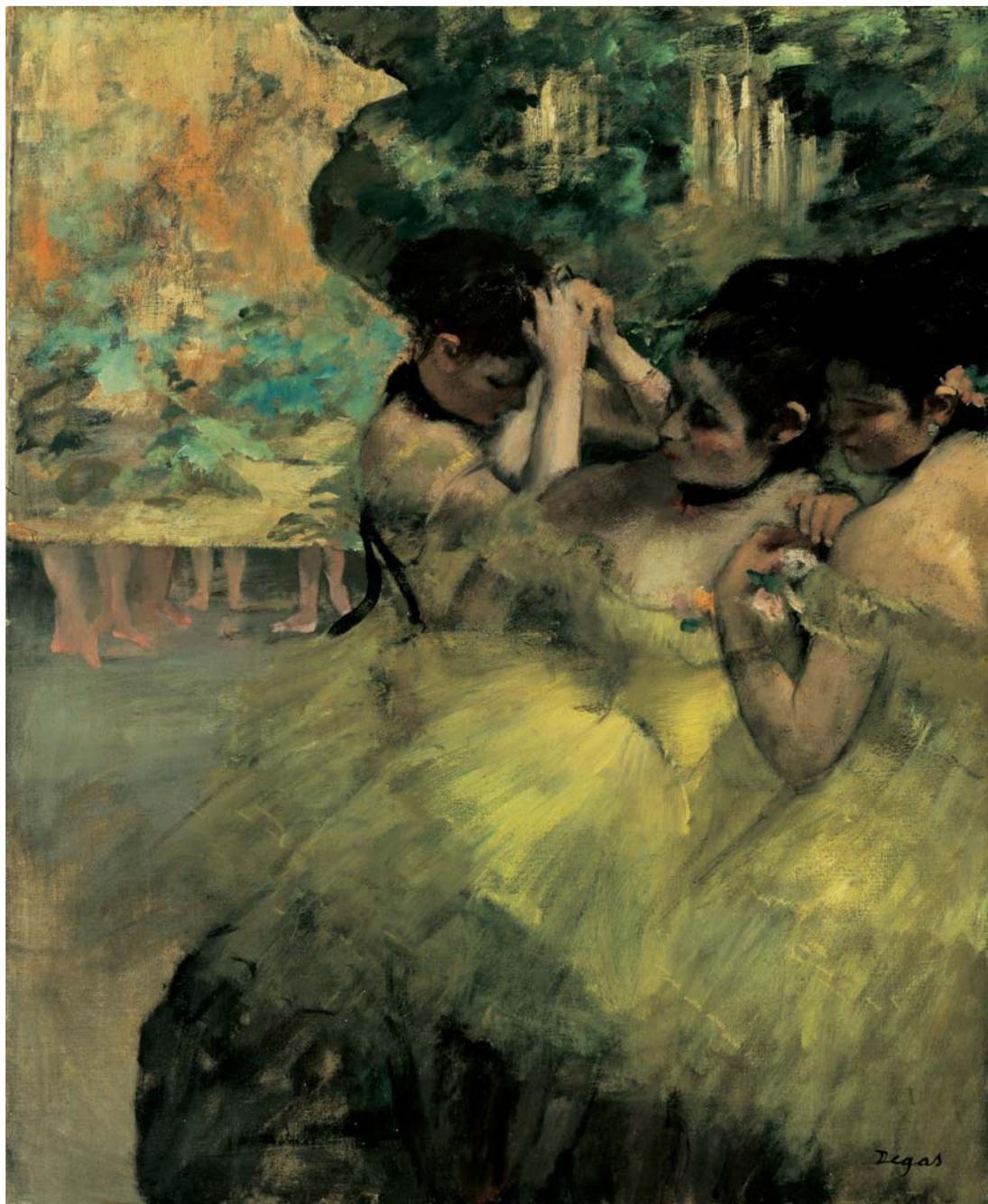


# DEGAS, SICKERT AND TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

LONDON AND PARIS 1870–1910

SOLE SPONSOR: THE BRITISH LAND COMPANY PLC  
TATE BRITAIN, 5 OCTOBER 2005 – 15 JANUARY 2006



EDGAR DEGAS *YELLOW DANCERS* 1874–6 © THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

## TEACHER AND STUDENT NOTES WITH KEY WORK CARDS

8 X A4 CARDS WITH INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION, FULL COLOUR IMAGES, DISCUSSION POINTS, LINKS AND ACTIVITIES. FOR USE IN THE GALLERY OR CLASSROOM. SUITABLE FOR TEACHERS OF ALL LEVELS AND FOR KS4 & 5 STUDENTS TO USE INDEPENDENTLY.

BY LINDA BOLTON.

# DEGAS, SICKERT AND TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

LONDON AND PARIS 1870–1910

## INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition explores the creative exchange between British and French artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When Degas turned away from the traditions of the Salon to become a 'painter of modern life' he initiated a movement in which the city, its inhabitants and their amusements, distractions and vices would become the primary subject matter. Degas observed and found beauty in the life of the modern city. Toulouse-Lautrec participated in and celebrated its distractions. Sickert exposed the darker, dehumanizing and criminal realities of metropolitan life.

A central theme of the exhibition is the interaction between the artistic life of Paris and London. Each city in some way represented a shock or an affront to the other which stirred the artists' imaginations and the market for their work. The works in the exhibition invite the visitor to consider and explore this 'turn' to the everyday and the resulting development of a 'modern art' form both in terms of technique and subject matter. At the same time they provide an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between art and popular culture, and such modern phenomena as the cult of celebrity and the power of the media.

## THE EXHIBITION LAYOUT

The exhibition features the work of Degas, Sickert, Toulouse-Lautrec in the period between 1870–1910, and other artists working at this time, in the context of modern painting in Paris and London. The exhibition opens with an introduction to this theme: Importing the New Painting to Britain in the 1870s. Room 2 introduces Degas, Sickert and modern subject matter of the 1880s. Toulouse-Lautrec and his British Circles in the 1890s follows in Room 3. Room 4 features Degas's *L'Absinthe*, and Room 5 focuses on portraiture. Room 6 explores Sickert and the Paris Art World of the 1900s, and Room 7 focuses on Nudes and Interiors. The last room focuses on Interior Lives. You can find a Room Guide at [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/degas/roomguide](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/degas/roomguide)

## VISITING THE EXHIBITION

Exhibition tickets for school groups of more than ten students are available **in advance only** from Education Bookings on **020 7887 3959** at a cost of £4 per student and teacher so long as payment is received two weeks before the visit. As the available tickets are limited it is essential to book well in advance. All groups with more than 30 students will be split and asked to enter the exhibition at 30-minute intervals. If you would like to use the Schools Area to have lunch or to use the locker spaces please book these when you book your tickets as there is limited space available.

As all exhibitions at Tate can be busy you cannot lecture in exhibition rooms, but you can discuss works in a conversational manner with groups of no more than six students at a time. If possible, brief your students before they enter the exhibition, and if you have a large group, we recommend that you divide them into smaller groups and follow the suggestions in this pack.

## HOW TO USE THIS PACK AND STRUCTURE YOUR VISIT

This pack aims to provide an introduction to the exhibition and to the themes highlighted by its curators, to suggest themes and issues to explore, and to offer information about key works on display, as well as discussion points and activities. The key work cards can be used to help focus work in small groups in the exhibition, and for preparation or follow up in the classroom. Call **020 7887 8734** to check which works are on display.

## RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN THE GALLERY

There is a range of free teachers' packs available at the Groups and Activities desk in the Rotunda at the gallery; by calling Education Bookings on **020 7887 3959** or by downloading from [www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools](http://www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools). The pack for *A Picture of Britain* features a key work card on *Brighton Pierrots* 1915 by Sickert. The pack on *Turner Whistler Monet* features sections on the work of Whistler.

