



Fig.80
The Flamingos
1907
(Detail of no.24)

Fig.81
Exotic Landscape
1908
Private Collection,
New York



The Peaceful Exotic

‘Come to Mexico!

On the high plains the tulip trees bloom

Tentacled creepers form the mane of the sun

The palette and brushes of a painter they say

Colours as deafening as gongs,

Rousseau has been there

There his life became dazzling’

Blaise Cendrars¹

Like the soldiers he had depicted so carefully in *The Artillerymen* c.1893–5 (no.21), in undertaking compulsory military service, Rousseau had once worn uniform; but unlike many of his contemporaries, he never left France. There was a significant military presence in Mexico from the years of the Second Empire, well into the Third Republic, but contrary to the myth developed by Apollinaire, Salmon and many more, Rousseau did not participate. His interview with Alexandre in 1910 confirmed the fact that his voyages had gone no further than the Jardin des Plantes.² Perhaps, given this information, it is no surprise that his images of distant lands – including *The Waterfall* 1910 (no.23) with its small antelope and gently running water – should convey a distinct sense of the familiar.

However, as Christopher Green has shown in the present catalogue, Rousseau

did not construct such extraordinary scenes verbatim from an existing language of exoticism. The animals in his pictures are far from being faithful sketches of those in the city's zoological collections. No more are the lush plants, the exotic foliage, true to exact horticultural varieties. When The Museum of Modern Art's Daniel Catton Rich asked a Professor of Botany from the University of Chicago to identify the verdure in Rousseau's pictures, he could draw no firm conclusions. In Rousseau's work, the expert explained, 'The plants are conventionalised and most of them are difficult to identify'.³ Thus, for example, the tent-shaped ones shown in *The Waterfall* might equally be Yucca, a 'New World' plant, or Dracena, an 'Old World' variety. Perhaps, in paintings that are outlets of fantasy, they could be both simultaneously.

Since they do relate to identifiable plant types, it is likely that Rousseau had studied tropical foliage from life, an idea that contemporary accounts support. Weber recalled that, upon a large sheet of cardboard on his studio wall, Le Douanier had mounted a whole array of drawings. Many of these featured the Jardin des Plantes, its birds, swans, animals and flowers.⁴ It may be that Rousseau made sketches in the hot-houses but, unfortunately, it is impossible to know for sure. Despite the enormous number of drawings that Rousseau produced and exhibited – over forty featured in the 1911 retrospective alone – few examples of his draughtsmanship survive. There is evidence, however, that Rousseau considered nature vitally important to artistic practice. Max Weber remembered how, even when working on other subjects, Rousseau considered it important to keep some greenery close by for inspiration.⁵ Likewise, in a letter, Le Douanier urged Weber to 'follow nature at every stage', while Uhde described how he collected leaves from the cemetery to take back and study in his studio for form and colour.⁶

Clearly though, this was not simply a process of recording nature, for, as he told Alexandre, he always reworked motifs in the studio. He also, as Christopher Green's essay shows with the example of *Banana Harvest* 1907–10 (fig.33), occasionally worked from photographs of jungle foliage (see p.43). In brief, in painting his exotic havens, he continued to adapt his 'sources' according to his wishes. The canvases in this section are at once a blend of the observed and the imagined, the result of primary and secondary viewing, collages of disparate information. They present a heady combination of the tangible and the fantastic.

In an age of colonial expansion, in the popular press and elsewhere, images of Western man at ease in the jungle were manifold. This was the period of large-scale expeditions; many great explorers made their names in the years spanned by Rousseau's career. However, with a few rare exceptions, only groups of animals populate Le Douanier's idyllic jungle scenes. The stars of his *Monkeys in the Jungle* 1910 (no.25), his *Exotic Landscape* 1908 (fig.81) and the *Tropical Forest with Monkeys* 1910 (no.27), are all groups of primates. However, if these animals are not human, they are as European as Rousseau's portrait sitters. Some of the creatures – such as the flamingos in the canvas of the same name of 1907 (no.24), or the pair of Himalayan 'semnopathèque' in his *Monkeys in the Jungle* – are visual quotations from the *Bêtes sauvages* album that Rousseau kept in his



Fig.82
Marcel Monnier
Camp at Dibi (Sanwi) Binger
Mission from the Ivory Coast
to the Sudan, 1891–2 (detail)

