn from memory. Even in times of tolerable health, however, not only did Lautrec choose to portray the dynamics of racers and animals, as well as of the dancers and performers of Montmartre, but he did this in such a way as to leave a stamp of his own unrealized potential and unused energy on the canvas. Landscapes and still lifes, subjects devoid of motion and vibrancy, are absent from Lautrec’s prolific oeuvre, especially when compared to those of his contemporaries Cézanne and Monet. Lautrec is often quoted as having said, “Landscape is nothing and should be nothing but an accessory to make the character of the figure more intelligible” (Frey, 234). True to his opinion, and perhaps taking his distaste for this static and unemotional genre from Degas, whom he greatly admired, and in whose oeuvre pure landscapes appear very rarely, Lautrec

Surety of perception and an independence of mind which was later to be most valuable,” writes Jere Abbott in an introduction to an exhibition catalogue for a Lautrec—Redon exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1931 (Abbott, 5). Not only does Abbott emphasize the contrast between Lautrec’s wishes and ability, but he also connects physical isolation with “a surety of perception.”
painted no landscapes after his initial childhood experiments (Frey, 182). Once again, this supports the insistence of Lautrec’s art on the primacy of the human form and experience.

Lautrec’s first formal painting teacher was local artist Réne Princeteau, whose instruction provided the traditional initial exercises of depicting hunting scenes and animals. Having learned the basics of Princeteau’s offerings, Lautrec soon moved to Paris, where his works’ primary focus became the denizens and habitués of Montmartre. Nonetheless, a focus on the physical, animalistic qualities in his subjects, for which Princeteau had trained his eye, and for which Lautrec had a predilection, continued to imbue all of his work. In Paris, Lautrec joined the studio of Léon Bonnat, one of the city’s foremost painters; when Bonnat closed his studio fifteen months later, Lautrec moved to the studio of Fernand Cormon. Surrounded by fellow students and aspiring artists, Lautrec soon found himself in the cafés and cabarets of Montmartre, enjoying the variety of continual entertainment and plentiful drink, and finding endless subject matter for his work. It was also here that he met Emile Bonnard, Vincent van Gogh, Edouard Vuillard, Louis Anquetin, and other painters who became his colleagues and lifelong friends.

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9 Princeteau provided Henri with “a thorough grounding in the technique of a from that, unadventurous though it was, still suited the tastes of the young beginner, conditioned as these were by his surroundings...Lautrec borrowed from Princeteau his themes and his technical devices for presenting human figures or horses under aspects displaying their forms and poise to best effect” (Lassaigne, 21). In fact, Lautrec’s animals were often more poised and controlled than the human models, to whom critics have attributed animal qualities.
While Lautrec’s fellow artists frequented the Chat Noir, Moulin Rouge, and a myriad other establishments to be inspired and entertained, at the end of the night they dispersed to their studios and lodgings. For Lautrec, this setting became a lifestyle; before long, he moved to the foot of the butte, and his days and nights of work and pleasure became inextricably intertwined. Unlike Degas, Renoir, and Manet, for whom Montmartre was one source of inspiration among many, Lautrec became the embodiment of the artist-on-Montmartre image of his time. As Arthur Symons recalls, Lautrec “was the only painter who absolutely loved it” (Frey, 262). Although Symons may have been exaggerating, the “bawdy goings-on, the flagrant artificiality and ill-disguised lasciviousness, the available spectator sports both on and off-stage, the heady odour of tobacco and rice-powder” which were characteristic of Lautrec’s environment are well documented (Frey, 262). On Montmartre Lautrec found a new home and surrogate family; among its motley throng of pimps and prostitutes, performers, actors, artists, alcoholics, and bourgeois slummers looking to rub elbows with the working class, the incongruity between his deformity and aristocratic heritage was less explicit.

Regardless of the degree of acceptance Lautrec gained among Parisians as marginalized as himself, he was also drawn to Montmartre by the dynamic and energetic acts and transient lifestyles of the dancers and performers who

10 Today, this image continues to color Lautrec’s identity. The most recent example, entitled Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre (2005) is this year’s exhibit of his work at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.
dominate his work. These served not only as an inexhaustible supply of subject matter, but also allowed Lautrec to live the full range of Montmartre experiences. \footnote{Jere Abbott offers this straightforward analysis of the connection between Lautrec’s work and ability: “He might paint till doom but he could never join the dancing and it was the dancing he most wanted” (Abbott, 7).} Lautrec continued to swim, row, sail, and spend much of his time outdoors even after being incapacitated by injuries, and engaged himself in his surroundings despite his deformity and at times deterring appearance. Publisher and friend Jules Renard left a practical, if somewhat humorous, assessment of the attraction Montmartre’s establishments held for Lautrec. In an entry in his Journal, dated 26 December 1895, Renard wrote of Lautrec, “He likes bars (in night clubs?), on account, no doubt, of the high stools on which he can perch. Then he is nearly as tall as we are!” (Toulouse-Lautrec, A Bestiary, 9). \footnote{The inhabitants of the artist’s newly chosen milieu did not necessarily ignore Henri’s physical appearance, but they welcomed him together with his defects. Henri’s friend François Gauzi remembered his notoriety at the cafés and bars where he was greeted as a friend, but was “seen only as a midget — a miniscule being, a gnome, one of Ribera’s dwarfs, a drunken, vice-ridden court-jester whose friends are pimps and girls from brothels. He has an appalling reputation which, in part, he deserves” (Frey, 241). Gauzi’s description isn’t wholly fair, for Lautrec enjoyed friendships with men of his own class as well, and outside Montmartre, assumed the decorum expected of a Toulouse-Lautrec. Still, this account is telling of Lautrec’s ability to adapt his behavior to his environment.}

Conversely, the artist’s full acceptance into this world was attendant upon his physical peculiarity. Even with his jovial nature and ability to put those around him at ease, without the deformity that set him apart from members of his own class and placed him on par with his new companions, Lautrec would never have been fully welcome on Montmartre. Had his body been normal, he would likely have remained a privileged aristocrat, a mere curious slummer, bearing
the brunt of Bruant’s jokes, or receiving the same treatment as just another paying customer at the brothels.\textsuperscript{13} Instead, on Montmartre, his comical appearance and widely respected talent offered the artist admission into the inner sanctums of the world he loved to portray.

As Henri outgrew his injuries and maladies and entered a world of young men like him, which revolved around the art studio by day and the entertainment of Montmartre by night, he became exposed to fewer expectations of physical rigor than had been the case at his ancestral home and in the company of his father. This may explain why his letters from the time of his apprenticeships contain fewer complaints about health or allusions to physical exploits. Even so, nightly drinking with friends, visits to studios and galleries, and climbs to and from the hill where he spent most of his time were taxing to Lautrec’s short legs. Around Montmartre, he was remembered for his waddling walk: “Il accentue sa malformation en exagérant sa démarche claudicante, appuyé sur une courte canne qui ne le quitte pas”\textsuperscript{14} (Gassier, 15). A single reference in all of Lautrec’s letters sums up the effects of his short stature on his daily activities, and provides Lautrec’s insight into the role of his deformity in his interactions with friends. Writing to his mother from Amsterdam in February 1894, Lautrec reported: “The amount of beer we’re drinking is incalculable, and

\textsuperscript{13} As it was, Bruant, who knew Lautrec by name, was known to interrupt his own performances to introduce the artist to the crowds, and hung his paintings on the walls of Le Mirliton (Frey, 187).

\textsuperscript{14} “He accents his malformation by exaggerating his limping walk, propped by a short cane which never leaves his side.”
no less incalculable the kindness of Anquetin, whom I cramp with my small, slow person by keeping him from walking at his own pace, but who makes believe it doesn’t bother him” (Schimmel, 235-6). Lautrec’s friends also noted that the artist avoided the polished floors of museums and art galleries, which posed a challenge to his balance, causing him to rely on others for physical support (Denvir, 11). Here, the feelings which must have accompanied Lautrec on his daily excursions with friends are made explicit: indebtedness for their kindness and tolerance, coupled with an ever-present awareness of his own slowness and encumbrance. This sensitivity to physical difference was two-way, making Lautrec’s companions as acutely aware of their own perfect health as the artist was of his frailty.

Lautrec’s early manhood was accompanied by an accumulation of facial hair, which, curiously, Henri reports in his letters. On at least two occasions between December of 1885 and the following spring, the twenty-one-year-old painter writes to his family of his beard and “Auvergnat whiskers” (Schimmel, 98-9). Aside from signifying a boy’s coming of age, a beard was the traditional accouterment of an artist. For Lautrec, however, wearing a beard not only identified him with his beloved profession, but was also a way to mask or

15 In the collection of letters, Schimmel comments that this was one of Lautrec’s only references to his deformed legs, thereby identifying the scarcity of Lautrec’s treatment of a subject which had such a heavy impact on his life (Schimmel, 235-6).

