

The Red Woman

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Women have been the focus of countless works of art through the centuries, from Botticelli's *Venus* to Manet's *Olympia* to Degas' prostitutes and so on, serving as muses and subject matter. In many cases, it is the female figure on display with varying degrees of sensuality¹ that commands the audience's attention. However, some modern artists chose to challenge that ideal of a titillating nude. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is an excellent example, with many of his deceptively chaste compositions depicting adult subject matter. Lautrec was born into a wealthy family but suffered through illness for most of his life, never surpassing five feet in stature due to fractures in both femurs during early childhood². It is believed that his lifelong health complications and oddly shaped figure were what drew him to the unorthodox district of Montmartre, hailed as a place to escape boredom and find inclusivity for misfits³. Here he found inspiration for many of his paintings, much unlike his previous impressionistic landscapes and gardens, which catapulted him into infamy.

Some of Lautrec's best-known pieces are centered around the women he met in Montmartre. "*A Montrouge*"-*Rosa la Rouge* is a stunning portrait done in oil on canvas of the model Carmen Gaudin, standing in as a Parisian prostitute. Gaudin served as a model for many

¹ Manet's *Olympia* was one of the first popular paintings to showcase a naked woman not present simply to stimulate the male viewer, as her stoic expression and relaxed pose suggest she is indifferent to the presence of that whom she looks at. It has been speculated that *Olympia* served as one of the main inspirations to Lautrec's *Rosa la Rouge* since both works display women who work as prostitutes but are not presented overtly sexually, similar to Degas' prostitutes. (Heller 1997)

² Lautrec's parents were first cousins, explaining the ample genetic deformities the artist exhibited and his poor health from that inbreeding.

³ Montmartre is a large hill whose name comes from the surrounding district, known for its inhabitants of artists, writers, cabaret dancers, prostitutes, bourgeois wanderers, and poor workers during the 19th century. Many artists thirsting for real life inspiration came to this place, as it provided the desired subject matter and a free lifestyle. (Butt 2016)

of Lautrec's works, identifiable by her brilliant red hair⁴. The painting cuts off just below the waist, depicting a woman, Rosa, in an untucked white work shirt with the sleeves rolled up that covers her waist and black skirt, hiding her womanly figure under the garment's boxy shape. The shirt itself appears wrinkled or disheveled, as though she has had a full day of work and errands. Her face is turned away from the viewer and covered by thick strands of her vibrant red hair, the rest of which is tied at the back of her neck. Her lips are also red, the only other vibrant pop of color besides her hair in the whole composition. The pale skin exposed by the lack of a top button on her shirt is so light it almost blends in with the fabric, forcing the viewer to stop and stare for a second to discern where garment ends and woman begins. The background behind the woman, which takes up the rest of the composition, is unremarkable, presumably the window outside of a club⁵. The painting is done in Lautrec's recognizable painterly style, with every paint stroke visible upon closer inspection and a muted color palette comprised mainly of white, red, and different shades of tan and brown. Nothing about the painting reads academic or even somewhat realistic, with many of the forms lost in the lackadaisical brushstrokes and the absence of contrast.

⁴ Carmen Gaudin was a laundress from Montmartre whom Lautrec favored for many of his works. It was known that he had a preference for pale, slim, red-haired girls and Gaudin was a perfect fit. Lautrec was especially fond of depicting her in her work clothes, often looking pensive and thoughtful mid task, creating a movement and story in his pieces that is seen in *Rosa la Rouge*. The irony of using her to model as a prostitute involved in a murder story is that many believe she was the cause of the painter's death. He caught syphilis from the red headed beauty and died at age 36 from the complications of the illness, made worse by his already poor health. (Butt 2016); (Serrano 2012)

⁵ The song which inspired the subject of the painting is an original bar song written and performed by a friend of Lautrec's. In it, a young prostitute named Rosa either lures men outside to kill them or is lured out herself to be murdered by her angry pimp. Either way, the famous line "...and tomorrow the cop will find red, in Montrouge" indicates the definite act of murder. Interestingly, Lautrec chose to ignore much of the nightclub scene and sordid nature of the story in favor of focusing on the prostitute herself, making the reference to the song loose and a more in-the-know situation. (Heller 1997)