There is a **free exhibition guide** available to all visitors, and an **audioguide** price £3.50 adults and £3 concessions. The Tate Britain shops have a selection of books, journals, catalogues, postcards and related materials.

## WEBSITES

Relevant websites are included in the text. They include:

**Tate Online** [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/degas](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/degas)

**Tate Learning** [www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools](http://www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools)

This site includes a dedicated area for teachers and group leaders, and teacher resource notes for all major Tate exhibitions.

## FURTHER READING

The free exhibition guide offers a concise introduction to the three main artists and to the themes featured in each of the eight rooms. It also contains a list of events connected with the exhibition.

**Anna Gruetzner Robins and Richard Thomson**, *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec* (the exhibition catalogue) 2005, Tate Publishing, is available for £26.99 from Tate shops.

**Jad Adams** *The Drink that Fuelled the Nation's Art*, Tate Etc. Issue 5 Autumn 2005. The article can also be accessed on line at [www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue5/thedrink](http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue5/thedrink)

Tate bookshops also stock artists' monographs and books on artistic movements over the four decades featured in the exhibition.

For example:

**Douglas Cooper**, *Toulouse-Lautrec*, 2004, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, Publishers, £13.95.

**Keith Roberto**, *Degas*, 1982, Phaidon Press Inc., £5.95.

**David Peters Corbett**, *Walter Sickert*, 2001, Tate Publishing, £8.99.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTISTS' LIVES AND WORK

## EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917)

As a personality Degas was a conservative who regretted the changes taking place in society, yet as an artist he rejected the slavish imitation of the past in favour of an attempt to capture the spirit of the modern age. Degas was born in Paris in 1834, the son of a prosperous banker and a Creole woman born in New Orleans and brought up in France. The family name was actually the aristocratic-sounding 'de Gas'. The artist modified this but never lost his bourgeois manner and reserve. From the age of 11 he boarded at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and was destined for a career in law. However, he abandoned these studies, determined to become an artist. In 1855 he entered the studio of Louis Lamothe (a pupil of Ingres), and later spent a few months at the École des Beaux Arts. In 1856 he left for Italy, spending three years in Naples, Florence and especially Rome. His earliest finished paintings are highly accomplished family portraits, but back in Paris he dutifully embarked on the large-scale history paintings in the established tradition of the nineteenth century French Salon.

By the mid-1860s he had become what he was to remain – a painter of contemporary life. Inspired by the new currents in French painting, and by his friendship with Edouard Manet and the circle that would later become known as the Impressionists, he completely changed his subject matter. He began to frequent the popular haunts of the man-about-town: the ballet, racecourse, theatre and café providing his new subject matter. Although Degas is seldom regarded as an Impressionist painter, he did exhibit with the group, and was instrumental in organising the Impressionist exhibitions of the 1870s and 1880s which challenged and overturned the accepted standards of the Salon. He shared their interest in depicting ordinary life and like them was influenced by Japanese prints. However, he differed in his preference for artificial lighting and dislike of outdoor painting.

Degas's concerns were with drawing, form and composition, not with the transient effects of light which so captivated the Impressionists. He made endless studies for his paintings, filling whole notebooks with drawings of hands or a particular architectural feature for a background. He believed that a true understanding of a subject came through scrutinising and rediscovering it through repeated drawing. He found it regrettable that too many artists followed colour instead of line, telling Sickert, 'I always tried to urge my colleagues along the path of draughtsmanship, which I consider a more fruitful field than that of colour'. Towards the end of his life, however, as his eyesight deteriorated, he became a great colourist and his canvases are characterised by broad, sweeping forms. He spoke of having been liberated from the 'tyranny of line' as he slashed colour onto roughly executed forms, but behind these works lay years of observation and sketching.

## WALTER SICKERT (1860–1942)

Sickert was born in Munich of Danish and Irish descent. His father was an artist and his mother an heiress who effectively supported the family. When he was eight the family moved to London and Sickert attended several schools in the city before spending four years rather unsuccessfully as an actor. He then entered the Slade School of Art but left when invited to become an apprentice in the studio of Whistler. In Paris at the age of 23 he began his life-long

friendship with Degas whose method of record and recall he adopted as well as an interest in everyday life as subject matter. For over a decade he lived and worked in and around Camden Town, a seedy, working-class district much mutilated by the building of the railways. He was described as a dandy in appearance and manners who had a genius for discovering the dreariest house and most forbidding rooms in which to work.

After his unhappy marriage broke down, Sickert spent seven years in Dieppe. When he returned to England in 1905 as an established artist he became the leader of a circle of younger artists which later became known as the Camden Town Group. They followed him in asserting that modern painting should portray modern life in its rawness in order to shock people into really seeing the world in which they lived. Like Degas he portrayed contemporary subjects such as crowds at the music hall, but much of his work is more personal and intense, capturing isolated figures in intimate or disturbing moments. The most famous example is his Camden Town Murder Series, each of which shows a naked woman and a clothed man in a squalid interior. Although this referred to an actual murder, for Sickert it was also an exploration of composition, form and light. The writer Virginia Woolf said, 'Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer... it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot'. Sickert described himself as a 'literary painter' and compared his work to that of Edgar Allan Poe the writer of psychological horror and detective fiction.

## HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864–1901)

Toulouse-Lautrec was the son of a French aristocrat. He broke both of his legs in falls and as a result of a genetic condition they ceased to grow and he had great difficulty walking. He was only 1.5 metres tall. He was encouraged by his family and friends to develop his talent for drawing and when he was 18 he began formal training with leading Parisian artists. At 21 he became financially secure and set up a studio in Montmartre, the district of Paris with which he is always associated.

He spent much of his time in the local cafés, theatres and dance halls which provided subject matter for his paintings and lithographs. He met Degas and followed his lead in becoming a painter of ordinary life. 'I don't belong to any school. I work in my corner. I admire Degas', he told an interviewer. He was less respectable than Degas, however, holding middle-class life in contempt and ridiculing it both in his art and manner of life. No doubt this had much to do with the scorn he himself received because of his appearance. He became addicted to alcohol at an early age and died as a result at the early age of 36.

He used loud colours and adopted an exaggerated and often grotesque style to capture the noise, energy and artificiality of the cabarets and clubs he frequented and for which he produced the advertisements and posters for which he is today probably best known.

## OTHER ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

These include artists who knew or shared similar interests as Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec, such as James Tissot, Giuseppe de Nittis, Charles Clausen, Charles Condor, JAM Whistler, Philip Wilson Steer, Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard.

# KEY THEMES IN THE EXHIBITION

## EVERYDAY LIFE

*What is the 'proper' subject matter of art?* Portraits of the great and good? Representations of important historical events? Depictions of beautiful landscapes, natural objects or views? Or should art reflect the world as it is in the experience of ordinary people? Do you go to a gallery to admire the work of great artists, or to be helped to see the world that you already know in a different way? This exhibition is about the 'turn' that took place in European art from traditional subject matter to the world of everyday experience.

Of course everyone's experience is not the same and many of the people who saw these works around the time of their production would have had little experience of the activities they illustrate. Yet there is still a sense in which they seem to capture the spirit of the time in the way that today advertising, design, popular fashion or music might be said to do so. What images would you choose to represent life today?