16 Lautrec’s close friend, Thadée Natanson, recalls, “There is an overwhelming pleasure in bowing down to someone who has been denied the recognition he deserves…it is a fine gift to submit to the will of someone who has so little power” (Frey, 356). A sort of guilt pervaded Natanson’s and others’ friendships with Lautrec, so that they tolerated the diminutive man’s capricious bullying as a sort of penance for their own physical well-being (Frey, 356).
enlarge his receding chin, yet another symptom of his condition which became more pronounced in his early adulthood. The newly grown facial hair was also a sign of virility, which was especially important to a young man who had been denied the physical capabilities of his peers. Lautrec’s pride in his beard was an assertion not only of his status as an artist, but of his very manhood.

In the absence of personal journals or written missives on his work, and reticence on the topic in his letters, written primary sources of Lautrec’s intent and meaning are virtually non-existent, forcing scholars to examine artist’s voluminous oeuvre for insights into his values, predilections, and the body parts which mattered to him the most. Scant recorded evidence of Henri’s feelings about his art and his own person do not necessarily preclude an art historian from arriving at certain conclusions simply by looking at his art. In her book Art and Psychoanalysis (1993), Laurie Schneider Adams advocates the validity of an image alone or in combination with prior knowledge of biography as a legitimate source of information for reading a work:

Visual artists...express themselves primarily in imagery and only secondarily in words. Their most "truthful" autobiographical statements are their images. To this point, it has been suggested that an individual work of art can be likened to a short story, or a chapter in an artist's life. The oeuvre as a whole then 'adds up' to a larger text, comprising the artist's creative biography. Insofar as one can 'read,' or deconstruct, the artist's imagery, it is possible to arrive at its personal as well as its cultural and historical sources (Adams, 259).
Thus, an artist’s work and life coexist in a mutually influential relationship, and, to fully understand the first, one must gain an understanding of the latter. Lautrec’s biography is among the better-remembered, more colorful ones, and it begs the question of a connection between his own stunted legs and the elongated, sinuous ones in his works. If Lautrec painted that which he loved and was fascinated by most, it is telling that he made only one formal self-portrait, and no renderings of dwarves or men of similar stature to his own appear in his oeuvre. The only exception, a self-portrait of Lautrec in front of the mirror (1880-83) (Fig. 3), cuts off the artist’s body below the chest and blurs his facial features, which by this time had become distorted by pyknodysostosis. Confined to a dark interior, away from his beloved outdoors, Lautrec wears a painting smock in front of what appears to be a cluttered mantelpiece. Different from his other portraits in its use of demure color, static posing, lack of detail, and a face that deliberately conceals expression, Lautrec’s only formal self-portrait is a picture of melancholy and a recorded attempt to reconcile himself to his reflection.

While Lautrec’s letters do not paint a complete picture of the artist’s self-image, and formal self-portraiture is limited, the miniscule sketches of his miniature person leave no doubt that, while making light of his own situation, Lautrec saw himself as perfectly worthy of ridicule from others. The numerous
sketches drawn on tablecloths, paper scraps and in small sketchbooks reveal self-deprecating humor and a pained awareness of a grotesque physique (Figs. 4 and 5). Here, Lautrec “brought out frankly, if with a brevity confessing his reluctance, his physical deformity and the almost equal ugliness of his face,” writes Jacques Laissagne (Laissagne, 11). Verbally, Lautrec also made light of his deformity, qualifying his unusual body with a sexual appetite and above-average endowment, calling himself “a coffee-pot with a large spout” (Lucie-Smith, 9). Ambivalence toward himself and toward women characterizes much of Lautrec’s work: the relationships he experienced were of a commercial nature, so that, while some women’s bodies were accessible to his pleasure-seeking, as they were to all men who paid the price, Lautrec was continually aware that his appearance would ultimately prevent him from forming a monogamous, lasting romantic relationship with a woman. The dichotomy between the sensuous, agile bodies of Montmartre’s performers and his own disfigured one demonstrates Lautrec’s self-consciousness and a longing to partake in the movement before him. What Lautrec chose to portray was his opposite in appearance, shape, and mobility.

Cult of the star: commercial commissions
So pervasive is Lautrec’s predilection for legs, that its manifestations can be found throughout his oeuvre, on men, women, and even animals. The very settings Lautrec chose to portray — racetracks, circus arenas, stages and dance floors — reveal Lautrec’s penchant for robust activity as the axis of his Parisian experience. Although he could not compete with his subjects in athleticism or prowess on the dance floor, the energy with which he imbued his paintings allowed him to participate in these experiences, if only vicariously, through retracing the movement of his models with his crayon or brush.17 Through the physicality of the gesture with which Lautrec recorded stars like La Goulue and Le Désossé, he was able to perform his own sort of dance. Where his legs lacked, his drawing hand compensated. Lautrec accused himself of a deficiency in nimbleness and grace, making several references to this in his letters. The praise Lautrec denied himself for his cumbersome body he received from some of his more supportive critics for his art. In a review of his life and work written for a Bordeaux newspaper shortly after the artist’s death in September 1901, one critic wrote: “Il peignait et dessinait avec une prestesse stupéfiante”18 (Gassier, 56). What his body prevented him from achieving, he expressed with his brush, capturing these qualities of the men and women who were known and admired for their vitality, agility, and captivating performance.

17 Frey writes, “As he was fascinated by animals, he was also fascinated by humans who moved with animal vitality, and his drawings of La Goulue and Valentin Le Désossé, as he followed their careers from cabaret to cabaret and finally to Le Moulin Rouge, confirmed his fame among his contemporaries and recorded theirs for posterity” (Frey, 243).

18 “He painted and drew with a stupefying nimbleness.”
To fully appreciate the consistency with which legs appear in Lautrec’s work, it is useful to examine both publicity posters made for a certain performer and works made outside the constraints of commission. Many of the lithographs which feature synecdochical use of limbs were produced for a commercial or practical purpose. Like brand recognition engrained in consumers by advertisers of a product, these posters usually zero in on the most recognizable aspect of the performer, such as La Goulue’s twisted knot of orange hair, Aristide Bruant’s hat and scarf, or Yvette Guilbert’s long black gloves. Lautrec had considerable authority throughout the stages of the poster-making process: from a quick sketch of a pose observed in a café, to the final coloring of the stone in preparation for a lithograph, Lautrec controlled all details of his production. A model’s requests may have had a slight effect on the final outcome, but even commissions for publicity posters were not so restricted by a client’s guidelines as to inhibit Lautrec’s choice of imagery or execution. In a way, he enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with those he publicized: their black gloves, dance moves, or lacy bloomers were engrained into the minds of Parisians through Lautrec’s immensely popular posters. These covered the walls of the city, and were paraded along the streets in carts driven specifically for the purpose.

By the same token, Lautrec’s own publicity depended on the fans of Jane Avril, Aristide Bruant, and others whose names, bodies and talents he

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19 Some, like Jane Avril, were more conscious than others of Lautrec’s contribution to their publicity and success on stage (Frey, 234).
advertised. In the end, Lautrec’s choice of the final image for any publicity poster owed a heavier debt to his own imagination and intent than to a commissioner’s criteria, for there were other graphic artists Montmartre celebrities or their managers could choose from. Thus the cocked leg, which appears in his works, became visually synonymous with Lautrec’s own signature (Fig. 6) Trained to recognize Lautrec’s style from the legs of Jane Avril, La Goulue, Cha-U-Kao, and Valentin le Désossé, Parisian audiences could then identify the artist’s hand in posters advertising other, less familiar persons, products, or services.

An example of Lautrec’s choice to emphasize legs beyond the necessity of advertisement can be seen in a comparison between the poster of the Moulin Rouge by Jules Chéret, Lautrec’s earlier contemporary and predecessor in the development of the lithographic poster print, and Lautrec’s own slightly later version. Although the two shared common subject matter, the prevalence of legs in Lautrec’s posters again shows that his chosen modes of representation were guided by deeper motives than the need for an accurate portrayal of the advertised commodity. Chéret’s Bal au Moulin Rouge (1889) (Fig. 7) shows several women clad in revealing yellow dresses, riding donkeys towards the mill itself, which is placed in a prominent place in the center of the poster. Despite the women’s generous exposure of cleavage and naked legs, the eye is drawn to the darkest areas of the composition — the black donkey, the red, phallic mill, and the poster’s title. Exposed legs flashing in the foreground confront the viewer, but they do not command his attention for long; blending into the mass of the
women’s undifferentiated bodies and yellow dresses, they are not accessory to the women’s mobility. Here, repetition of the nearly identical chérettes reduces them to the status of nameless, readily available and easily interchangeable commodity, while the establishment itself, Le Moulin Rouge, is unique and irreplaceable.

