

Exhibition Reviews

Rousseau

London, Paris and Washington

by ROGER CARDINAL

MUSING ON THE achievement of the self-taught Henri Rousseau some fourteen years after his death, Baroness Hélène d'Oettingen declared that 'the density of his pictorial merit is such that even the most concealed borders of his pictures bear the impress of the ardent solicitude which surrounded them'.¹ It was she who lent impetus to his growing reputation by organising the first London exhibition of Rousseau's work, held at the Lefèvre Gallery in 1926, with just twelve paintings. It seems incredible that almost eight decades should have passed before a full London retrospective could be realised. *Henri Rousseau. Jungles in the City at Tate Modern, London* (to 5th February),² curated by Frances Morris, Christopher Green and Claire Frèches-Thory, has rectified a gross anomaly, while boosting Rousseau's popular appeal through an emphasis on his best-known imagery of virgin forests and savage beasts.

The first room at Tate Modern immediately propels the visitor into the thematics of the exotic and the thrilling by exhibiting a fearsome contemporary sculpture of a gorilla making off with a naked woman under its arm. This violent exercise in erotic excess (and rollicking bad taste) is by the sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet, and was shown at the two World Fairs held in Paris in 1889 and 1900, which Rousseau is known to have attended.

The first work by Rousseau himself at Tate Modern is that evergreen shocker from the National Gallery, *Surprised!* (1891; cat. no.43), chosen as the ubiquitous signature image on all Tate posters and leaflets, as well as the catalogue cover.³ This was Rousseau's first venture into the jungle vein and one which he was not to repeat for several years. Also known as *Tiger in a tropical storm*, it exemplifies that 'density' and 'ardent solicitude' of which the baroness spoke. With its goggle-eyed great cat poised to pounce across the vegetation upon some unseen victim, it is not only a dramatised fantasy of primal existence but equally a masterpiece of delicate workmanship: for the entire canvas is coated with curious semi-transparent trails that mimic rain, while two white threads in the sky offer an eerie shorthand for lightning. Rousseau's thematic content may be simplistic to the point of naivety – and it is, of course, as the first maestro of Naive art that he found fame – yet there is admirable subtlety and acuity in his treatment of surfaces, not least in terms of colours and their interplay.

Another room contains just three paintings, this time depicting rather more French-look-



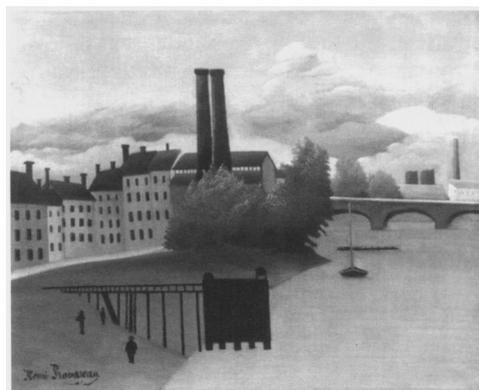
59. *The snake charmer*, by Henri Rousseau. 1907. 169 by 189 cm. (Musée d'Orsay, Paris; exh. Tate Modern, London).

ing forests, whose thickly planted trees suggest both airlessness and exhilarating proliferation. *Rendez-vous in the forest* (1889; no.14) is an electrifying vision of an amorous couple on horseback, half-smothered by foliage. *Promenade in the forest* (c.1886; no.16) shows a forlorn woman lingering in woodland that seems half wilderness, half paradise and foreshadows the ambiguous tropical wonderland of works such as *Eve* (c.1906–07; no.52) or *The snake charmer* (no.51; Fig.59). The well-known *Carnival evening* (1886; no.15) – a quite amazing early painting – shows two figures in carnival costume posing before a thicket of bare trees which recedes down a slope, so that the eye then rises to Tanguy-like snatches of cloud and Rousseau's trademark moon, luminous and magical. Each of these smaller paintings is treated with the same assiduous, all-over delicacy that would come across as fussiness were it not so singularly mesmerizing.

