

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS LARGE ROUSSEAU EXHIBITION

The largest exhibition ever held in this country of the works of Henri Rousseau, the French customs collector who taught himself to paint during the latter part of the 19th century and became one of the masters of modern art, will open at the Museum of Modern Art Wednesday, March 18, and will remain on view through May 3. This large retrospective exhibition of approximately fifty works dating from 1886 to 1910 will include every phase of his art from his realistic little scenes of Paris to the canvases of the lush jungles which grew only in his imagination and eventually brought him fame.

The exhibition has been directed by Daniel Catton Rich, Director of Fine Arts of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a collaboration of the Institute and the Museum of Modern Art. It was shown in Chicago at the Art Institute during January and February.

Mr. Rich has written a ten-thousand-word essay for the Rousseau book, with 52 halftones and 4 color plates, which the Museum is publishing simultaneously with the exhibition. Both book and exhibition will focus the attention of the American public on a painter who can no longer be regarded merely as the man who influenced cubism or as a quaint primitive but, with Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh, as one of the most influential painters of the late 19th century.

Shortly after Rousseau's death in 1910, New York saw the first one-man exhibition of the artist's work ever held. It was arranged at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery "291" by Rousseau's friend, the American artist Max Weber, who has lent several paintings and drawings to the present exhibition. In recent years many Rousseau canvases have found their way into private and public collections in the United States; so it has been possible, in spite of present conditions, to assemble a large number of his important paintings for the exhibition.

His last great work, The Dream, lent by Sidney Janis of New York, will climax the exhibition with an entire wall to itself. It is perhaps the most memorable of Rousseau's jungle pictures. The Waterfall, a second jungle masterpiece of 1910, has been lent by the Art Institute of Chicago. Entirely different in style and subject is A Game of Football, 1908, in which four mustached athletes disport themselves in striped jerseys.

Two great pictures of an earlier period are among the outstanding canvases in the exhibition. Storm in the Jungle, 1891, lent by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Clifford of Philadelphia, shows a tiger leaping through underbrush as lightning streaks the sky. Contrasted in mood to this tempestuous jungle scene is The Sleeping Gypsy, owned by the Museum of Modern Art. In this masterpiece of hallucinatory power, a pale moon looks down over sand dune and desert upon a lion silhouetted against a blue sky and the dark figure of the gypsy asleep in a multi-colored garment.

In the catalog Mr. Rich interweaves with Rousseau's life an analysis of his art. He writes in part as follows:

"Henri Julien Felix Rousseau was born in Laval, the chief town of the Department of Mayenne in northwestern France on May 20, 1844. His family was poor, his father a humble dealer in tin ware. Though records are lacking, it is probable that in 1862, at the age of eighteen, he was sent to Mexico in the service of the ill-starred Emperor Maximilian as a musician in a military band. Returning to France in 1866, he was demobilized the next year and became a lawyer's clerk. Soon afterward he may have entered the customs service, but in the War of 1870 he was back in the army with the rank of sergeant. In 1871 he was given employment in a toll station on the outskirts of Paris, not as a customhouse officer (douanier) but as a minor inspector. All this time he had been compelled, as he says himself, 'to follow a career quite different from that to which his artistic tastes invited him.' Around 1885, when about forty, he retired on a tiny pension, determined to become known as a professional artist.

"No painting dated before 1880 exists. But Rousseau had probably drawn and painted all his life. He was entirely self-taught, not because he scoffed at instruction (he later founded an 'academy' and gave lessons) but because he had been too poor to enroll in an art school. The first little pictures that survive show him working in the amateur tradition of the 'eighties in France. Rousseau began with memories of anonymous portraits, flower pieces, little romantic landscapes.... Had Rousseau stopped here he would have been only a forgotten figure in a minor tradition. Instead he chose to teach himself more. He now determined to observe the objective world about him with penetrating eyes and to seek counsel from above. As he himself expresses it, he 'worked alone without any master but nature and some advice from Gerome and Clement.'

"The artist was living with his second wife in the most humble surroundings of the Plaisance quarter in Paris. He did all sorts of small jobs to eke out his pension, such as serving as inspector of sales for a newspaper, writing letters and acting as legal adviser to the poor of the district. His wife opened a little stationery shop where his pictures were always on sale and he painted a certain number of portraits of his neighbors. For a time he taught drawing in a municipal school.

"At first the age denied him. Not that his pictures were ignored even when skyed or tucked away in the coldest corners of the Independents where, between the years 1886 and 1890, he showed twenty works. The public found them out and laughed uproariously. Critics poked fun at him. Rousseau did not falter. Industrious he collected his press notices and pasted them into a book. Next to one he noted: 'Wrote to the Journalist for his insulting article. Made excuses.' But if the public was amused and critics misunderstood, a few artists took a second look at these paintings, which seemed so opposed in style and feeling to the main currents of their day.

"By 1895 Rousseau was known to many leading artists.

Through constant exhibition in the Independents (where every year he trundled his canvases to the Salon in a little cart) he had slowly won the interest of a new generation beginning to be concerned with invented rather than observed forms.... The enormous and mural-like painting, The Hungry Lion, shown at the new Autumn Salon of 1905, suddenly focused attention upon the painter. This was the famous Salon of the Fauves....

"In 1907 commenced the fullest period of Rousseau's life. His dream had come true. At the age of sixty-three he found himself in the center of the most advanced group of artists and writers in Paris, admired and recognized by the intellectual world.... But nothing turned his head. He still remained the ingenuous 'artist-painter,' accepting applause with the same tranquillity with which he had met abuse. Though he had acquired a dealer, Joseph Brummer, who was able to sell a few works for him now and then for small sums, he remained poor all his life, hardly knowing (as his letters prove) where his next meal was coming from. 'Having my rent to pay, then a big bill at my color merchant's, I am very short of money and this evening I have only 15 centimes for supper.'

"In spite of increasing fame Rousseau's last years were saddened by one disappointment. At sixty-three he fell madly in love with a dour widow ten years younger who seems to have encouraged him for a while, then thrown him over. In vain Rousseau wrote her passionate letters and squandered what money he could get on jewelry.... At his death he left an unexecuted document, willing her most of his pictures, but she did not even attend his funeral.

"On September 4, 1910, he died at a hospital in Paris at the age of sixty-six. His friends were out of the city and only seven people attended his funeral, among them Paul Signac, President of the Independents. A year later a tombstone was set up by Robert Delaunay, Apollinaire and M. Quéval, his landlord. And in 1913 Brancusi, and the painter Ortiz de Zarate engraved on the stone the epitaph that Apollinaire had written:

'Hear us, kindly Rousseau.
We greet you,
Delaunay, his wife, Mondieur Quéval and I.
Let our baggage through the Customs to the sky,
We bring you canvas, brush and paint of ours,
During eternal leisure, radiant
As you once drew my portrait you shall paint
The face of stars.'"

Individual lenders to the exhibition include Dr. and Mrs. Harry Bakwin, Dr. and Mrs. Frank Conroy, the Chester Dale Collection, Morton R. Goldsmith, Mrs. William Hale Harkness, Sidney Janis, Mr. and Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn, William S. Paley, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Louis E. Stern, and Max Weber of NEW YORK; James Thrall Soby of FARMINGTON, CONN.; Mrs. Patrick C. Hill of WASHINGTON, D. C.; Mr. and Mrs. Walter S. Brewster and Col. Robert R. McCormick of CHICAGO, ILLINOIS; Mr. and Mrs. Henry Clifford of PHILADELPHIA, PA.; and Dr. Franz Meyer of ZURICH, SWITZERLAND.