One of the most noted aspects of the work is Lautrec's depiction of a prostitute as a normal working-class woman. Instead of calling out the woman's occupation by presenting her nude or giving her an enticing expression, the painter uses only her red locks and disheveled clothes to suggest her line of work. Even then, it is up to the audience's interpretation whether she is a sexual figure. Reinhold Heller suggests in his catalogue "Toulouse Lautrec: The Soul of Montmartre" that Rosa's tousled appearance readily suggests the aftermath of sexual activity, which is what the upper-class male viewer of the 19th century would have concluded upon seeing the work. He also claims that Lautrec, along with other artists such as Degas and Forain, depicted women with their sleeves rolled up to imply sexual availability much how Kirchner's street walkers flashed their ankles to signify their availability⁶. Many artists of the time, especially those who resided in that area of Paris, included the sexual nature of nightlife. It was what happened each night, and Lautrec never shied away from the taboo or potentially offensive content.

In contrast, Carrie Butt explains in her article "'A Montrouge'--Rosa La Rouge: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec" that Lautrec's depiction of the woman is not sexual, but fierce—her stance is defiant, and her work clothes suggest her strong, practical nature. *Rosa la Rouge* is the opposite of sultry and is meant to pose a suspended moment that leaves the viewer in anticipation of what happens next. Carrie Butt believes that the work is meant to be unnerving, as it was hung in a night club where one would expect images of enticing nude women instead⁷. Butt's

⁶ Heller is a German art historian who resides in and was educated in America. He believes that many artists of Lautrec's time strove to depict sexuality in a toned down, more ambiguous picture. Heller also closely links Lautrec's prostitute works with Degas' brothel scenes, claiming they reach for the same goal of "naturalness".

⁷ As mentioned earlier, the main inspiration for *Rosa la Rouge* other than Carmen Gaudin was a song written and performed by Lautrec's close friend Aristide Bruant about a prostitute that was murdered by her pimp, though the song's ambiguity makes some believe the Rosa, the prostitute, was the one

interpretation is supported by Carlos Serrano, who claims the work gives an overall feeling of tiredness and melancholy, opposite of the expected sexual energy a working prostitute might give⁸. He also believes Rosa is caught in a frozen moment of natural posture, indicative of narrative. Though the painting is only loosely based on a song's story, the movement created by the anticipation of the next scene is a nod to the original Rosa and her fate, as well as the ambiguity of the source material. The latter visions of Lautrec's work ring more valid than the former interpretation, due to the painting's lack of suggestiveness or nudity.

It is true that many artists of the time focused on sexual material, including Lautrec; however, that cannot be accurately used to describe this painting. Without knowing that the subject is in fact based on the story of a prostitute, it would be difficult to realize the occupation of Rosa or the location behind her. She appears to be any working woman, tired after a long day's toil and perhaps standing outside a store on a regular street. The muted colors create an atmosphere of weariness and suspense, neither of which imply sexual nature, and her clothes appear wrinkled from labor, not sex. Further, her boyish silhouette distances her even more from prostitution, with only the red in her hair and lips making it clear she is not a man. Lack of that one color would make it far more difficult to gender the subject since her facial features are hidden and her work clothes appear slightly masculine. Lautrec does not appear to be making a

who killed her client after luring him outside. Lautrec's painting was hung in Bruant's Montmartre club Le Mirliton despite it having little to do with the song other than both being centered around a woman named Rosa with red hair. Some believe the painting was Lautrec's way of mocking the audience since Bruant often did the same, teasing the 'tourists of pleasure' who frequented his club. (Butt 2016); (Serrano, 2012)

⁸ Serrano's "*The Portraits of Carmen Gaudin*" talks about how Lautrec enjoyed displaying Gaudin as a laundress as opposed to a sex worker, showing her exhaustion from her day-to-day life as a working-class woman.

statement about prostitution or the sexual inclinations of poor women; moreover, he is showcasing the normality of the everyday Parisian.

Another highly debated aspect of *Rosa la Rouge* is Lautrec's intended depiction of the poor working-class which inhabited Montmartre. Most agree that his intention during his time in Montmartre was to capture the life of the people there, but some call upon his privileged upbringing as a lens through which he showed that life. This meaning his paintings exaggerated the misery and grime the poor lived in, presenting Montmartre existence as raunchy and miserable⁹, and sexuality as the always present hallmark of the lower class. This narrowed view came despite Lautrec's taking up of the lower class's vices that are not usually associated with the upper-class.