At times, it is true, Rousseau fits the stereotype of the inept autodidact, the Sunday painter who can only compensate for incompetence by ploughing a limited furrow with obsessional care. At least one picture celebrates his amateurish approach in a way we

might now suspect of being canny play-acting. It is *Painter and model* (1900–05; no.1), a small work which caught the fancy of Kandinsky, who purchased it as an instance of Rousseau's admirable primitivism. The painter, evidently Rousseau himself, perches on a folding stool while his wife sits on her stool in front of him. Both are dressed in black, as though for a solemn Sunday stroll. Oddly, the easel is positioned for us to see the work in progress rather than for the painter to work at it. This oddity is compounded by the fact that the scene is by a pond in a public park, hardly the usual venue for a portrait sitting. It is a slight, even daft, work, easily outshone by the earlier and more ambitious *Myself, portrait-landscape* (1890; no.2), in which Rousseau stands erect and proud, artist's beret and palette to the fore, in a setting comprising the Seine and the Eiffel Tower. Rousseau, it seems, could see himself both as innocent novice and as authoritative master.

There are just over fifty works in the exhibition. Only a third of these could be described as 'jungle paintings', although they hold their own by virtue of their generally large size. Wisely, the selectors have included a good many of those smaller images which were Rousseau's bread and butter, and which reflect a painstaking effort to record aspects of the metropolis, from its monuments, parks and riverbanks to its grassed-over fortifications and, of course, its toll-booths. (*The customs post* of c.1890, no.8, is Rousseau's tribute to the toll-booth where he worked for many years before his early retirement.) Rousseau has a penchant for marginal sites whose features he summarises, and often re-deploys, implementing quite effective compositional principles. Thus *The environs of Paris* (no.36; Fig.60) transcends any documentary function to become a generic riverscape, with white tenements, two jutting factory chimneys, a bridge and a gigantic black jetty. These form a carefully harmonised ensemble. Three flatly



60. *The environs of Paris*, by Henri Rousseau. 1909. 45 by 53.7 cm. (Detroit Institute of Arts; exh. Tate Modern, London).



61. *The dream*, by Henri Rousseau. 1910. 204.5 by 298.5 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Tate Modern, London).

painted male figures are pinned to the sandy riverbank like cardboard cut-outs, caricatures of Friedrich's horizon-gazers. An almost studied anti-naturalism arises from this treatment of the semi-industrialised scene, and it is easy to see how such an image might have appealed to contemporaries such as Paul Signac or Félix Vallotton.

Given that its coverage tends to echo that of the two other major retrospectives of recent times (one held in Paris and New York in 1984–85, the other in Tübingen in 2001), the Tate exhibition could be seen as a straightforward attempt to provide a rounded view of Rousseau's *oeuvre*: there are but a few major omissions, such as the great floral still lifes, or popular favourites like *The sleeping gypsy* (1897; Museum of Modern Art, New York) or *Old Junier's cart* (1908; Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris). Yet these gaps are barely noticeable amid the general richness of the show, which culminates in the greatest of the jungle canvases, *The dream* (no. 50; Fig. 61) and *The snake charmer* (Fig. 59). While the first of these has been criticised for its slightly fey introduction into the wilderness of a pale-skinned nude upon a de luxe canapé, the latter carries total conviction in its presentation of a dusky flute-player attended by writhing boas and no less writhing trees, her eyes as hypnotic as her twin nipples, all but invisible on her shadowed torso. Such enigmatic imagery haunted the imagination of Surrealists such as Max Ernst, André Masson and especially Victor Brauner, who painted the pastiche *The meeting at 2 bis rue Perrel* (1946; Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris).

What is original about this exhibition is its insistence on contextual documentation. Energised by silent films and by the central positioning of *Senegal lion devouring an antelope* (1886), a masterpiece of taxidermy borrowed from the Musée national d'histoire naturelle

in Paris and the inspiration for one of Rousseau's more bloodthirsty canvases, a substantial section is devoted to dozens of supplementary items, chosen to accentuate the link between Rousseau's visions and his actual environment and epoch. These include old photos of Paris by Eugène Atget and Jules Girard; postcards of the Eiffel Tower and the latest flying machines; a visiting card identifying him as 'Henri Rousseau Artiste Peintre'; an album of press cuttings (mostly derogatory); early articles by the likes of Robert Delaunay, Guillaume Apollinaire and Roger Fry; and monographs by André Salmon, Roch Grey and the Surrealist Philippe Soupault, as well as Wilhelm Uhde, the first champion of Naïve art.