In his version of the commission, Le Moulin Rouge, La Goulue (1891) (Fig. 8), Toulouse-Lautrec focuses on La Goulue (the Glutton), the cabaret’s principal attraction in 1891. Inherent to this composition is a suggestion that Le Moulin Rouge owes its success to this dancer, and her uninhibited quadrille, oftentimes made all the more risqué by the dancer’s exposure of her lacy bloomers, their bottom embroidered with a heart, which draws the crowds silhouetted in the background. Chéret’s dainty donkey riders, albeit suggestive of the amoral entertainment on offer on Montmartre, virtually bar the male viewer from witnessing their sex with their demurely crossed legs, corseted torsos, and hair concealed by hats. The imagery is sexually charged, but it borders on the pastoral. By contrast, Lautrec’s La Goulue embodies dynamism and wantonness, her uncovered hair brightly dyed, and the outlines of her thighs visible through scant undergarments. Concealed by tight black stockings and voluminous petticoats, her legs provide a tantalizing, yet explicit, allusion to what is beneath her clothing. The composition of the poster is centered around her sex, her legs propelling like blades of a mill, and she confronts the viewer of the poster with her behind, all the while commanding attention from the
audience included in the poster. Emerging from a cloud of underskirts, La Goulue’s slender legs and muscular calves advertise physical exertion as well as the possibility of a sexual encounter. While Chéret multiplies the legs in his poster and colors them with the same intensity as the rest of the bodies, Lautrec manages to convey to his audience that, at least for him, the dancer’s legs embody the Moulin Rouge experience.20

Chéret’s treatment of legs appears indifferent when juxtaposed to Lautrec’s work of the same genre. Wherever they appear, legs are treated on par with the other elements of the composition and other parts of women’s bodies, for women comprise the majority of Chéret’s subjects. The one notable exception is an 1877 advertisement for the Folies-Bergère (Fig. 9). Here, however, the overelongated, exaggerated, almost spider-like legs are those of men — in their grotesque, pointed form they are almost too abstract to be believable body parts.21 Central to this composition is a woman’s body surrounded and partially obscured by the legs of the four men around her, while her own legs are almost fully concealed by a long, loose skirt. We see hints of her anatomy in the outline of her upper leg visible through the skirt, similar to the technique later used by Lautrec in his La Goulue poster, but her black-stockinged foot is shown only up to the ankle: this woman has little to offer the viewer. A comparison between

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20 Lucie-Smith attributes Lautrec’s repeated representations of La Goulue to the artist’s fascination with her “ferocious energy” (Lucie-Smith, 27).

21 Chéret’s uninhibited portrayal of men’s legs suggests the artist’s confidence with his own pair. Frey notes a tendency in Lautrec’s post-1893 work to truncate his models’ legs at the edges of his compositions, “making them as physically limited as he was” (Frey, 360), as, for instance, in Caudieux (1893) (Fig. 10).
these posters by Lautrec and Chéret demonstrates that, although depictions of legs appear in different ways in the works of Lautrec’s contemporaries, Lautrec surpasses the others with the consistency and intensity of his representations.

Lithographic successes

A word must be said here of Lautrec and his development and use of lithography. While the artist’s early oeuvre is comprised of oil sketches, drawings, and pastels, it is his lithographic posters and prints that have earned him a place among the most influential graphic artists. Reversing the traditional process, wherein preliminary drawings were made in preparation for a final oil painting, Lautrec often sketched in paint or pastel first, creating several variations on a composition to be used for a final drawing for a journal illustration or advertisement. The artist submitted both his lithographic prints and his paintings to the group exhibitions in which he participated, negating the difference between “commercial” and “fine” art, much to the chagrin of his family, who still entertained the hope that Lautrec might one day be recognized by the Académie des Beaux Arts.

The popularity of Lautrec’s posters has become legendary. He is credited with an overnight transformation of the lithographic print, a radical departure
from the highly decorative design of predecessors like Jules Chéret, Eugene Grasset, and Pierre Bonnard.22 Claude Roger-Marx credits Lautrec with having produced, together with Daumier, “the most magnificent body of work on stone that we possess” (Roger-Marx, 185); thus Lautrec’s place is, without a doubt, among the biggest names in lithography. Jules Chéret is dubbed “the real initiator” of color lithography, and lauded for his confident, instinctive use of color and simple compositions, “skillful and as rich as the distribution of the values” (Roger-Marx, 183). Frey characterizes Chéret’s work with “pretty, laughing girls and baroque detail” (Frey, 296). This label of Chéret’s style as baroque is not surprising in view of the lithographer’s heavy reliance on the art of Watteau and Fragonard in his early training (Weill, 24). Today, Chéret still enjoys more renown for his work in advancing the color lithograph than does Lautrec, but, a year after Lautrec debuted his skills as lithographer with Le Moulin Rouge, La Goulue, (1891), Chéret purportedly exclaimed, “Lautrec is a master!,” and so the reins of lithographic mastery were passed on (Frey, 296).

If color lithography was born with the work of Chéret, in the hands of Lautrec it reached its zenith. What the younger artist introduced to lithography was a new economy of line, focused composition, and the use of blocks of flat colors — elements which were at once appealing and facilitated retention of the

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22 Although Lautrec’s success did not occur overnight, he transformed the expectations and the force of visual impact that a poster could achieve within a relatively short time. Writes Douglas Cooper, “in the space of ten years, [Lautrec] revolutionized the technique of lithography somewhat as Daumier had done fifty years earlier and as Picasso has done again fifty years later” (Cooper, 6).
image. Alain Weill, in The Poster: A Worldwide Survey and History, writes, “for the neutral, exterior vision of Chéret [Lautrec] substituted an interior, immediate vision: where Chéret had drawn his usual little woman, a graceful allegory encircled by pierrots under the windmill’s blades, Lautrec shows us what really happens, painting the people as they are, without concession” (Weill, 34). So popular was Lautrec’s fresh, catchy imagery that informal collectors began removing his posters from Paris walls the very night they were put up, still damp with the poster’s glue (Frey, 326). In a reversal of intent and outcome, the purpose of immediate, short-lived publicity, for which lithography was so well suited, was negated by amateur archivists, who succeeded in preserving for posterity images executed in a medium that was never meant to last.23

Maisons closes and the candid perspective

A notable body of Lautrec’s later works is comprised of drawings made from observation at the maisons closes, which Lautrec worked on while living

23 In his later work, the simplicity and flatness of lithography came to bear on Lautrec’s treatment of his painted canvasses. Not only did he leave swaths of cardboard or canvas untouched by paint, but he also left the final product, executed in a non-greasy paint, unvarnished, guided by his particular distaste for glossy surfaces. This refusal to varnish left Lautrec’s paintings as vulnerable to time and the elements as his lithographic prints. Several scholars have perceived in Lautrec’s unprotected canvasses an element of the artist’s self-destruction, in keeping with the theory that his entire life was a slow but certain, calculated suicide. In my opinion, the dispensation with varnish diminished the material three-dimensionality of Lautrec’s canvasses, reducing them to a flatness like that of his lithographic prints. Considering the slimming down of these paintings to the bare minimum, one cannot help but remember Lautrec’s desire to seal himself in an envelope in a letter to his grandmother.
with the women. These afford one a look into the private and exoticized realm of
the Parisian brothel.24 A sketch for Femme sur le dos, Lassitude (1896) (Fig. 11),
the tenth sheet of Lautrec’s Elles series, shows a thin young girl lying on her
back, her legs dangling off the edge of the bed. The model’s scant frame nearly
sinks into the covers, the tips of her toes just touching the floor, as if she is resting
after her last client’s visit, but is ready to get back on her feet whenever
necessary. Here, Lautrec has all but drowned the girl’s form amid linens and her
own clothing: only her head and legs stand out. Her head recedes into the
background, and the viewer cannot meet her gaze; his only point of access is
from the left, and the eye follows the spindly legs to find the rest of the girl on
the bed. Clad in dark stockings, the legs dominate the left portion of the drawing,
exposed and vulnerable, like the girl herself, and hinting at her tiring profession,
whether it involves vigorous dancing or prostitution. In the final version of the
drawing for the album (Fig. 12), Lautrec has removed her right stocking, leaving
the top of the left one just barely visible under the covers, alluding to the
frequent removal of clothing in her line of work. The final effect is that, without
the emphasis on legs which is so striking in his initial depiction, her bare flesh
now blends in with the bed, and the girl is literally absorbed by her
surroundings.