## CITY LIFE: LONDON AND PARIS

*Are there limits to art?* At the beginning of this new millennium it can sometimes seem that art is more about shocking people than practically anything else. The paintings in this exhibition were also shocking at the time. Shocking because they were different from what people expected art to be like, but also because of their content. But people then as now were shocked by different things. The British were shocked by what they considered to be the immorality and excess of the French. The French were shaken by the squalor and meanness of London. Paris was the city of light; London the city of 'dreadful night' ('The City of Dreadful Night' was a poem by late nineteenth century Scots-born poet James Thomson). A central theme of the exhibition is the way these two images fed on one another as artists and collectors moved back and forth between the two cities. Today it is far easier to travel and to visit many more places. What shocks or surprises us about other cultures today?

## THE FUNCTION OF ART

*How relevant is art?* Once art has turned to the everyday how does it affect us? What is it for? Is it mainly for decoration or investment? Some of the works in the exhibition – such as Toulouse-Lautrec's posters – were advertisements designed to help us spend our money. Some would brighten up any living room. Others would probably make us depressed. Is art meant to change the way we live? When you leave the exhibition do you think you will be changed in any way by your experience of looking at these works?

# LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

## CITIZENSHIP & PSHE

In these subject areas you might consider discussing themes of drink or drugs. In England in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries gin was seen as the evil addiction of its day. Temperance movements were set up to try to reform drinkers, and make young people 'sign the pledge' not to touch a drop of alcohol. You might discuss the issues and dangers that drink and drugs hold, as well as artists' depictions of them. Sickert said for those who live 'in the most wonderful and complex city in the world, the most fruitful course of study lies in a persistent effort to render the magic and poetry which they daily see around them'.

## HISTORY

You might want to consider how the invention of the steam train and the rail networks that built up from the 1840s made transport to and from London and Paris much easier, and a cultural interchange more possible.

## ENGLISH/LITERACY

The exhibition opens up rich opportunities to explore narratives. Many of the paintings invite speculation as to what is going on, or what the story might be behind the picture. Virginia Woolf spoke of Sickert's story-telling facility: 'To me Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer... He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action. As I remember, his show was full of pictures that might be stories... The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis; it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot'.

## LANGUAGE

Sickert lived in Dieppe for several years and often stayed in Paris. To interact with a wide social network he spoke French. How do you think a lack of language might prevent a full cultural interchange and vice versa?

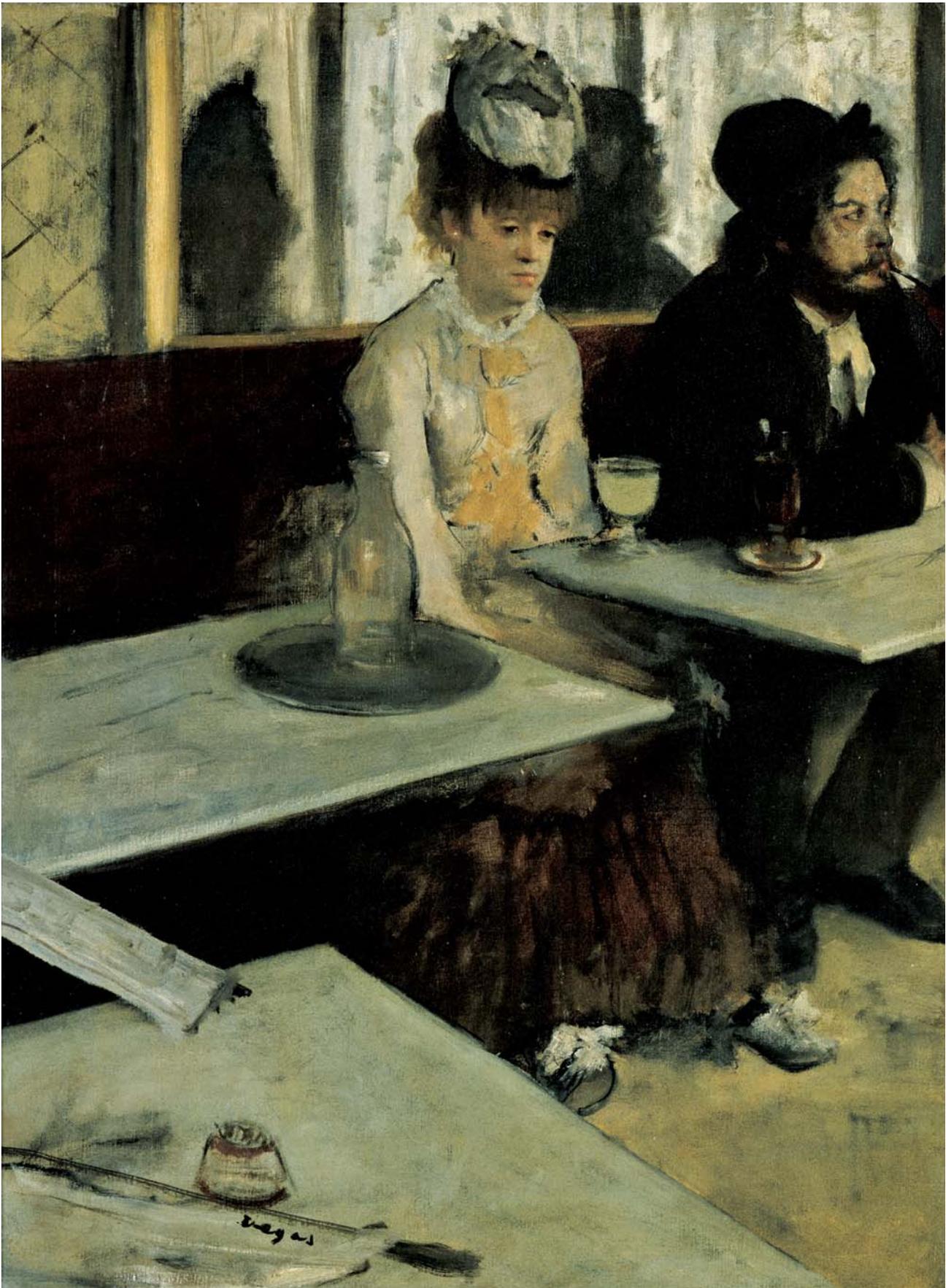
## MUSIC

In music you could listen to Offenbach's *Cancan*. It had become the iconic sound of the Belle Époque of Paris in the 1890s, and although no longer practised, it is readily recognised by many as the 'soundtrack' to a dance.

You might also think about the name of the cancan. It derives from the French word for scandal, and was performed by a line of women, who with their arms around each others' waists raised their knees and kicked their legs as high as possible to reveal their underwear. This energetic dance often ended in the splits, something no decent woman would have considered doing even privately. The cancan was considered vulgar and risqué in the nineteenth century, and for these reasons, enormously popular in the Parisian music halls.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

Much of Toulouse-Lautrec's art was for posters advertising a wide range of products such as bicycles, cigarettes and theatre performances. You could discuss the way the artist was both a fine artist and a graphic artist, practising across a range of media from oil on canvas to pastel and lithograph.



EDGAR DEGAS *L'ABSINTHE* 1875-6 © MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS  
PHOTO © RMN - H LEWANDOWSKI

'L'ABSINTHE IS A STUDY OF HUMAN DEGRADATION... AND THE OUTWARD AND VISIBLE SIGNS OF THE CORRUPTION OF SOCIETY'.

Walter Crane, artist, major figure in the arts and crafts movement

EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917)

### L'Absinthe 1875–6

*Oil on canvas, 92 x 68 cm*

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

#### BACKGROUND

Absinthe is a powerful alcoholic drink which contains a high concentration of a poison from the Wormwood plant which has hallucinogenic properties. It was first produced in 1792 and reached the height of its popularity at the end of the nineteenth century when it was associated with the artistic life and was known as the 'drink of Parisian abandon'. In the early years of the twentieth century it was banned as a danger to health in many countries (including France in 1915).