Further materials offer insight into the contemporary 'tropical craze', of which Rousseau's work was an undoubted tributary. His fellow citizens were hungry for images of exotic climes made known by modern exploration, and especially the material and imaginary wonders made accessible by French colonial activities. Rousseau was certainly in thrall to the great Exposition universelle et internationale of 1889, which, on a single site, brought together a Cambodian pagoda, a Tunisian pavilion, a Kanak campsite and a Senegal village complete with living natives. The miscellany was mysteriously sanctioned by the ultra-modern Eiffel Tower that loomed high above.

Definite proof of the stimuli for Rousseau's jungle paintings – he never once travelled beyond France – is given in dozens of postcards of the Jardin des Plantes, including the Palmarium, the Winter Garden, the Zoological Gallery and the Monkey Palace, not to mention the hothouses of the Jardin d'Acclimatation in the Bois de Boulogne. Also displayed are illustrated magazines, maps of the *oultre-mer* territories, tales of travel by

Jules Verne or Louis Noir (author of an 1899 potboiler *Le Charmeur de Serpents*) and *Bêtes sauvages* (c.1900), an illustrated album issued by the Galeries Lafayette as a treat for its customers. It was from this lowly source that Rousseau lifted several decisive images, using a Pantograph (an instrument which transfers outlines, usually on a larger scale).

All this gives the lie to any notion of Rousseau as an autonomous inventor, for it seems clear that the major part of his iconography is indebted to popular culture. In fact, he seems generally to have preferred to trawl through the engravings in *Le Petit Journal* than the academic masterpieces in the Louvre, although there are, of course, a few well attested borrowings from Delacroix, Gérôme and others. He is less a faithful documenter of real scenes than of the imagined and stylised ones which nourished the fantasies of his fellow Parisians. Yet the tenor of the exhibition, supported by well-informed catalogue articles by Christopher Green, Vincent Gille and others, is not only to place Rousseau firmly within the socio-cultural context of the 1890s and early 1900s but equally to identify him as a captivating painter entirely worthy of the high esteem in which Picasso and other artists held him.

At the heart of the story lies the enigma of Rousseau's sensibility and the question of how aware he was of the ways in which his pictures affected other people. Those recurrent jungle dramas suggest a symbolic search for risky alternatives to the humdrum and the predictable. It may be that it is not so much the tiger or its prey which is so startled in *Surprised!*, but the artist himself. The apocryphal tale of his having sometimes to open a window because his visions were becoming too scary suggests an experiment in inducing surrogate fear, an armchair adventure for the stay-at-home bourgeois. Above all, Rousseau had the knack of producing images which facilitate unconscious associations. His kitsch exotica, transformed into frozen oneiric tableaux, somehow skid into a dimension of genuine poetic feeling, a bemusing dimension that transcends petty literalism and banishes all considerations of incompetence. Non-intellectual bemusement is indeed their most precious effect, and perhaps the key to Rousseau's intuitive genius.

¹ R. Grey: *Henri Rousseau*, Rome 1924, p.16; Roch Grey was the pseudonym of Baroness d'Oettingen, sister of the Cubist painter and Rousseau collector Serge Férat. Her book, published by Valori Plastici, was the first in English on Rousseau.

² After London, the exhibition, with some modifications, tours to the Grand Palais, Paris (13th March to 19th June), and the National Gallery of Art, Washington (16th July to 15th October).

³ Catalogue: *Henri Rousseau. Jungles in Paris*. Edited by Frances Morris and Christopher Green, with texts by Nancy Ireson and essays by Claire Frèches-Thory, Vincent Gille, Christopher Green, John House, Frances Morris and Pascal Rousseau. 232 pp. incl. 100 col. pls. + 45 b. & w. ills. (Tate Publishing, London, 2005), £35 (HB). ISBN 1-85437-612-8; £24.99 (PB). ISBN 1-85437-547-4.