24 This album reveals the “discrepancy between male fantasy and female reality” (Frey, 328).
Moreover, Lautrec’s sojourn in the maisons closes underlines the contrast in his own life — his
name was made illustrious by a union of two historically significant families, while his own
body was deformed by this very union, as well as the discrepancy between desire for a
monogamous partner and the reliance on brothels for female companionship necessitated by a
grotesque body.
Another compelling example of a work unguided by commission is La Clownesse Assise, Mademoiselle Cha-U-Kao (1896) (Fig. 13), which became the best-selling image after the album’s division (Denvir, 159). The depiction of this entertainer, resting in the semi-private quarters of what is probably a brothel, her widespread legs and hands clasped in front of her pudendum confronting the viewer, has become one of Lautrec’s most famous images of Montmartre’s performers. Not only is Cha-U-Kao’s background blurred, but her face and upper body take second place to her provocative, boldly colored legs, which overwhelm the composition. The emphasis on legs here is obvious; although the solid mass of black which is the dancer’s lower half may be attributed to her choice of clothing, and not to the artist’s creative license, it is noteworthy that Lautrec has painted her legs in one solid mass, making no distinction between her pantaloons, tights, and shoes. This lithograph adorns the cover of several books on Lautrec, becoming, in these instances, a derivative of the artist’s entire life and work.

All of these drawings attest to Lautrec’s privileged access to brothels. Placed on equal footing with their inhabitants by his own physical disadvantage, Lautrec was made privy to moments outside the realm of economic transaction visible to the usual customer. Jan Polasek writes on the criticism of work done in brothels: “This period is characterized as his form of protest, defiance and mockery of all decent behavior, and most often a real analysis of his work is replaced by discussions of Lautrec’s physical handicap and the impossibility of
living with a normal woman” (Polasek, 35). Far from radically deviant, Lautrec’s choice of subject matter followed a long tradition of brothel scenes and depictions of prostitution in the works of Vermeer, Frans Hals, Degas, Emile Zola, and Japanese ukiyo-e prints. What Lautrec introduced into this genre was a view which refrained from romanticization and exoticization of the prostitute. Although he was a customer as well as a painter of the maisons closes, Lautrec was able to achieve a candid perspective of the private goings on, unlike the more voyeuristic works on the same subjects by Degas, who prided himself on his ability to capture an intimate scene while maintaining the illusion of remaining unnoticeable. 25 Because the Elles drawings were not commissioned works or ones initially intended for exhibit or sale, their execution was unhindered by prospective customers or commissioners, and certainly met no censure from their models. These images – entirely the artist’s own – demonstrate a voluntary, unbiased visual emphasis on legs, which can be read here both as sexual symbols and emblems of physical ability.

25 Lillian Browse writes of Degas, “he had a horror of the self-conscious pose which the presence of the painter or camera-man usually inspires in a model. His aim was to catch the sitter unawares as if one were peeping through a key hole” (Browse, 4). Although Lautrec, too, was free to observe, whether explicitly or from a concealed location, his physical handicap limited his predatory status or voyeuristic agency: his gaze symbolically castrated through his lack, his was an unthreatening presence. It is interesting to note that in Edo Japan, tea and women’s bath houses were staffed by blind male musicians or attendants, whose presence was considered harmless because of the impotence of their gaze. These were often featured in the Ukiyo-e woodblock prints from the era, and, albeit there is no evidence that Lautrec’s behavior was modeled on this concept, he is very likely to have seen their representations in Japanese prints.
Representations of men’s and women’s legs alike surface time and time again in the artist’s paintings, drawings, and lithographs. While in some places Lautrec draws the viewer’s attention to legs by placing them at the center of the composition, or painting them in dark colors, in others he exaggerates their length. Elongated male forms can be found in Henri’s earliest oil sketches, and continue to reveal his somewhat skewed perception of the male body in his later work. The young artist’s depictions of his father are the first to show an elongation of the male body. In contrast to representations of his mother, these depict dynamism and physical activity: without exception, Alphonse’s legs are included in these compositions, in which he is most frequently pictured on horseback. Denvir identifies Lautrec’s tendency to stretch male bodies, attributing this exaggeration to the artist’s own deformity (Denvir, 29). Henri often depicts men in braggadocio stance, with hands on hips and legs set apart (Fig. 14). In other instances, Lautrec stretches the legs of his seated male models, as in an 1882 portrait of René Princeteau. These depictions, like those of the female body, although perhaps devoid of sexual meaning, were emotionally charged for the physically slighted artist. Images of disproportional male bodies could not have been accidental to a superior draftsman like Lautrec; whether intended to endow his male subjects with what he himself felt deprived of, or
projections of jealousy of his models’ physical perfection, the legs in depictions of men like Alphonse, Valentin le Désossé and Aristide Bruant are laden with meaning.26

Sometimes, the men in braggadocio pose are easily recognizable, at others — unknown. Their presence can be read as Lautrec’s alter ego, one with strong legs firmly planted on the ground. Valentin le Désossé especially, with his agile body and lanky limbs, may well be the artist’s projection of himself onto a dance floor that was treacherous for his own little legs. Henri became a famous habitué of the dance halls, but he shared these spaces with a man completely his opposite in physique and ability. Le Désossé, a talented amateur who was often seen on the dance floors while Henri idled by the bar, danced with an unsurpassed agility, giving the impression of having legs of rubber or being double-jointed, which earned him the nickname boneless. Like Lautrec, whose pyknodysostosis had left his fontanelles badly formed, so that his head had to be protected form

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26 It is interesting to compare Lautrec’s representation of legs of Valentin le Désossé, who appears in the left of two decorative panels made for La Goulue’s tent at the Foire du Trône in 1895 (Fig. 15), with the stance in an earlier self-portrait by Edouard Manet (Fig. 16). Désossé is depicted not dancing as usual, but with static legs set wide apart at an awkward angle. Almost twenty years earlier, in 1878-9, Manet had painted Self-Portrait with a Skullcap, in which he depicted his legs in a similar pose. Like Lautrec, Manet had made only two formal self-portraits. Manet’s stance in this portrait has been described as an “awkward, wide-based gait necessary to maintain his balance,” which is telling of the artist’s health at the time the portrait was painted, as he experienced the effects of a neurological disorder which had caused a loss of sensation in his left leg and limited his mobility (Gedo, 18). It is likely that Lautrec had seen this painting, for he was familiar with and a great admirer of Manet’s work, and he had seen the Bar at the Folies-Bergère when it was first exhibited (Frey, 130). The similarity of the pose Manet assumes in his self-portrait and the legs on le Désossé in the 1895 panel is too great to dismiss — this could be evidence of the men’s similar ways of vicariously asserting their physical stature in the public eye through the projection of their desires of physical fitness onto their canvasses. Although Manet’s symptoms occurred later in his life than had Lautrec’s, the artist had similar difficulty reconciling the newly developed handicap with his prior image of carefree Parisian flâneur (Gedo, 12).
the cold by a hat at all times, le Désossé always sported a top hat, even while
dancing (Denvir, 9). But, unlike Lautrec, he possessed a body which was both
agile and lanky, and his jutting chin was the opposite of the artist’s receding one,
yet another manifestation of pyknodysostosis.27 Like Lautrec, le Désossé “became
a trademark of the dance halls he visited” (Frey, 193). Gauzi remembers that “the
ladies of the quadrille considered it an honour to dance with this skeleton-like
ccharacte” (Frey, 193). Likewise, Lautrec’s subjects were honored to sit for him or
to have him execute their publicity posters. Le Désossé appears in at least two of
Lautrec’s most important works, Le Moulin Rouge, La Goulue (1891) and
Dancing at the Moulin Rouge (1889-90) (Fig. 17). It is very possible that le
Désossé, his presence coveted on the dance floor for his physical ability, is
Lautrec’s alter ego, the agile, tireless, physically active body Lautrec wished he
possessed.

One might reasonably question the validity of drawing a connection
between the overt emphasis on the legs of dancers and prostitutes and the artist’s
own handicap. After all, legs on women, especially when viewed through the
eyes of a male consumer of flesh, are a highly sexualized part of the female
anatomy, and its revelation in Lautrec’s (and others’) work may be more effective
in tantalizing the viewer than in eliciting reflection on the health and dynamism

\[27\] In *Explosive Acts*, David Sweetman refers to le Désossé’s “trademark jutting chin and high top
hat," neither of which Lautrec possessed (Sweetman, 13). It is notable that Lautrec appears in
photographs and paintings in a bowler, whose contrast to the phallic top hat worn by le
Désossé further distinguishes the dancer’s masculine, physically able form from Lautrec’s
truncated one.
of a dancer’s body. However, Lautrec’s portrayal of legs transcends gender and even species: the limbs of athletes and animals, and even the elongated forms of musical instruments (see footnote 37), which appear time and time again, reinforce the visual language of movement and athleticism which is so meaningful in the context of Lautrec’s biography. Already, I have shown that Lautrec portrays men with consistent attention to legs or their lack: the braggadocio pose of men known by the artist and anonymous male figures stresses legs as a body part that is crucial to enacting masculine posture, while the truncated bodies in Caudiex (1893) and Louis Pascal (1891) suggest melancholy and perhaps even jealousy.