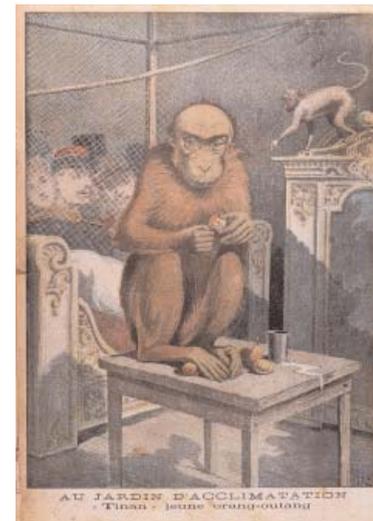


Fig.83
Exotic Landscape
1910
The Norton Simon Foundation

Fig.84
'Tinan', *Le Petit Journal*,
20 December 1896

studio.⁷ The pose of the baboon, in the 1910 *Exotic Landscape* (fig.83), might similarly be that of the orang-utan in the Jardin d'acclimation as depicted by *Le Petit Journal* (fig.84). But these 'wild animals' are Western not only in the sense of their picture-book pedigree.

Interestingly, many of the animals in Rousseau's images of the jungle at peace have human faces. This is strikingly the case in certain images – particularly the 1910 *Exotic Landscape*. If Emmanuel Frémiet's *Gorilla* (fig.26) played out an essentially human fantasy, then Rousseau's animals did likewise. In certain of these images, such as the 1910 *Exotic Landscape*, the jungle is a sanctuary. Somewhat ironically, it becomes a place of retreat, an escape from the 'jungle' of Paris; not unlike the artist's suburban landscapes. These locations offer freedom from the everyday grind of civilised life. His monkeys sit on the grass, just like the people he painted in his *View of the Fortifications* 1896 (no.7). Likewise, the group of monkeys in the 1910 *Exotic Landscape* peek out from behind the leaves, in a similar way to the courting couple in *Rendezvous in the Forest* 1889 (no.14). Hence, in these jungle scenes, the tropical forest is no more threatening than the woodland of France. To compare the serenity of *Two Monkeys in the Jungle* 1909 (no.26) with the eerie intensity of *Carnival Evening* 1889 (no.15) might even suggest that it is less so. As in his early portrait-landscapes, Rousseau had awarded his subjects with attributes, so too, in his images of the tranquil forest, he painted his animals with oranges. The 1910 *Exotic Landscape*, *Two Monkeys in the Jungle* and *Monkeys in the Jungle* are all constructed in this way and, as a device, these playthings emphasise the quasi-human appearance of the animals. Rousseau's monkeys here are not 'wild' beasts and, if they are, they are no more 'savage' than Rousseau's depictions of children with toys.

Of all the artist's animals, perhaps the most 'civilised' in appearance, if not in behaviour, are the monkeys in the 1906 canvas known as *The Merry Jesters* 1906 (no.28). Here, the artist defined the faces particularly clearly, while the relationships between the figures are equally well determined, from the two main characters to the animal they taunt with a stick, from their companion crouching in the undergrowth to a smaller animal alone in the near distance. In a forest clearing, watched by an owl, the group upset a milk bottle; the scene captures the moment as its contents empty. These are not performing animals, but they engage in some kind of strange performance.

A question arises: why are the 'Merry Jesters' playing with a milk bottle in the middle of the jungle? In the forest setting, despite the reigning calm, their presence is uncanny. It seems that there ought to be some kind of understandable logic to the scene; yet if any such logic exists, it escapes the viewer. Describing the scene, one critic asked himself in print whether he had really seen such a thing, while others were simply unimpressed.⁸ Even the hanging committee at the 1906 Salon d'Automne (where the work was first shown) appears to have found the work difficult. They placed it in an obscure corner where it was hardly visible, a choice that the conservative critic Camille Mauclair praised in an ironic write-up for *Art et Décoration*. Rousseau had been set aside justifiably, he concluded, implying that the jury had been wrong to award a prominent place to his *Hungry Lion throws itself on the Antelope* the previous year. On that occasion, he explained, 'things went a bit far'.⁹

But how, in its turn, could *The Merry Jesters* go too far? Perhaps Rousseau's peaceful jungles, peopled by quasi-human animals, unsettled contemporary viewers because they blurred the boundaries between the different species. This was certainly part of their appeal for the avant garde. Many intellectuals of Rousseau's day were interested in the ideas of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who in his book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) had called for a return to instinctive behaviour, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had aligned the instinctive with childhood. Rousseau's monkeys certainly appear to behave instinctively: a contemporary critic, with an air of both intrigue and distaste, observed how the upturned milk bottle 'allows the monkeys to give themselves up to their natural taste for face-pulling and facetiousness'.¹⁰ Some years later, in an article in the review *Action*, other peaceful exotic landscapes by Rousseau would illustrate an article that questioned the superiority of the human race, challenging the Darwinism of contemporary science.¹¹ Rousseau's animals, like the fantasy his Jungle pictures prompted, encouraged viewers to identify with something other than dominant cultural norms. It was in such a way that André Salmon described Le Douanier's appeal for a new generation of painters in 1912. For them, Rousseau was 'an uncle from black-white America', who could help them to find their inner selves.¹²

With the exception of *The Merry Jesters*, few contemporary critics wrote about Rousseau's 'peaceful exotic'. Perhaps it was because the connotations those images provoked were less than relaxing. Louis Vauxcelles identified the owl in the tree as the owl of Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (1896), one that surveyed the 'anthropomorphics who have a very nasty air about them'.¹³ To Vauxcelles, Rousseau's image was one that, like Jarry's infamous play, celebrated the chaos and absurdity of the human condition.

