



1890

Oil on canvas

45 1/2 x 59 inches (115.6 x 149.9 cm)

**HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC**

French

The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection in memory of Frances P. McIlhenny, 1986, 1986-26-32

### LET'S LOOK

Where is this scene taking place?  
How can you tell?

Which people are standing still?  
Which ones are moving?

Find some diagonal lines,  
some vertical lines, and one  
horizontal line.

Where are the dark areas?  
Where are the light areas?

## AT THE MOULIN ROUGE: THE DANCE

This large painting shows the Moulin Rouge (French for “Red Mill”), a popular dance hall near Paris, in about 1890. Men in dark coats and top hats chat among themselves while women show off their fancy hats and feathery stoles. In the center people are dancing. The large, open spaces between the figures and the slanting floorboards invite us to slip into the painting and join the milling crowd.

Who are these people? In the foreground, a woman in pink is shown in profile, eyes downcast, facing the dancers. Still and self-contained, her silhouette directs our gaze—almost like a signpost—toward the dancer’s curving, rhythmic figures. Look how the dancer’s shadows on the floor in the foreground echo the shapes of their bodies. The male dancer with rubbery-looking legs was a well-known performer nicknamed Valentine the Boneless. He is shown here teaching a young woman a daring new dance.

In the background we can just make out the bartender at the long, horizontal bar, serving drinks to gentlemen wearing tall, black top hats. Behind the bar are four vertical columns and three gaslight chandeliers, which illuminate the trees beyond. How many full-length figures (from head to toe) can you see? Look for several figures that are cropped (cut off) by the edges of the painting. Lautrec arranged his colors in a special way. Look how the areas of pink and red make a diagonal line from the woman in pink in the foreground, through the red legs of the dancer in the middle ground, and farther back to the red coat and orange-red hair of the waiter.

Lautrec has created the feel of a real dance hall with many people moving about. We can almost hear the blaring music and the murmur of the crowd broken by laughter. We can imagine the smell of the smoke-filled air. Within this scene, Lautrec has painted many small portraits of individual people. Each portrait—whether full-face,

profile, or three-quarters view, or even from behind—sensitively describes a particular person. The owner of the Moulin Rouge liked this painting so much that he hung it over the bar.

## ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born in 1864 to wealthy, aristocratic parents in Albi, an ancient city in southwestern France. When he was ten years old he began to suffer from a rare disease that stunted his growth. His condition was made worse by two falls in which his fragile leg bones were broken. While recuperating, young Henri entertained himself by doing watercolors and drawings of animals and his family.

After high school, Lautrec's mother took him to Paris to study with some of the best-known painters in France. He became skilled at drawing and experimented with the techniques of Impressionism, but ultimately developed his own very personal style. In 1891, he made his first poster of dancers at the Moulin Rouge. The poster included the same male dancer featured in this painting. Lautrec's poster was an enormous success! He had found the world he wanted to capture in his art.

Lautrec lived and worked in Montmartre ("mon-MART"), which was then a country village on a hill near Paris but is now a neighborhood within the city. He adored dance halls and cabarets where workers, artists, and wealthy aristocrats mingled. Lautrec drew and painted this world just as he saw it from the table reserved for him nightly at the Moulin Rouge, saying, "I have tried to draw something real, not ideal." Other entertainments also attracted Lautrec and became subjects for his art: bicycle races, skating rinks, the circus, masked balls, and the theater.

Unfortunately, Lautrec became addicted to alcohol and in 1899 suffered a mental breakdown. He recovered briefly, but then started drinking again and in 1901, at the age of thirty-six, he suffered a stroke and died.

Throughout his brief life, Lautrec was attracted to energy and individuality. He focused intensely on making pictures of dancers and singers, capturing their unique personalities by gently exaggerating their features. Like many Impressionist artists and his friend Vincent van Gogh, Lautrec was influenced by Japanese woodblock prints—their simplified shapes, decorative lines, and use of cropping. His influence on advertising and book illustration remains strong today.

## THE MOULIN ROUGE

The Moulin Rouge was a glitzy nightclub that opened in 1889. There was a dance hall and an art gallery inside, and outdoors a garden with slideshows, a giant papier-mâché elephant, a shooting gallery, a fortune teller, and a troupe of tame monkeys! A huge circus painting by Lautrec hung in the entrance hall. Outside, red lights decorated a windmill, creating the effect of flames when the arms turned. The carnival atmosphere of the Moulin Rouge attracted people from all walks of life, making it one of the most fashionable places to go in all of Paris.

## LET'S LOOK AGAIN

There are some unusual characters in this crowd. Find the one whose face looks like a skull and another who has his nose in the air.

Look closely at the three largest figures of women. What do their body language and clothing tell us about their personalities? Walk in groups of three, each student assuming the role of one of the women. Use your imagination and clues found in the painting to invent a name and personality for your character. Take turns telling each other who you are.

How many profiles of faces can you find in this painting? Try drawing the profile of one of your friends. Make sure the ear lines up with the eyes, as in Lautrec's profile of the woman in the pink dress.

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

Lautrec loved the Moulin Rouge. Write a paragraph describing one of your favorite places.

Imagine that you are in this painting—in a crowded, bustling dance hall near Paris a hundred years ago. Explore the background, middle ground, and foreground. Write a paragraph describing what you see, hear, smell, and feel.

Find the bald bartender in the back of the dance hall. Bartenders hear all sorts of stories told by their customers. Pick one of the people in the painting and write their story, as told to the bartender.

## HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

When he first started painting, Lautrec experimented with various ways of signing his name on his

work. Perhaps inspired by the seals stamped on Japanese prints, he decided to use a logo consisting of a circle with a combination of his three initials—*H* for Henri, *T* for Toulouse, and *L* for Lautrec—inside. Experiment with making your own logo this way. Try arranging your initials in squares, rectangles, and triangles, as well as circles.

*This painting is included in The Figure in the Impressionist Era, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.*