The Review

Toulouse-Lautrec at the Courtauld:

Just beyond the Moulin Rouge

The Courtauld Gallery, in the west wing of Somerset House, is one of London's best-kept secrets. Images you've known forever catch you off guard in the Courtauld's creaky-floored, airy rooms — Cranach's *Adam and Eve*, van Gogh's bandaged head, Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergères*. Now there's another treat. Nancy Ireson's *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril* — *Beyond the Moulin Rouge* brings together works from European and American collections with the Courtauld's own 1892 portrait of Jane Avril in a compact visual exploration of the relationship between the artist and the celebrated Moulin Rouge dancer. Avril was nicknamed La Melinite, after a powerful form of explosive, and was exotic, alluring, and a star of the Montmartre scene. There are the originals of those posters that everyone had on their walls in the 1970s, the spectacular *At the Moulin Rouge*, with Lautrec himself in the background, on loan from Chicago, and a number of affecting portraits of Avril — pensive, haughty, lonely and distracted.

As the chronicler of Parisian bohemian life in the 1890s, Lautrec didn't pull his punches and both the public and private faces of Jane Avril are uncompromising and unflattering. Best of all Lautrec captures the ebullience and energy of her movements in dance, as in the famous poster for the Jardin de Paris, and her elegance in the design for the Divan Japonais poster.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901). At the Moulin Rouge, 1892–1893. Oil on canvas, 123 x 141 cm.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection.

There is medical material on display here too, because both Lautrec and Avril were 'interesting cases'. She had spent 18 months as a patient at the Salpêtrière hospital, where staff and students have included Charcot, Tourette, Babinski, and Freud, because of a movement disorder thought to have been Sydenham's chorea. Medical voyeurism was a feature of late 19th century Parisian life and Charcot's public lectures included the display of the interesting cases being studied in the Department of Movement Disorders. At the Salpêtrière's *Bal des folles*, members of the public were invited to dance with the strange patients. Jane Avril claimed that dancing cured her unwanted movements and her career was born. She was admired as an energetic, sensual, and idiosyncratic dancer — Lautrec's friend Paul Leclercq described the scene:

'In the midst of the crowd there was a stir, and a line of people started to form. Jane Avril was dancing, twirling, gracefully, lightly, a little madly; pale, skinny, thoroughbred, she twirled and reversed, weightless, fed on flowers: Lautrec was shouting out his admiration.'

Her movement disorder may have contributed to her dance technique — 'an orchid in a frenzy'.

Lautrec was also of considerable medical interest. The son of two aristocratic first cousins, he sustained femoral fractures at the ages of 13 and 14 years and malunion was accompanied by retarded growth, so that his adult height was only 1.54 metres. He is thought to have suffered from pycnodysostosis, a lysosomal storage disease of the bone with multiple skeletal and dental manifestations. He was also a serious alcoholic and died at the age of 36 years.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) Jane Avril, c.1891–1892. Oil on cardboard, 63.2 x 42.2 cm. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo: Michael Agee.

When you have absorbed all this Lautrec/Avril material, take your time going downstairs and be sure not to miss the treasures on show — a marvellous pot pourri of medieval and renaissance gems, terrific Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, and a fine showing of British and European 20th century art. And, if the thought of the NHS reforms and the prospect of Monitor and clinical senators breathing down your neck is all too much, you can always pick up a bottle of Absinthe from the gallery shop on the way home.

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Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril — Beyond the Moulin Rouge is on at the Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN (www.courtauld.ac.uk) until 18 September 2011.

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