Degas's *L'Absinthe* (1875–6) shows two figures in a café. The woman is generally thought to be a prostitute; the man is a drunk. It is the woman who is at the centre of attention. The sadness of her situation, typical of many who came into the cafés of Paris or the pubs of London to pick up a customer or while away the hours of loneliness, is emphasised by the downward tilt of her hat, eyes, shoulders and arms. The ambiguity of her social status is reflected in her position – pushed off one table and half-way between that and the next. Her isolation is intensified by the way the man at her side is turned away from her, with his forearm occupying much of the shared table and leaving no room for her carafe of water.

In terms of composition, the painting is a daring experiment. Degas has drawn our attention to the way in which people do not sit conveniently between objects. In life people are never at the centre of the canvas and are rarely seen 'as a whole'. They are always in some kind of context which influences our perceptions and reactions to them. The lower left-hand side of the painting is occupied by the barren expanse of the table which provides an area of visual bleakness in keeping with the forlorn expression and pose of the woman. The effect is that of a random snapshot, yet the composition works perfectly: the eye is led to the figure of the woman, and the newspaper lying across the two tables pulls the scene together as well as strengthening the naturalistic effect.

The painting aroused strong feelings when it was exhibited in London in 1893. The choice of subject matter was thought unsuitable and the casual manner of depiction immoral and provocative. It seemed to express everything the British thought was degenerate and decadent about France, yet it was owned by a British collector.

#### DISCUSSION

##### Primary and secondary

- Look at the woman in this painting. How do you think she is feeling and why?
- Where is she and what do you think she is doing?
- Do you think there is a link between the man and the woman?
- How has the artist arranged the different parts of the painting? Do you think it is carefully composed or not?

##### Secondary

- Look at how women are portrayed in the exhibition. Do you think the artists differ in the way they see women? Are the women of Paris portrayed differently from the women of London?
- Can you tell by looking at the paintings which are cited in Paris or London?
- Today we seem far more concerned with drug abuse than alcohol abuse. Do you agree with the current plans of the government to extend pub opening hours? What do you think the effect will be?
- What was it about the painting that you think shocked some of the British public at the time? What do you think the French response might have been?

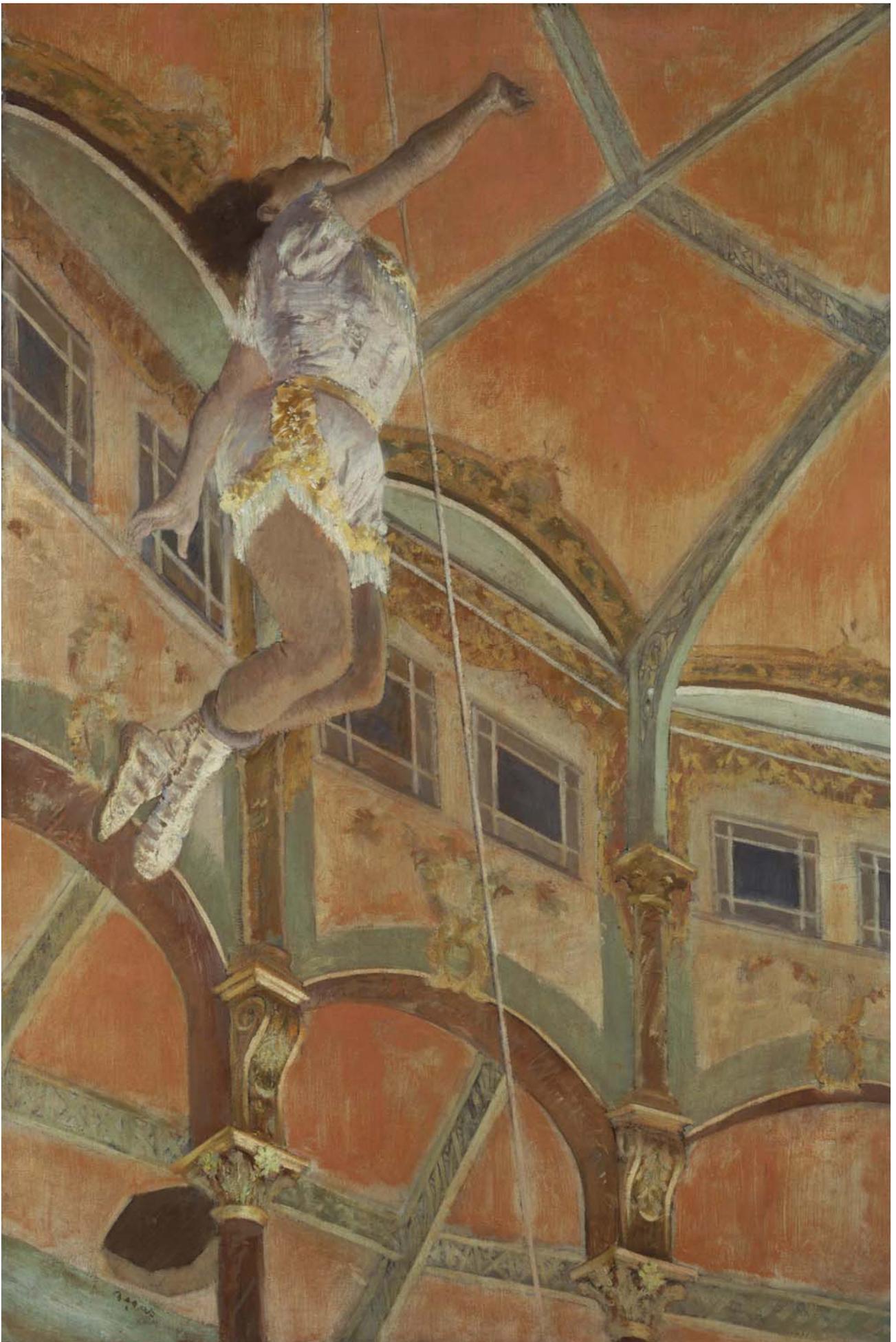
#### ACTIVITIES

##### Primary and secondary

- The impact of photography, and particularly the snapshot can be seen in the work of many artists working at the end of the nineteenth century. The lack of conventional composition in the snapshot is frequently replicated in paintings. Use a camera to quickly snap pictures of people around your school, college or house, and examine the way these shots differ from something more composed, such as a posed fashion shoot or a photograph of a sports team. What does the quickly-caught image suggest over the composed one?
- Using collage from magazines, photocopies or your own photographs, improvise the content of the painting by introducing other characters into the scene. Who will you bring into the picture? How does the atmosphere develop and change? Withdraw the additional characters one by one to reconstruct the original setting. Tell the story of the man and the woman in the light of the experience.

#### LINKS

This painting, initially titled *Dans un café*, was owned by British collector, Captain Henry Hill, who also possessed six other canvases by Degas – most of them of ballet dancers. *L'Absinthe* did not sell in Paris and was shipped to London and bought in England by Hill who lent it to the *Third Annual Exhibition of Modern Pictures* in Brighton where it caused a great stir in terms of both subject matter and its daring composition. His studies of the ballet dancer and other female subjects can be seen on [www.arthistory.upenn.edu/ashmolean/Degas/Degas\\_entry.html](http://www.arthistory.upenn.edu/ashmolean/Degas/Degas_entry.html)



EDGAR DEGAS *MISS LA LA AT THE CIRQUE FERNANDO* 1879 © THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

'A PAINTING REQUIRES A LITTLE MYSTERY, SOME VAGUENESS, SOME FANTASY. WHEN YOU ALWAYS MAKE YOUR MEANING PERFECTLY PLAIN YOU END UP BORING PEOPLE'.