Others argue that Lautrec admired the lighthearted and strong attitudes of the people he met despite their poverty. Many of his friends were not well off, and he reportedly found much in common with the Montmartre people as his stunted growth and constant illness estranged him from the wealthy class he grew up in¹⁰. Instead, the painter strove to capture their everyday life as it was, with vices included, but the humanity of the lower-class included too. Lautrec became a fixture of the district's nightclubs and cafes along with fellow artists; moreover, these places were where he befriended the majority of his models¹¹. Though he was born into wealth, the

⁹ Heller discusses how this view was one Lautrec adopted from Bruant, not as a way to pity the people of the Parisian district but simply as the only way to be realistic to life there.

¹⁰ Lautrec was known to indulge in all the common activities of the district, partaking in ample alcohol consumption, drug use, and sex. (Butt 2016)

¹¹ One of these cafes was likely where the artist met Gaudin. He is described being very fond of her strong character and sweet nature and thought of her as an ideal model. This also negates the idea that Lautrec would depict common people like Gaudin in a negative light, as he was fond of most of the people who inhabited that part of Paris. Gaudin's spirited personality is captured in Rosa's fierce stance and confident posture. (Serrano 2012)

artist identified with the people he met, making his aspiration to capture the realness of the Parisian neighborhood all the more relevant.

His focus on the hair and head of the figure in the portrait are indicative of that care for the people, and neglecting to go a sensual route with the painting further negates the aforementioned stance¹². The painter does not seem to pity the poor; again, many of his close friends were not wealthy by any means, and Rosa does not appear to be a woman to be pitied or sexualized. She is a person who lives in a district in Paris, who has a life and an occupation, and who feels tired after long days. The goal of the 19th century impressionists was to capture life as it happened, giving movement and relatability to their paintings which is clearly shown as an intention in Lautrec's work. It would not be capturing life as it happened if the painter were to try to create a sense of suffering in his composition of *Rosa la Rouge*, as Montmartre was a place to escape boredom and to enjoy the nightlife. Other works by Lautrec, like his 1889 piece "The Drinker", do show the more dejected side of poverty in Paris¹³. In contrast, *Rosa la Rouge* displays much more than simply a red-haired girl after some sort of toil earlier in the day. Claiming Rosa is a motif for the condescending view Lautrec and his upper-class colleagues had of the impoverished people of Montmartre is not reflective of the tone or focus of the painting and takes away its profound realness.

Lautrec keeps his painterly style and messy shapes despite moving away from the traditional impressionist subjects and style once reaching Montmartre. Like many other artists,

¹² Lautrec himself suggested the pose in the painting so that it would showcase her hair and make her head the focal point of the painting. (Serrano 2012)

¹³ *Gueule de Bois*, or *The Drinker*, is a painting of a woman, modeled by Suzanne Valadon, sitting despondent at a table with a bottle and half full glass in front of her. Reminiscent of Degas' *Absinthe*, *The Drinker* gives a much more somber tone than that of *Rosa la Rouge* and was another one of Lautrec's attempts to give a real depiction of the working class of Montmartre. (Skira 1950)

his works announce their presence as paintings. There is colored paint on a canvas applied with some sort of brush, while the believability of finding the image of a woman wearing a work shirt standing in front of a window is left to the audience. This method of composition furthers the storytelling power of *Rosa la Rouge* since it is not trying to fool the viewer into believing it is a real woman in a real place, and adds even more to the ambiguity of the piece. The hazy appearance could be argued as how someone who is drunk or exhausted might actually see the scene, engaging the audience in the narrative despite Rosa looking away, preoccupied with the world around her. It could also be argued to be the effect of which nighttime would have on the human eye. One could even argue the Lautrec loved his messy style and that is why the picture appears hazy. This limitless quantity of interpretations for the painting is why the ambiguous nature is so important.

“*A Montrouge*”-*Rosa la Rouge* is by far my favorite piece by Lautrec. The woman looks as though she could be a modern girl from the current day, creating a timelessness that makes the composition tangible to the audience no matter the day or age. Much like the greatest works of literature that have been enjoyed despite many decades and even centuries passing since their creation, Lautrec’s painting is ambiguous enough to be understood by a wide audience but specific enough to be relatable to many. Rosa’s brilliant hair is enticing to the eye, but the mystery of her hidden face and strong posture create the perfect intrigue. Is she confronting someone, or being confronted? Has she just gotten off work, or is she about to go out? An innumerable amount of questions and interpretations are possible with this work, which is the true beauty of what Lautrec does in *Rosa la Rouge*. It can fascinate club goers from the 19th century and can be admired by youth of the 21st century and will go on to be praised by future generations as well.

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