It is logical to assume that if Lautrec portrays animalistic tendencies in his human models, a similar attention to energy would characterize his depictions of animals. Such is the case in Lautrec’s treatment of the legs of animals, especially horses, whose energy and mobility is conveyed in his work. In the lithograph Le Jockey (1899) (Fig. 18), the focus is on the rears and legs of two horses and their riders, whose own semi-erect positions, legs apart, mimic those of the animals. The parallel between man and animal is apparent here and speaks to the energy and dynamism that drew Lautrec to both creatures. Caught in mid-air in a joint quest for speed, their movement echoed in the blades of a distant windmill, the faceless riders and horses are reduced to the essence of their mobility.

Lautrec had a lifelong attachment to animals, and he kept pets at various times in his life — a family of parrots in childhood; a ferret; several cormorants,
whom he paraded around on summer vacations; and terriers successively augmented the artist’s at and, most likely, were subjects of keen observation. The best documentation of the artist’s love of animal life can be found in the illustrations Lautrec carried out for Lucien Descaves’ Histoires Naturelles, which were executed between 1896 and 1899 and published with the help of Lautrec’s friend Jules Renard (Toulouse-Lautrec, A Bestiary, 9). In his childhood, months spent in a facility where his underdeveloped legs were subjected to various treatments in the hopes of enhancing their growth, Lautrec had made daily visits to the Jardin d’Acclimation to study the various exotic animals kept there. Now, working on illustrations for the Histoires Naturelles, Lautrec returned to the Jardin des Plantes and the Jardin d’Acclimation.

Praising the illustrations in this series, Philip Hofer of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University asks, “Was Lautrec more sympathetic with animals than with man? Probably not, but animals did not anger or grieve him” (A Bestiary, 12). It is difficult to answer Hofer’s question, for there is no evidence that Lautrec was intentionally unsympathetic towards his human models, nor that any of his models ever angered or grieved him. At the most, with each representation he made of a human body, Lautrec was forced to evaluate its proportions and perhaps compare them to his own, which had the potential to grieve him. However, depictions of men and women are the primary subjects in Lautrec’s oeuvre, so that it is not fitting to suggest that Lautrec would save his most sympathetic portrayals for animal subjects.
The emphasis on motion evident in Le Jockey is one instance of a lifelong interest in horses and fondness for animals in general. Human and animal activity, desire, and behavior become conflated in Lautrec’s work and, though he does not pass judgment, the artist shows the similarity between the two, especially in their physical activity. The horses’ legs, which appear in Lautrec’s early oil sketches and continue to hold his interest throughout, are in keeping with the tradition of sport sketches, which were prominent in the works of Degas and Princeteau. They can also be read as a product of Lautrec’s wishful thinking for his own mobility, for a set of muscular, active limbs as alternatives to his own. It is telling that Lautrec relegates himself to the role of spectator in Le Jockey, staying behind to stare at the rears of horses and their equally athletic riders. It may be that Lautrec or the viewer himself is on horseback, riding among athletic, mobile jockeys, although they still leave him, a mere spectator, behind. These examples illustrate the comprehensive, pervasive nature of legs

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28 Animal qualities were noted by contemporary critics as well. In 1893, Thiébault Sisson’s review in *Le Temps* addressed the artist with: “you make [your models] look so awful!!...You find them...anywhere that animal instincts hold sway, writhing and acting up...” (Frey, 321). The *quadrille naturaliste* itself, which was the dance performed by La Goulue and others, had been deemed as implying “degenerate vulgarity” (Frey, 192). Lucie-Smith also notes the animal-like depiction of La Goulue in *Dance at the Moulin Rouge* (Fig. 17): “She is portrayed as the incarnation of stubborn animal vitality, almost as if she were a little bullock, about to butt her partner in the midriff” (Lucie-Smith, 31), while Robert Wernick describes the women of *Salon in the Rue des Moulins* (1894) as “waiting in bovine repose in the parlor under the madam’s prim eye” (Wernick, 72).

29 The artist’s interest in sport extended beyond the horse track, the traditional site of competition in painting, to bicycle races, rugby matches, and sailing competitions. Having last experienced autonomous mobility on his tricycle, Henri returned to the velodrome as a spectator of yet another leg-propelled sport. Tristan Bernard, who directed two tracks and organized races, was Lautrec’s connection to the inner workings of this world, which fascinated the artist with its movement and audience more than with the results of the competition. Bernard recalls, “one
in Lautrec’s work. Most emphatic in the depictions of café-cabaret dancers, this theme recurs in portrayals of men and animals alike, both indoors and out. Clearly, the legs bear meaning beyond that of sexual signifiers.

Influences: Japonisme and Degas

Lautrec’s stature literally lowered his vantage point of the world; in view of this, it is all the more significant that he often adopts an angle which would only have been accessible to him from a balcony or a ladder. Perhaps, in overcompensating, Lautrec yearned for what every viewer who has ever sat behind someone taller has wished for: a better view. A lover of performance and an eager audience member, Lautrec was deprived of a good view by his size. In assuming an elevated vantage point, the artist not only grants himself the visibility he lacked in reality, but also demonstrates his imagination with his successful adaptation of a viewpoint other than his own. Lautrec was not alone, however, in the use of high angle: his influence came partly from the work of Edgar Degas, and both artists were familiar with this technique from their exposure to Japanese woodblock prints, which were available to and hungrily collected and copied by contemporary Parisians. The large areas of solid color and defining black outlines used in Lautrec’s posters of Aristide Bruant, for day we met at a rugby match. There too he was less interested in the outcome than in those pileups of players which resembled a thousand-legged animal” (Frey, 353).
instance, are inspired by ukiyo-e prints. The choice of specific angles serves to intensify the visual effect of the composition’s contents. From the Japanese master printmakers, Lautrec also learned how “a small visible detail or fragment could be used to conjure up an unseen whole” (Lucie-Smith, 13). High angles, receding diagonals, and the truncation of bodies were elements which Degas, Lautrec, and others borrowed from Japanese printmakers, although their use of these techniques varies according to individual agendas.

At the Moulin Rouge (1892) (Fig. 19) combines these elements to make a composition which is unusual in Western painting, but is partly demystified by familiarity with Japanese art. The viewer witnesses the scene from a slight elevation, standing behind a receding diagonal banister, which leads the eye from the cropped green-faced woman on the right to a table surrounded by patrons in the painting’s middle ground.30 Here are several characters which were part of Lautrec’s eclectic circle: the literary and musical critic Edouard Dujardin, Sescau, the Montmartre photographer whose studio Lautrec would later advertise, Maurice Guilbert, and, dancing in the background with her lesbian lover, the famous dancer La Goulue (Lucie-Smith, 62). The ghoulish, green face of the woman in the foreground can be partly explained by the

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30 Incidentally, both parrots and the color green came to represent evil to Lautrec as he grew older. “The image of the diabolical parrot and, by extension, the evil green of absinthe, seemed to have special importance for him, even in his art. He later said to a friend, ‘Do you know what it is like to be haunted by colours? To me, in the colour green, there is something like the temptation of the devil’” (Frey, 145). While the color green plays a large role in this and others of Lautrec’s paintings, such as Dance at the Moulin Rouge (1889-90), and La Modiste – Mlle Louise Blouet (1901), it is usually absent from his lithographic posters, which are dominated by reds, yellows, blacks, and blues.
influence of photographic prints, whose margins are often inhabited by incidental characters passing in and out of the shot. For this technique Lautrec was also indebted to Degas, whose work was affected by the advent of photography (Lucie-Smith, 62). Cropping was also a method used by Japanese printmakers to create suspense and to draw the viewer’s attention to that part of the person which was included in the composition (Roberts, 12). Thus, it is improbable that photography alone would have decided Lautrec’s frequent use of cropped faces and limbs: his choices were likely informed by a combination of photography, an exposure to Japanese printmaking, and his own decisions regarding whose body to truncate and when.31

At the Moulin Rouge is one of few paintings in which Lautrec has included himself. Two diagonal lines — one connecting the cropped woman’s puffed sleeve to the backs and top hats of the two gentlemen seated on the right of the table, the second from the chair back and brown coat of Dujardin and the Spanish dancer La Macarona next to him — channel the eye to one focal point: the short artist’s pale face and protruding nose below a bowler hat. Here, Lautrec painted himself in the company of his cousin Gabriel Tapié de Céleyran, whose tall, lanky frame provided a stark contrast to Lautrec’s own stature, but whose similarly receding chin attests to the family’s faulted genealogy. At the time Lautrec made this painting, Gabriel was his constant companion, and the artist

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31 Federico Zandomeneghi, a protégé of Degas who lived in Lautrec’s building on rue Tourlaque, may also have been instrumental in exposing the artist to the cropping technique. According to Gauzi, it was “Zando”, as the Venetian painter was called, who taught Lautrec to see his objects “as if through a cropped frame” (Frey, 198).
enjoyed the reactions this physically mismatched pair elicited from other Montmartre patrons. In his assessment of the painting, Lucie-Smith points out the unusually high angle: “this often occurs in Lautrec’s work, as if to compensate for the fact that he was himself so short” (Lucie-Smith, 62). This evaluation fits most instances, but, because Lautrec himself appears in this painting, Lucie-Smith makes a somewhat cumbersome assumption that the artist would have exaggerated the height of his own perspective in order to look down on a scene of which he is himself a part. A more plausible explanation is that the slightly raised vantage point suggests Lautrec’s assumption of the angle from which men like Gabriel would have viewed him.