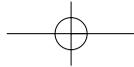
Turn-of-the-century Western society was anxious about 'Other' kinds of culture; understanding this helps illuminate the tensions caused by Rousseau's images of the 'peaceful exotic'. The Paris World Fairs of 1889 and 1900, with their colonial villages and foreign pavilions, at once provoked nervous fascination and appeased visitor worries. At the Jardin d'acclimatation, on a more regular basis, similar displays drew great crowds. Such images cannot but shock the present-day viewer: Europeans peering into enclosures, swathed in extravagantly conservative dress, contrast sharply with the semi-naked black 'exhibits' they scrutinise. These displays, through inherent racism and the underlining of 'difference', sublimated white 'civilisation'. Rousseau's jungles, peacefully peopled by European animals, had the potential to do just the opposite.

Rousseau, himself a Parisian, was nonetheless an attentive visitor to the 1889 World Fair; there, like so many others, he must have found the sights astounding. The event even inspired him to write a play upon the theme. It would be wrong to suggest that the artist was not a participant in the lamentable ethnographic tourism of the day¹⁴ but, notably, the comical country visitors he describes taking a tour of the attractions in his play make no mention of the African or Oceanic displays. Two other exhibits fixate them: the Annamese village and waxwork figures of Bretons like themselves in the Palais du Trocadéro. There, the characters compare appearances, noting similarities and

differences. Initially, however, they have difficulty identifying either: they compare both the Annamites and the Bretons to themselves and become confused. Perhaps this unease is comparable to that provoked by *The Equatorial Jungle* 1909 (no.29). What exactly, is the creature hidden behind the palm leaves? It is at once recognisable and strange. In such a way, Rousseau's peaceful exotic, symptomatic of an era of encounters, raised an important consideration: was there such a great difference between the French and the 'Other'?



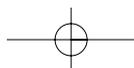
Fig.85
Postcard, 'Ashantis - The Meal'
(detail)



No.23
The Waterfall
1910
Oil on canvas 116.2 x 150.2 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago. The
Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial



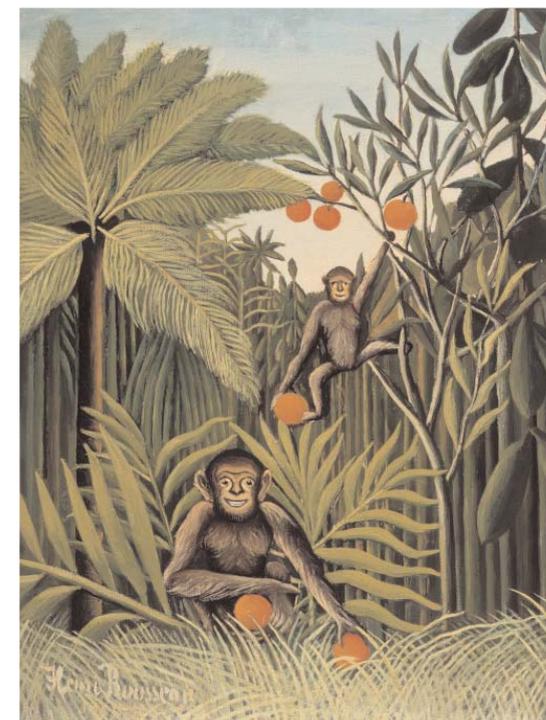
No.24
The Flamingos
1907
Oil on canvas 114 x 165.1 cm
Collection of Joan Whitney Payson





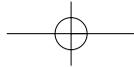
No.25
Monkeys in the Jungle
1910
Oil on canvas 114 x 162 cm
Private Collection

No.26
Two Monkeys in the Jungle
1909
Oil on canvas 64.8 x 50 cm
John Whitney Payson



No.27
Tropical Forest with Monkeys
1910
Oil on canvas 129.5 x 162.5 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington.
John Hay Whitney Collection





No.28
The Merry Jesters
1906
Oil on canvas 145.7 x 113.3 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art
The Louise and Walter
Arensberg Collection

No.29
The Equatorial Jungle
1909
Oil on canvas
Support: 140.6 x 129.5 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Chester Dale Collection