Degas

## EDGAR DEGAS

### Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando 1879

*Oil on canvas 116.8 x 77.5 cm*

National Gallery

#### BACKGROUND

Degas made several studies of Miss La La, a circus artiste whose sensational feats were well received when she performed with her troupe in Paris at the Cirque Fernando in January 1879. Known as 'La Femme Canon' she held a canon on a chain between her teeth while hanging by her legs from a trapeze. The canon was then fired. She also performed this stunt in London to great acclaim. The *Westminster Review* wrote: 'During the past week an additional attraction has been added in the person of a dusky lady known as La La, whose feats of strength fairly eclipse anything and everything of the kind that has gone before. She does all that her muscular rivals have done and a great deal more. She has, we believe, already astonished all Paris and we have little doubt that her fame in London will rapidly spread'.

Like the ballet dancer, the circus performer had to push herself to the extremes of endurance in order to produce something which appeared effortlessly graceful. Here Miss La La crosses the ankles of her silken boots and extends her arms in an appearance of gravity-defying elegance. Something that we may not be immediately aware of today is how much of her body is on display. In an age when women's legs were always concealed the exposure of so much flesh must have added an extra frisson of excitement to her daring routine.

Degas shows her here being hoisted to the rafters of the circus pavilion by a rope attached to a device in her mouth. The choice of the circus as a subject, like the café-concert, reflects a shift in what was thought appropriate subject matter for art from 'elevated' history or myth to the activities of modern life. Degas himself was especially attracted to what was 'artificial' in contemporary subject matter. He claimed to a landscape painter he met at the circus: 'For you, natural life is necessary; for me, artificial life'. This interest reflected that of contemporary writers such as Edmond de Goncourt whose novel *The Zenganno Brothers*, which describes the skilled performance of circus acrobats, was greatly admired by Degas. Writers and painters alike were interested in the edges of society which offered an attractive contrast to the more conservative culture of the Parisian middle-classes.

Just as Degas was interested in portraying the more hidden and peripheral aspects of society, so in this picture he depicts the subject not from a conventional viewpoint – which would display her skills and produce a satisfying image – but from below, something his notebooks show he was interested in: 'After painting portraits from above, I am now going to paint some seen from below'. La Femme Canon herself provided a useful model for depicting this, although to a contemporary audience it must have seemed a rather awkward and incomplete moment.

#### DISCUSSION

##### Primary and secondary

- People used to 'run away to join the circus'. Why do you think that was? What do you think was the appeal of the circus? What is its image today?
- How can we compare circus acrobats to gymnasts? What do you think the differences are? Why were so many artists attracted to the circus and so few to sporting events?
- How does this painting compare to any performances you might have seen, for example at the circus, the fair, the theatre, films or street artists?

##### Secondary

- Degas has been described as essentially an abstract artist using the human figure onto which to project form and colour and movement. Do you agree with this judgment?
- Later in life Degas thought he had been too hard on the female figure; treating the women like specimens in the zoo. His aim had been to create a naturalism which was radical at the time – a sense that the sitter was unaware of being captured, of not posing for the picture. What is your opinion?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### Primary and secondary

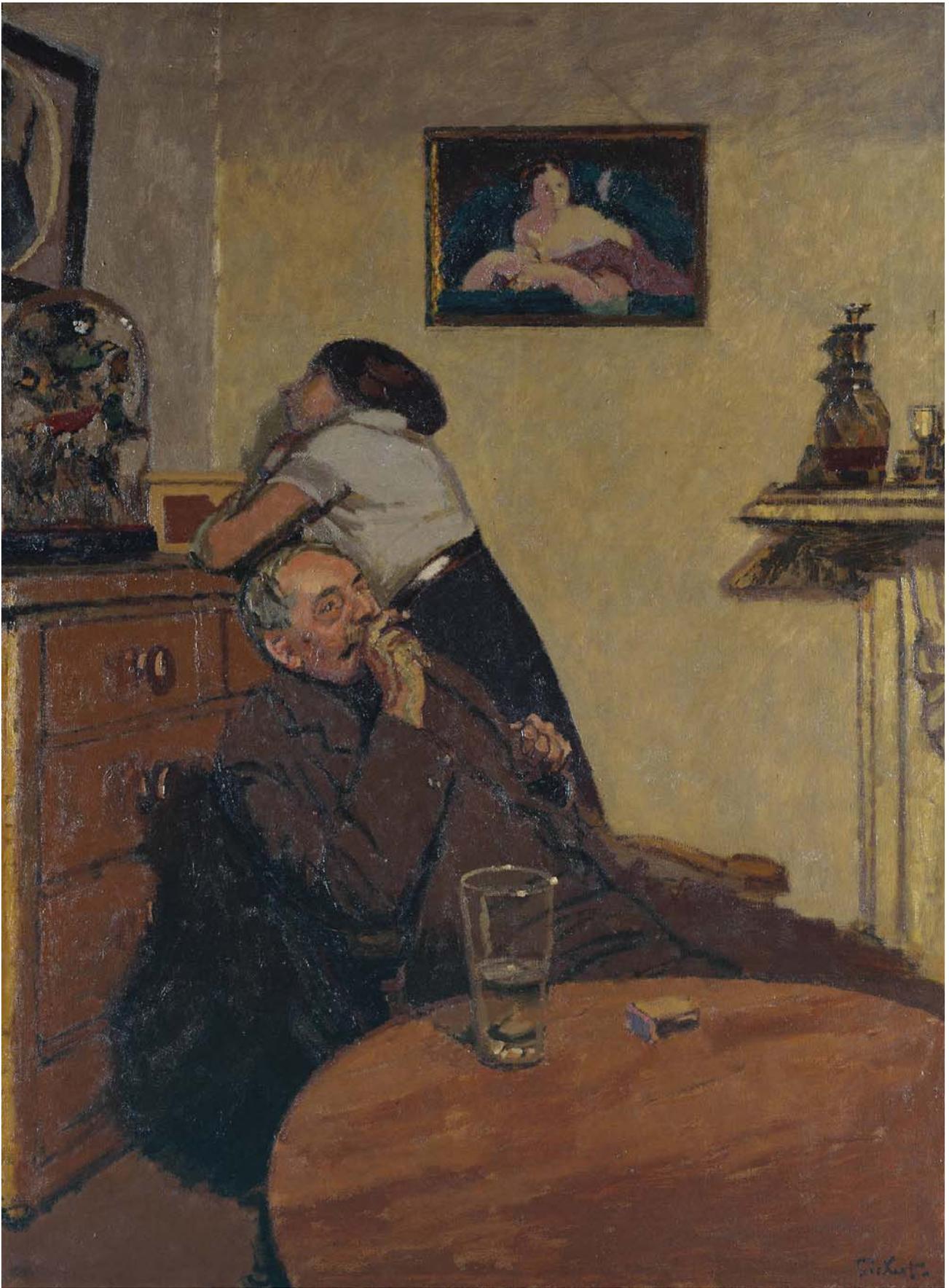
- Make your own drawing or painting of a familiar event from an unusual angle. How does it make you think about the event?
- Think of alternative places for Miss La La to be suspended from. Using collage, photographs, drawing or painting, from life or from your imagination, place this daring acrobat into other settings.

##### Secondary

- Draw a figure lying down from the angle of the feet facing you. The proportions you are familiar with will change. Seen from a particular viewpoint the foot might even seem longer than the leg. Is it a helpful way to look afresh at things which are familiar to us, such as the figure or the landscape?