Another notable instance of the artist’s inclusion of himself is in the right panel of La Goulue Dansant, la Danse Mauresque (1895), in which he paints himself from the rear, passively observing the activity. Frey posits that here, in addition to a meditation on himself, Lautrec “was making a statement about his role as outsider inside the painting,” a theme which recurs from time to time in his work (Frey, 236). It would seem, however, that, by concealing his face from the viewer and, by extension, from himself, Lautrec was in fact avoiding introspection. In thus shying away from his own critical gaze, his painting was much like his letter writing. Instead, the artist turned to third-person narrative and cameo appearances, offering himself up to the viewer’s evaluation and painting a picture of himself as he felt he appeared to others. At first intentionally repulsive, later self-representations become subtler, such as the one
in Au Moulin Rouge. But Frey correctly points out that “his visual commentary on his physical appearance is almost always denigratory,” and that, even when not overtly offending his viewer with his nudity or scatological humor (see Fig. 4), Lautrec still depicted himself “in contrast to men stronger, taller and handsomer than himself,” to his own disadvantage (Frey, 236). From Lautrec’s own self-deprecation and Gauzi’s recollection of his attention-seeking behavior emerges an image of a man who sought to put his friends at ease about his deformity by being the first to make light of it, diverting attention from his physical lack using humor and exhibitionism.

Lautrec not only shared artistic techniques, but also subject matter with Edgar Degas. Both focused their studies on the movement of dancers, depicted a woman’s private toilet, and visited and recorded their impressions of Cirque de Fernando. The artists’ drawings of dancers, however, are strikingly different. In Degas’ painting Le ‘pas de deux’ sur la scène (1873) (Fig. 20), the high perspective is attributable to the likely position of the viewer in a box above the stage, and is thus unlike the elevated position Lautrec assumes in his depiction of

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32 If the visual comparison and focus on his physical inadequacy leaves room for doubt about Lautrec’s eagerness to draw attention to himself despite his self-consciousness, we may find further evidence in the bravado and humor with which Lautrec made light of his body. On one occasion, responding to a friend’s observation of his liberal drinking habits, Lautrec purportedly said, “No, I’m not afraid of getting falling-down drunk. After all, I’m so close to the ground” (Frey, 244).

33 Ultimately, Lautrec reserved the final judgment of his physical status for himself and, although eager to play into an image of buffoonery or joviality, drew a firm line between image of self as comically short and clinically dwarfed. On one occasion, after being introduced to a Monsieur la Fontanelle, a dwarf who lived on Montmartre, Lautrec commented, “I may be short, but I’m not a dwarf” (Frey, 269).
a single-story space. In this painting, as well as in many others, the dancer’s legs are very still, as if floating. They lack the physical presence, grounding, and dynamism which imbue similar works by Lautrec. While the world of ballet which captured Degas’ imagination prided itself on strenuous and regimented exercise, carefully formulated steps and moves, in which pause, stillness, and maintaining poise are as important as movement itself, Lautrec’s cabaret dancers were performers of the chahut, of spontaneous, unrestricted movement, kicking and twirling with abandon not to be found on the stage of the Grand Opera. Beside La Goulue and Jane Avril, Degas’ dancers appear static and strained.

Moreover, while many of Lautrec’s representations of dancers focus on legs, clothed in dark stockings or placed at the center of a composition, Degas’ approach to legs is holistic: they are of equal importance to heads, arms, and tutus, blending into a sea of immaculately white or pastel costumes and pale skin. The detail which most consistently draws the eye in Degas’ depictions of ballerinas is the black velvet ribbon on the girls’ necks, token attributes of young ballerinas. Examples of this can be seen in Danseuse salutante, un bouquet à la main (ca. 1885) and Danseuse verte vue de dos (ca. 1884-6). Both artists also painted brothel scenes and showed women bathing privately, and, although the works of the two are depicted from a voyeuristic perspective, the knowledge that Lautrec was openly admitted into brothels and took up residence at maisons closes suggests that his gaze was that of a self-identified witness rather than a concealed voyeur. Without the disarming handicap of Lautrec, Degas’ infiltration
into the inner sanctums and observation of women at their toilet, or even his posing of models in his studio, must have been much more surreptitious.

Nonetheless, most art historians acknowledge Lautrec’s fascination with the older artist and the common ground the two shared. The language used to describe their work and careers is so similar, that it could be interchangeable, an interesting circumstance given the radically different appearance of their art. In her monograph on Degas and his depictions of ballerinas, Lillian Browse writes,

Mystery of atmosphere, effects of light, feeling for texture and allure of colour, all were subordinated as, summing up, he stated with the greatest possible economy, his formal aim of synthesising plasticity and movement....The body as seen in ordinary everyday life performs a minimum of the feats and contortions of which it is capable—a miraculous piece of machinery which grows stiff and rusty through lack of exploitation. A dancer’s actual instrument is her body, the medium through which she expresses her art (Browse, 5).

The above assessment is as applicable to Lautrec as it is to Degas, and, although Lautrec’s work was guided by the same principles as that of his predecessor, it surpasses the older artist’s with its dynamism. The legs painted by Toulouse-Lautrec have lives of their own, and are often the focal points of his compositions: brightly colored, centered, or dramatically truncated, they can stand alone, representing the whole of the body to which they are attached, at the same time embodying Lautrec’s preoccupation with legs other than his own.
Like Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas, Georges Seurat drew on circuses and cabarets for subject matter. Of particular importance is his painting Le Chahut (1889-90) (Fig. 21), a scene of cabaret dancers whose legs appear static regardless of the musical number which they are performing. In Seurat’s formulaic portrayal, the four pairs of legs are identical except for the bows on the shoes, even though they belong to dancers of both genders. Here, the position legs occupy in relation to the rest of the body and to the composition as a whole reveals their relative unimportance, especially when juxtaposed to Lautrec’s lithograph Troupe de Mlle Églantine (1896) (Fig. 22). In the latter, the dancers are slightly cropped, and, although their entire bodies are shown or hinted at, their kicking legs, in their recognizable dark stockings, appear to displace the rest of the bodies to the edges of the composition. It is as if the dancers have too much energy for the confines of the frame; absent the writing, one might mistake this poster for an advertisement for stockings, so dominant is the leg imagery. The rest of the dancers’ bodies are visible, yet their hands are concealed by skirts, which have been kicked up, and the barely delineated faces literally pale in comparison with the solid brown legs. The calves are emphasized, and the flexing muscles and energetic kicking echo the frothy ruffles of the petticoats. The dancers’ essence is distilled into their legs; this lithograph is imbued with energy unknown in the static, flatly stacked dancers of Le Chahut. As Arthur Danto writes in his review of a 1985 exhibit of Toulouse-Lautrec’s work at the New York Museum of Modern Art, “Alongside Lautrec, every artist looks static.
There is more energy in a square inch of his drawing than in any six square blocks in Soho” (Danto, 660).

Lautrec’s slightly raised angle is visible here; again it enhances the viewer’s participation in the scene and successfully evokes the energy and movement in the two-dimensional medium of lithography. His dancers are seen slightly from the front, with the intimation that, being positioned before the dancers, Lautrec’s viewers may catch a glimpse of what is below their skirts. In Seurat’s composition, the viewer is a supposed member of the cabaret’s audience or orchestra, and his view of the proceedings on stage is partially obscured by the musicians before him. Therefore, unlike Lautrec’s privileged viewer, he is unable to adjust his position for a better look, and must content himself with the side view which the dancers, receding to the back of the stage, have to offer.

Lautrec’s experimental, unconventional, and often conflicting angles combine to implicate the viewer in the immediacy of the dance hall experience, impart the flavor of the topsy-turvy world of Montmartre entertainment, and reveal the unconventionality of Lautrec’s own perspective. Although he may not have been able to physically keep up with the pace of the world around him, Lautrec could do so through the dynamism of his work. The raw energy demonstrated in his quick brushstrokes, fluid lines, and saturated colors reflect the vibrant, ephemeral, ever-moving quality of the life and performance around him, and Lautrec finds a space for himself in this world by retracing the
movements of his models with his brush if not with his own legs. Lautrec’s entire oeuvre cannot be distilled into a single image of legs by any means, but it is telling that “Lautrec’s legs” have had a long-lasting effect on the artist’s place in the public imagination, as well as on graphic artists. An example of this is found in posters from a graphic design exhibit held in 2001 to commemorate the centennial of Lautrec’s death. Among the hundred works submitted, dancers’ high-kicking legs was the image most often quoted to symbolize Lautrec’s work (Buffi, 70).

At full height, Lautrec remained shorter than both his parents, victim of their incestuous union. This permanent deficiency has been discussed as the reason why Lautrec’s art “increasingly found its urgency and energy in a fascination with the manipulation of the body parts, especially legs in the dance, in the exuberance, in the athleticism, in the unnatural flexibility and thus the configurations of body parts which made La Goulue and Valentin le Désossé – the boneless man – so famous” (Pollock, 11). In a way, Lautrec himself was a boneless man, his weak bones suffering from hairline fractures inflicted by

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34 The city, with its lights, activity, and motley inhabitants is the universally recommended location for the nineteenth-century artist-flâneur. Poet and critic Charles Baudelaire wrote in 1863, “the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy,” capturing the contemporary view of the artist’s relationship to the city (Baudelaire, 9).
ordinarily untaxing physical activity such as getting up or walking around. Pollock’s assertion that Lautrec’s art was increasingly permeated with a fascination for the physical is slightly inaccurate, however, because, even in his earliest sketches, Henri chose his subject matter from among horsemen and hunters, stressing this rigorous lifestyle as exemplary and worthy of depiction, one to which he aspired but in which he could partake only through artistic renderings.

Today, Toulouse-Lautrec’s work continues to capture the imaginations of audiences with its depictions of a life simultaneously tantalizing and slightly repugnant. The latest exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. is entitled Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre; a focus which once again evokes the hedonism of Lautrec’s Paris.\(^3\) Much as Montmartre had been the site for performance of interactions between classes whose quotidian life occurred in different social spheres, so today its representation in art continues today to evoke the raciness coveted by the bourgeois outside Montmartre. Ironically, albeit subject matter such as prostitutes and lesbian dancers was unmentionable among the haut monde of Lautrec’s family, it was frequented by bourgeois men, foreign businessmen, aristocrats, even Comte Alphonse himself. These men sought an experience away from the gas-lit, orderly streets of Paris proper, and enjoyed the smoke-filled café cabarets where

\(^3\) The exhibit’s brochure contextualizes Lautrec as one who “reveled in Montmartre’s pleasures. For these artists, the raucous spirit of Montmartre — its unbridled energy, tawdry behavior, garish colors, and provocative celebrities — was both a way to live and a subject to depict” (Matheny, 1).
Lautrec made his living, and visited their favorite prostitutes, leaving their wives at home. Here they could appear with their demi-monde girlfriends and enjoy the abusive, brutally honest lyrics of Aristide Bruant, self-appointed “spokesman of the under-privileged urban masses” (Frey, 184). They also came to witness exposed body parts — cleavage, legs, and bottoms — which were carefully concealed by “proper” women. In the dance halls, men who saw women in voluminous, confining garments by day could appreciate the tightly-clad anatomy of the high-kicking chahut dancers, the heart-embroidered bloomers of the famous La Goulue or, if they were lucky, come on a night when she chose to bare all to her eager and attentive audience.

This world was one which brought out the virgin-whore dichotomy in Parisian society. Here, a man could enjoy the bodies of lower-class women, leaving the idealized, unsoiled image of his bourgeois wife behind. It is notable that the only female legs Lautrec exposes are those of Montmartre women. Not surprisingly, the artist’s only access to women’s legs would have been in this milieu, as the properly dressed and physically demure women of his own class never had occasion to reveal their legs to the artist. Portraits of the artist’s mother, which show her in bust or half-length, are composed so as to avoid the issue of sex all together (Fig. 23). The viewer does not miss very much, however, for a full-length portrait of Comtesse Adèle’s long, still skirts, absent any hint of physical activity or sex, would reveal very little. In this way, the virgin-whore dichotomy divides representation along class lines; according to feminist art
historian Griselda Pollock, this is yet another way in which the male, aristocratic
gaze of the artist, and those of his bourgeois patrons, lust after the sexual and
class taboo embodied by the likes of La Goulue and Jane Avril. Arguably, the
legs Lautrec painted not only illustrate his insecurity with his own legs, but also
project every man’s castration complex, seen in the symbolic lack of the phallus
on a woman’s body.36

In her essay “Fathers of modern art, mothers of invention,” Pollock
identifies the “cocked leg” featured in many of Lautrec’s works, and questions its
significance in the scope of the artist’s biography and the mores of his time.
Combining the writings of Sigmund Freud with feminist theory, Pollock couches
her discussion of Lautrec’s work in issues of gender, class and race in
contemporary Paris, using examples such as Le Moulin Rouge, La Goulue (1891)
and Jane Avril (1893). Pollock’s claim that the cocked leg has acquired such high
visibility as to become the distillation of Lautrec’s visual vocabulary resonates
with the writing of Julia Frey, who also recognizes the longevity of this visual
symbol and its connection to Lautrec’s graphic legacy. “In the poster,” writes

36 Lautrec’s friend Thadée Natanson called the artist “a penis with legs,” while Lautrec himself
boasted of his sexual endowment, which leads scholars to believe that in his sex life, at least,
Lautrec was satisfied with size. Prevailing cultural beliefs in the late 19th century attributed
rapacious sexual appetites to dwarves, a stereotype which Lautrec may have used to his
advantage to exaggerate accounts of his sexual escapades (Frey, 379). Even if his sexual
performance was up to par, Lautrec had numerous reasons for feelings of impotence,
perticularly resulting from the gulf between his aristocratic title and his actual status. His
father’s failure to acknowledge his artistic success, and his practical disinheritation from the
family estate were cause enough for serious feelings of inability to live up to the expectations of
his family (Frey, 138-9). Later, his Uncle Charles’ act of burning paintings Lautrec had left in his
care served as a negation of the artist’s work in addition to Lautrec’s already enforced
awareness of physical inadequacy (Frey, 395).
Frey, “Jane Avril’s high-kicking leg seems to take on a life of its own, forming a striking abstract shape that even now remains a symbol of her dancing” (Frey, 225). Furthermore, the leg becomes not only the distillation of the artist’s visual vocabulary, but, placed at the center of his compositions and his interest in the human body, a centrifugal point of his self-image.

Lautrec’s preoccupation with legs surpasses brand recognition or sexual symbolism: as shown in the drawings at the vélotrèmes and dance performances, which he could watch for nights on end, legs were the motors and pistons of contemporary Paris. If, as Brower suggests, the dancer uses her body as an instrument, then Lautrec’s instrument was his drawing hand. That hand, which replaced his legs as the bearer of talent and agency, together with his keen powers of observation ensured his popularity for posterity. The recurrence of gloved hands in his imagery, although secondary in frequency to legs, is equally

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37 The theme of instrumentation is an undertone that runs throughout Lautrec’s oeuvre, as well as those of Seurat and Degas. Although not discussed at length by scholars of Lautrec, the frequent presence of musical instruments not only explicitly portrays the relationship of dancing legs to music and the rhythm inherent to the scene, but also points to the idea of agency, which appears in works such as Seurat’s Le Chahut (1889-90), Degas’ L’Orchestre de l’Opéra (c.1870), and Lautrec’s Divan Japonais (1892) and Jane Avril (1893). In these compositions, the instrumentation is tri-fold—the literal connection to musical instruments, which set the scene on stage in motion; the dancer’s use of her body, and especially her legs as instruments of her art, and, lastly, the painter’s hand and brush as instruments in (re)creating the scene of activity on paper, evoking music and movement for a viewer who is removed from the original performance. The hands of the musicians, bringing their instruments to life, the legs of the dancers, and the hand of the artist are thus equated as the organs of agency through which they might convey their talent. On the technical level, the stylistic treatment of musical instruments is Lautrec’s tribute to the art movements around him, to which he never openly subscribed, but elements of which are nonetheless evident in his work. Although Lautrec forged his own visual path in many ways, here his work bears visible stamps of other influences, especially the vantage point Degas takes behind the orchestra in several of his paintings of dancers. Moreover, Frey points out the “fanciful, serpentine extension of the neck of a bass viol” as a visual allusion to the sinuous lines of Art Nouveau (Frey, 325).
important to the retention of Lautrec’s work in the public eye and to his own expression. Most frequently paid homage in publicity illustrations of Yvette Guilbert, the long black gloves came to represent Lautrec’s art in a way similar to the cocked leg (Fig. 24). “So famous are the black gloves worn by Yvette Guilbert,” writes Griselda Pollock, “that they now signify Toulouse-Lautrec rather than Guilbert and her calculated authorship of her own performing costume and its trademark” (Pollock, 13). Using these instruments and symbols, Lautrec succeeded in claiming his stake in art history. “To posterity only his skill at rendering what he had observed would be important. His work would be admired by people who never knew he was a dwarf” (Frey, 237).