#### LINKS

Degas was interested in the female figure in extremes of action – ballet dancer, acrobat, woman bathing, woman ironing, cleaning herself. You can find links at:  
[www.arthistory.upenn.edu/ashmolean/Degas/Degas\\_entry.html](http://www.arthistory.upenn.edu/ashmolean/Degas/Degas_entry.html)



WALTER RICHARD SICKERT *ENNUI* C1914 TATE © THE ESTATE OF WALTER R SICKERT 2005. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, DACS

'HIS PALETTE IS A POOR WRETCH IN FADED RAGS. EXQUISITE IN DIRTIED TONES, THE RANGE OF BLACK GREEN, CLAY GREEN, CAVIAR GREY, THE OVER RIPE AND STEWED BLUES AND PINKS, REDDISH, RECYCLED REDS, DEAD LILACS, IT IS STEEPED IN LONDON WINTERS, AND IN THE FOUL FLOW OF THE THAMES'.

Francois Monod, art critic, 1908

WALTER RICHARD SICKERT (1860–1942)

### **Ennui circa 1914**

*Oil on canvas 81.3 x 114.3 cm*

Tate

#### **BACKGROUND**

*Ennui* is a French word which means boredom or a lack of interest in life. This painting, one of Sickert's most famous, shows a middle-aged couple in a sombre late Victorian sitting room. They face in opposite directions for they have, and perhaps have long had, nothing to say to each other.

She faces the wall suggesting the limitations of her life and the small likelihood of it changing. She glances at a portrait which perhaps reminds her of other times and places. He looks out into the dull space which sums up his life and presumably at the door through which he has gone back and forward for years to an unsatisfying job. There is nothing on the table except a glass and some matches. Alcohol and tobacco are his only pleasures and source of brief respite from the daily grind.

Although they do not see, or relate to, each other, their bodies overlap. This is a married couple – their flesh has become one. The wife is behind and in the inferior standing position because this has been a conventional marriage in which she has served and provided for her husband and not risen above whatever status he has been able to achieve. The painting on the wall behind them of an attractive woman in a pose suggesting pleasure, serves to reinforce the sense of tedium and dreariness. The painted woman faces away from the wife and her gaze seems to meet that of the husband in the distance. She, rather than his wife, is the subject of his dreams. The life has gone from their marriage.

The novelist Virginia Woolf said of this painting: 'It is all over with them, one feels. The accumulated weariness of innumerable days has discharged its burden on them'.

#### **DISCUSSION**

##### **Primary and secondary**

- Ask your students if they can guess the meaning of the word *ennui* from the subject matter of the painting.
- How does the painting make you feel?
- How does the artist use colour to suggest mood and atmosphere?
- Virginia Woolf said, 'To me Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer... He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action. ...The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis; it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying'. Ask your students if they can tell the story of *Ennui*. Compare their tales. How and why do they differ?

##### **Secondary**

- Does it remind you of any novels, films or television programmes you are familiar with? How does the 'static' nature of the painting compare with these in its ability to convey emotion?

#### **ACTIVITIES**

##### **Primary**

- Act out the story of the painting. Begin with the scene as portrayed and then improvise some further dialogue and action.

##### **Primary and secondary**

- Cut out some pictures from magazines which seem to capture narrative moments. Ask your students to tell stories using these as starting points.
- There is a strong sense of mood in *Ennui*. Find some other paintings in the exhibition where you think the sense of atmosphere is as strong. Try to find examples of different moods.
- How does Sickert's painting compare to a very similar subject such as Vuillard's *Vallotton and Misia at Villeneuve*?

#### **LINKS**

Sickert's *Ennui* is owned by the Tate, and was posed for by people the artist knew. He made several versions of the same theme. The models were Hubby, a childhood friend of Sickert, and his wife Marie who was the artist's charlady. For more info visit [www.tate.org.uk/collection](http://www.tate.org.uk/collection). If you click on Search the Collection and enter *Ennui* you will be able to find two sketches he made for this painting. If you search by subject, you can find out more about artworks relating to this theme in the Tate Collection.



WALTER RICHARD SICKERT *MINNIE CUNNINGHAM AT THE OLD BEDFORD* 1892 TATE © THE ESTATE OF WALTER R SICKERT 2005. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, DACS

'I'M AN OLD HAND IN LOVE THOUGH I'M YOUNG IN YEARS'.

Words from a song performed by Minnie Cunningham

WALTER RICHARD SICKERT (1860–1942)

### Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford 1892

*Oil on canvas, 765 x 638 cm*

Tate

#### BACKGROUND

Minnie Cunningham was a popular music hall performer of the 1890s. She is shown here on the stage of the Old Bedford Music Hall in Camden Town. Sickert went there regularly and made dozens of small sketches of the effect of light and movement on the stage and auditorium. These became the basis of several of his paintings which reflect the interest of his friend Degas in the theatre and performance.

The entertainer is shown brightly lit, in profile, turning towards some flowers which are probably part of the set but also suggest a bouquet being offered to congratulate her on her performance. The flowers are a similar colour to her dress and hat but are not so brightly lit. Even nature is unable to compete with the star of the show. Similarly her height raises her above the natural part of the background so that her head is level with the buildings on top of it. She is the equal of the men who built these non-domestic spaces.

She is challenging conventional relationships between the sexes and the redness of her outfit reinforces this – red being the colour of danger and provocation. Her very body shape defies not only the conventional contemporary image of the domestic woman but also that of the woman of pleasure. Her look is one of disdain but there is also an element of isolation and loneliness. Although she has visibly succeeded in achieving a degree of independence and perhaps wealth, she has done so only in the fantasy world of the theatre. She is still an object to be gazed upon in a space which commands little respect.

#### DISCUSSION

Primary and secondary

- How many colours do you see in the painting? How does the artist use colour to achieve an effect? What are some of those effects?
- There seem to be three vertical spaces in the picture. From left to right: one with the flowers; one with the subject; and one which is 'empty'. How do you read the construction of the painting? Can you do so to 'tell a story'?
- Today television is the main source of entertainment. How does watching in private differ from being in a music hall or other space? What are the differences for the audience and for the performers?

Secondary

- What is the social status of entertainers and performers today? In what ways has this changed from the time of the painting? Why do think that is?

#### ACTIVITIES

Primary

- What do you think it feels like to stand on a stage before hundreds of people? Role-play a performance with your class. What is the effect of applause, cheering, and heckling?

Primary and secondary

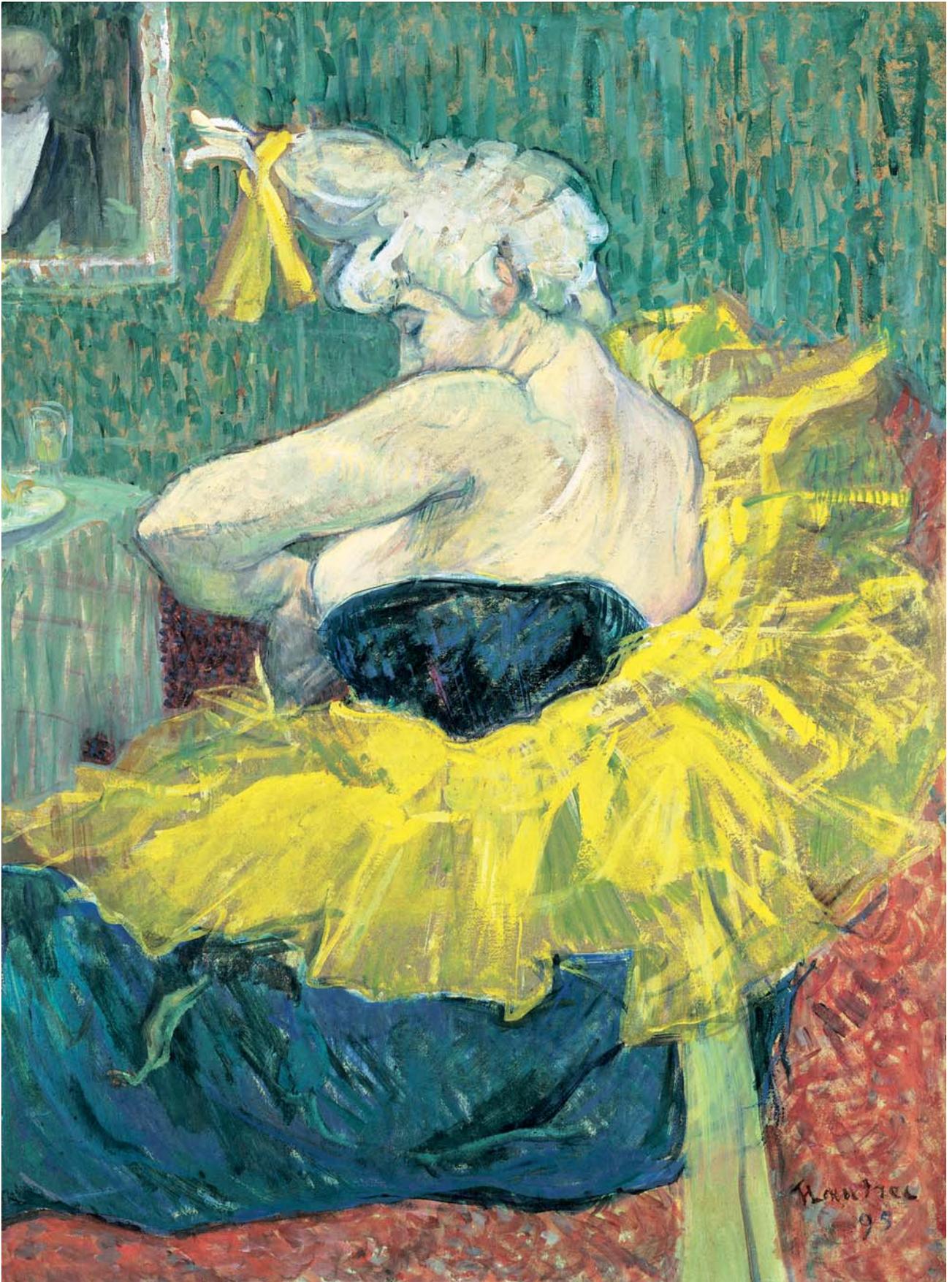
- Sickert appears to have caught Minnie Cunningham performing. Would a poster design for her performance look like this? How might you design a poster to advertise her show? What are the differences between an image made to attract viewers to a performance, and the depiction of a moment in the performance?
- Look for other paintings in the exhibition portraying the theatre. Find ones which concentrate on the performers and ones which show mainly the audience. Try to imagine being present at some of the performances. How does the mood differ from one to another?

Secondary

- How were women portrayed in paintings of this period? Find examples in the exhibition and compare them to how women are portrayed in the media today.

#### LINKS

Like *Ennui*, this painting is owned by the Tate. For more information visit [www.tate.org.uk/collection](http://www.tate.org.uk/collection) Click on Search the Collection and type in 'Minnie' under subject search. Here you can read that Sickert first exhibited this picture with the subtitle 'I'm an old hand at love, though I'm young in years', a quotation from one of her songs. Links with other paintings in the collection can also be found as well as links with Degas and French painting.



HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC *THE CLOWNESS CHA-U-KAO* 1895 © MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS  
PHOTO © RMN – H LEWANDOWSKI

'HIS HANDLING OF WATERCOLOUR, PASTEL, CHALK AND OIL, AND OF ALL MEDIUMS, IS MOST MASTERLY. HE FINDS THE MOST CURIOUS COLOUR COMBINATIONS AND HE RECORDS THEM IN THE MOST DISTINGUISHED FASHION. BUT FOR ME, THIS CONTINUOUS INSISTENCE ON UGLINESS, VULGARITY, AND ECCENTRICITY, THIS PAINTING...IS REALLY MONSTROUS'

Elizabeth Pennell, American art critic of *The Star* from 1890

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864–1901)

## The Clowness Chau-U-Keo Fastening her Bodice 1895

*Essence on cardboard*

Musée d'Orsay

### BACKGROUND

The Moulin Rouge was the best known of the many cabarets that opened towards the end of the nineteenth century, the period known as Paris's *La Belle Époque*, which was characterised – at least for the middle-classes – by prosperity, a sense of social freedom, and the availability of leisure time. It was renowned for the lavishness and variety of its presentations which bordered on the risqué and scandalous. Artists like Toulouse-Lautrec were drawn to the places like this because of their colour and animation, but also because of the different kinds of people who were able to mingle here in a way that was not possible elsewhere.

Chau-U-Keo was the kind of resourceful performer who went down well at such places. She was a dancer, acrobat, contortionist and all round music hall artiste. She always wore what appears to be a kind of clown's costume but is actually more of a parody entertainer's outfit, a kind of mixture of underwear and evening dress. Sometimes the performers would entertain patrons as they waited for entry or promenaded around or near the premises. This picture, however, captures a more private moment when she is getting ready to perform behind the scenes.

It looks like Chau-U-Keo has been spotted unawares. She has not been able to strike a pose or look her best. She is not yet fully dressed, caught in preparation – her glamorous façade almost complete. It is clear that she is no longer young, a fact that the artist reinforces by placing her large body side on to the viewer, barely fastened into her attire. The woman is framed alone, behind the scenes, rather than a participant in the glamour of the occasion.

The artist, whilst not unsympathetic to Chau-U-Kao, seems to give a hint of the reality that perhaps her great days are coming to an end. Her costume seems gaudy and ridiculous. She is in danger of becoming a clown, a figure of fun.

### DISCUSSION

Primary and secondary

- Because of his appearance Toulouse-Lautrec was himself an object of ridicule. Do you find evidence of this in this or other of his paintings?
- The clown's performance is about amusing the audience but often clowns are thought to be sad figures in their personal life. Why do you think that is?

Secondary

- It is alleged today that there are few roles for older women in films. Why do you think that is?
- Several of the artists in the exhibition seem concerned to show the hidden sides of public events. Why do they want to do this? What do they think it reveals about society at the time?

### ACTIVITIES

Primary and secondary

- Borrow some old clothes and dress up in them in strange and unusual combinations.
- Make your own drawing or painting using the mirror effect to make a contrast of age, wealth or social position.
- There are traditionally several different sorts of clowns in the European tradition. Try to find out about them and the different ways they perform. Put on your own performance.

### LINKS

Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec all painted female performers: acrobats, dancers at the Opera or Moulin Rouge, singers at the café-concert or music hall. Compare Chau-U-Keo with Jane Avril and the can-can dancers and with Miss La La.

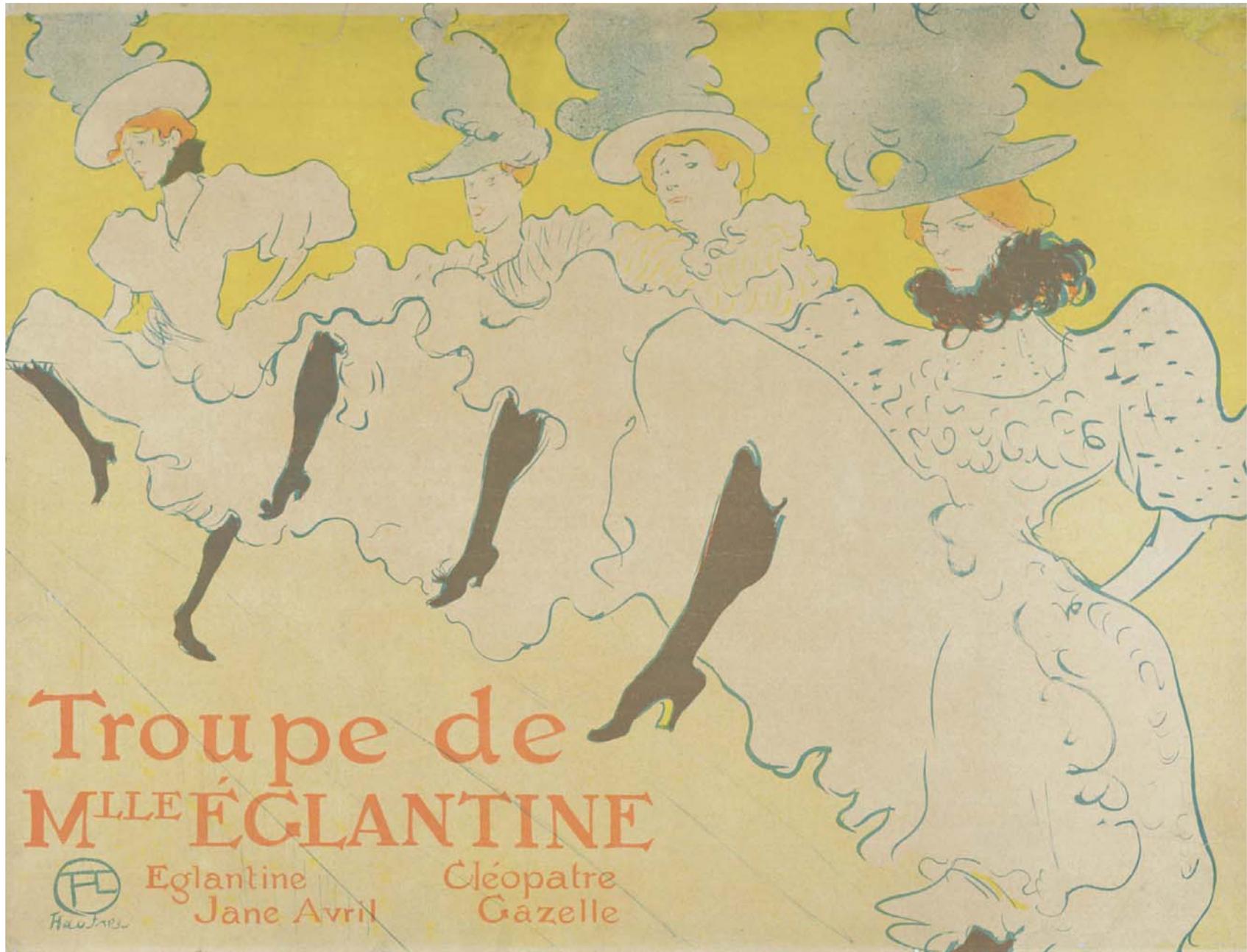
[www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/toulouse-lautrec\\_henri\\_de.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/toulouse-lautrec_henri_de.html)

[www.roland\\_collection.com](http://www.roland_collection.com) (14-minute film for 14 +) Roland collection of films and videos on art

[www.yaledailynews.com/article](http://www.yaledailynews.com/article)

[www.national.gallery.ca/english/default\\_2197.htm](http://www.national.gallery.ca/english/default_2197.htm)

[www.highbeam.com/library/search](http://www.highbeam.com/library/search)



HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC LA TROUPE DE MADEMOISELLE EGLANTINE 1896 © VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

## 'WORK HARD! YOU'VE GOT A SPLENDID TALENT'

Degas shouted to Toulouse-Lautrec as he passed him on the street

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864–1901)

**La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine 1896**

*lithograph 617 x 804 mm*

Victoria and Albert Museum

**BACKGROUND**

*La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine* is a promotional poster. It was commissioned by Jane Avril, one of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's favourite dancers, to advertise her tour to London. She is featured in this work as the first dancer on the left. Next to her, from left to right, are the rest of the French dancing group: Cléopâtre, Eglantine (Wild Rose) and Gazelle. They are shown performing the cancan, wearing sensational hats, a flurry of petticoats and red-brown stockings. The performance however, was not as well received by London audiences. British writer Arthur Symons thought Jane Avril had an 'air of depraved virginity'.

As a poster, it was printed in multiples to advertise the touring dancers. It is interesting to see how Toulouse-Lautrec used colour: a broad sweep of yellow for the background and under the heel of the third dancer. Orange overlays the yellow to give a deeper colour to the dancers' hair and to provide a sliver of colour to the brown of the stockings which is picked up by the feather boa and choker of the dancers at the end of the line. Orange is also the colour used for the lettering 'Troupe de Mlle Eglantine' in which Jane Avril plays the principle part. She was popular at many venues in Paris and abroad, with a touring schedule that ranged from comedy to tragic roles. When not performing, she was part of Parisian literary circles and a spectator of the café concert scene. Lautrec was a friend and she appears several times in his art, as a beautiful melancholic withdrawn into her own emotions, or wrapped up in the frenzy of her dancing.

At a time when women's bodies were concealed, and only the face and hands visible (and these too were frequently veiled and gloved) the view of legs being kicked up in the air to reveal petticoats and bloomers must have been shockingly racy. The music is energetic and distinctive: to hear Offenbach's work is to visualize high kicks, with increasing energy and speed, ending in a series of splits. The broad diagonal sweep of the composition provides an energy suited to the exuberance of the cancan dance which takes its name from the French word *chuhut*, meaning chaos or disorder. It's an iconic feature of fin-de-siècle Paris.

Toulouse-Lautrec is perhaps best known for his posters. They show the influence of Japanese prints in their simplicity and bold 'calligraphic' line. They caused a sensation in Paris and were taken down by collectors and dealers almost as soon as they were put up. They can also be seen as an early example of the cult of celebrity in the way they made stylish and stylized representations of popular 'stars' – singers and dancers – immediately available to the general public.

**DISCUSSION**

Primary and secondary

- Offenbach's music immediately brings to mind the cancan and represents Paris of the 1890s. Which music and dance do you think would best represent the 1990s or first decade of this century for people a hundred years from now?
- Toulouse-Lautrec was one of the most innovative poster designers of his age. Discuss the radical compositions of his posters. For example, look at *Confetti* 1894, which shows disembodied hands throwing confetti onto the young woman below.
- Much of his work is lithography. Discuss this as a medium; its techniques, advantages and disadvantages.
- How do the works of British artists William Tom Warrener or Charles Conder compare to those of Toulouse-Lautrec?

**ACTIVITIES**

Primary and secondary

- Find and listen to Offenbach's cancan.
- Find examples of dance music which immediately conjures up a dance in the mind's eye.
- Look for other paintings in the exhibition that show the cancan. (The cancan is also the subject of works by William Tom Warrener and Charles Conder, British artists working in Paris during the 1880s and 1890s). Try to imagine the sounds, smells and tastes that the artists must have been immersed in as they found material for their work. Which aspects of the dance or the crowd does each artist focus on?
- Toulouse-Lautrec is best remembered for his rapid pastel sketches in coloured chalks and for his posters featuring subjects shown from dramatically radical angles. Try making a pastel sketch in seven minutes, five minutes and three minutes examining what happens to the image within an increasingly restricted time period. Make a poster of a performer from an unusual angle – from above, below or from an acute angle.

**LINKS**

Mark Hudson reviewing this exhibition in *The Telegraph Review* provides an interesting take on the participation of English artists in Paris during the 1880s and 90s. See:

[www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main)

The British artists William Tom Warrener and Charles Conder found Parisian cabarets irresistible. They visited the Moulin Rouge almost nightly, making rapid portrait sketches of cancan dancers and absinthe drinkers. For more on Conder and his relationship with Toulouse-Lautrec and their Parisian haunts visit:

<http://www.modjourn.brown.edu/Image/Conder/Conder.htm>