Conclusions

Lautrec’s death in 1901 terminated a thirty-six-year life and fifteen-year career. Despite his physical handicap and debilitating alcoholism, Lautrec left a prodigious body of work: 737 oil paintings, 275 watercolors, 368 prints and posters, 5,084 drawings, some pieces of sculpture, ceramics, and a stained-glass window (Denvir, 8). Countless other works were lost or destroyed — some by the very Uncle Charles who had been first to recognize and encourage Henri’s talent (Frey, 395). Soon after the artist’s death, his school friend and manager Maurice Joyant, in collaboration with Comtesse Adèle, gathered Lautrec’s unsold
work and established a museum at the family château near Albi for its preservation and display. Lautrec’s best known works address the marginalized world of Montmartre entertainers, and are regarded today as emblems of the gayness and energy of Belle Epoque Paris. Despite a large body of paintings of animals, portraits of family members, and myriad commissions for illustrations, book covers, sheet music and menus, Lautrec is best remembered for the lithographic posters which he created to advertise the cabarets and individual performers of Montmartre. Lautrec’s imagery, while visually appealing and wildly successful at engraining Montmartre’s most colorful personages into the minds of Parisians, met with criticism from the higher classes of the art world and was unsuccessful in convincing his toughest audience, his family, of his talent. Ironically, today the posters of the high-kicking Jane Avril and the sensuous La Goulue appear on coasters and decorative scarves at gift shops of such traditional institutions as The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The bourgeois wife’s indignation at the status of loose Montmartre women is now inverted in the wardrobes of their middle-class counterparts, as one might wear a scarf illustrated with the picture of a dancer-prostitute to present herself as an erudite patron of the arts. Likewise, tourists continue to flock to Montmartre by the busload to retrace the steps of famous artists through a quarter of the city into which, in Lautrec’s day, a respectable Parisian might venture at his own risk.38

38 Jan Polasek, in his introduction to a volume of Lautrec’s drawings, recalls, “Montmartre
Toulouse-Lautrec was fortunate enough to enjoy the favor of many contemporaries during his lifetime, and has been amply remembered and written about by friends, family members, and art historians. Today, a search performed for books entitled Toulouse-Lautrec on Amazon.com will produce over three hundred matches, while close to one hundred and fifty major exhibitions dedicated to the artist in the century since his death have ensured that his name, story, and work have reached viewers from Omaha to Moscow to Tokyo (Frey, Uno Sguardo, 319-322). The widespread publicity Lautrec’s work has enjoyed, both during his lifetime and posthumously, is a result of artistic genius exposed to experiences worthy of depiction. No doubt, the artist’s unusual biography and premature death, along with his time-specific and class-conscious subject matter, have contributed to his work’s popularity and the cult of the artist which has grown up around the diminutive, syphilitic alcoholic

became almost the sole source of Lautrec’s artistic inspiration….Without Montmartre he would not have become what he was, and today we can add that, without Toulouse-Lautrec, Montmartre, too, would not have become what it was and has remained in our time. Most of the present visitors to Montmartre do not look for the places where Toulouse-Lautrec painted but are attracted mainly by the names of enterprises linked with the artist’s eccentric life” (Polasek, 19). Here, Polasek highlights not only the interest in Lautrec’s unusual biography, but also the continual reciprocal publicity between artist and his milieu.

Most of these exhibits have been organized by time and place of production; wherever thematic groupings prevail, the focus is usually on representations of Montmartre, women, or both. Be it in one-man shows or group retrospectives, these exhibits show Lautrec’s work through the lens of Paris, but introspection into his art is never more specific, which reflects partly issues of salability and audience interest, and partly the under-explored areas of the artist’s biography. There are no “Lautrec’s Legs,” for instance, to follow “Van Gogh’s Faces,” and no “Lautrec and the Dance,” although Lautrec’s subjects were not so different from those of Degas.
suffering from a physical handicap. Characterizations of the artist in film and popular literature have helped foster Lautrec’s growth in the public eye.

For artists like Toulouse-Lautrec, who have been mythologized with retrospective analyses of their lives, biography has become a determining factor in the view art historians take on their work. As Denvir discusses in “Devoid of elegance,” the first chapter of his book on Lautrec, the latter part of the eighteenth century saw a marked change in schools of art criticism, with a surge in stressing the artist’s personal experience and the influence of his life or lifestyle on his art, rather than a formalist approach to his work, one that would judge it solely on artistic style and adherence to or contradiction of tradition and precedent (Denvir, 7). As an artist whose oeuvre was thus examined in the context of his background, upbringing, physical incongruity, and often peculiar behavior, Lautrec was in fine company: his name joins the ranks of Wilde, Gauguin, Rodin, Van Gogh, Whistler, Warhol and others in standing up to scrutiny of a connection between private life and artistic production (Denvir, 7).

A nuanced analysis reveals that Lautrec’s oeuvre was not made ugly by his reaction to his own misfortune, but, rather, that specific imagery corresponds with particular details of his genetic flaw and its implications. Examined through the lens of class and gender in contemporary Paris, Lautrec’s legs become signifiers of revelation of the forbidden, symbolic distillations of the movement and energy of Montmartre, as well as subtle references of the artist’s most
notable physical abnormality and projections of a desire for physical perfection. Pollock writes,

I want thus to interpret Toulouse-Lautrec's stylistic gambit — condensed in the black leg, cocked and dancing, a fantastic shape set starkly against its simplified colored surrounds which detaches it from the body and yet makes it stand in for the body — I want to interpret this as the formal signifier of more than an ideological content or historical situation. It is what Freud would call "overdetermined." What made it viable was that it could signify its double charge of artistic difference and sexual difference. It is of course in the register of the fetish that Toulouse-Lautrec's formal device functions as aesthetically possible and culturally recognizable (Pollock, 8). (Italics mine)

Loaded with meaning, the legs in Lautrec’s art act as a visual signature, identifying the canvas with its creator, at the same time pointing to the creator’s own vulnerability. Detached from their bodies by ballooning skirts and roomy bloomers, which negate the leg’s attachment to the whole, legs act as autonomous entities, as if they alone represent the entire body, simultaneously revealing a distillation of the artist’s preoccupation with his own body, so different from those which achieved the incredible feats of elasticity and physical prowess in the hub of his chosen world.
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Images

Fig. 1: *Worn-out Love*, 1882

Fig. 2: *Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec, à cheval*, 1896
  Self-caricature, riding on a drawing pencil, c. 1882

Fig. 3: *Portrait de Lautrec devant une glace*, ca. 1880-83

Fig. 4: *Self-caricature in charcoal signed “Lost”*, 1882
Fig. 5: Self-caricature

Fig. 6: Jane Avril, 1893

Fig. 7: Jules Chéret, Bal au Moulin Rouge, 1879

Fig. 8: Le Moulin Rouge, La Goulue, 1891
Fig. 9: Jules Chéret, *Folies-Bergère*, 1877

Fig. 10: Caudieux, 1893

Fig. 11: sketch for *Femme sur le dos, Lassitude*, 1896

Fig. 12: *Lassitude*, 1896
Fig. 13: La Clownesse Assise, Mademoiselle Cha-U-Kao, 1896

Fig. 14: Aristide Bruant dans son Cabaret, 1893

Fig. 15: La Goulue Dancing with Valentin le Désossé, 1895

Fig. 16: Edouard Manet, Self-Portrait with Skullcap, 1878-9
Fig. 17: Dance at the Moulin Rouge, 1889-90

Fig. 18: Le Jockey, 1899

Fig. 19: At the Moulin Rouge, 1892
Fig. 20: Edgar Degas, *Le pas de deux sur la scène*, 1873

Fig. 21: Georges Seurat, *Le Chahut*, 1889-90

Fig. 22: *Troupe de Mlle Églantine*, 1896

Fig. 23: Comtesse Adèle Tapié de Céleyran

Fig. 24: *Drawing for a poster for Yvette Guilbert*, 1894
Bibliography:


