

# HENRI ROUSSEAU

## (1844-1910)

### ARTIST BACKGROUND

Henri Rousseau was a self-taught artist who is most widely known for his exotic jungle scenes. His naïve and imaginative work put him in the classification of primitive artist. He is considered one of the most important forerunners of the Surrealist movement because of the dream-like quality of his paintings.

Rousseau was born in Laval, France in 1844. He was initially interested in music and even won competitions for vocal music. After serving in the military, he became a toll collector for the city of Paris. His friends nicknamed him “Le Douanier,” which means customs official, a position far grander than the one he held. He was always struggling with poverty and tragedy, but painting was his passion. He sketched constantly at his toll station and then painted at home on Sundays. He retired from this job and started painting full-time at the age of 49. He often visited botanical gardens and hothouses to sketch exotic plants and went to the zoo to draw the wild animals. These visits inspired the famous scenes he painted that are so recognizable today. He painted huge canvases and enlarged the actual size of the plants he sketched to create these imaginative scenes.

Rousseau never actually visited any of the exotic locales that his paintings seem to represent. His work was entirely imaginative. When he attempted to exhibit his work, the critics ridiculed it as immature and child-like and certainly not the work of a master. He lived in poverty because he did not have the training or social standing of many of his contemporaries. He was, however, admired by the Parisian avant-garde artists and writers. They appreciated his work for its simultaneously primitive and modern qualities. Rousseau was always convinced that he was the greatest painter of all time. He would make up stories about his life so convincingly that he eventually began to believe them himself. He gave his grandchild a painting once and told him, “Hold on to this. One day it will be worth a hundred thousand francs.” Today his paintings are worth far more than that and are shown in the greatest museums of the world.

## REPRODUCTIONS

*Myself, Portrait-Landscape*, 1890, Oil on canvas, 56 x 43 inches

This self-portrait of Henri Rousseau was a statement to let everyone know that he was a master artist. He has represented himself nicely dressed with a graying beard and serious expression. He seems larger than life standing in front of the Eiffel Tower and a flag-decked ship. The balloon is thought to represent the future--his great future in the history of art. When this painting was first exhibited it was the laughing stock of the show.

*Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897, Oil on canvas, 51 x 79

This is Rousseau's most famous and recognizable work. Although it is not one of the jungle scenes for which he is well known, it displays the unique, eerie, and dream-like quality that places him in the position of being the forerunner of surrealism. This painting has a rather hypnotic folk quality. It is the absurdity of the image that makes this such an interesting work. A gypsy is lying asleep outside in the desert while a lion just casually stares at her. Why does the lion not attack her? Maybe the woman is just dreaming about the lion.

*Surprised!*, 1891, Oil on canvas, 51 x 63 inches

This was the first time Rousseau painted exotic vegetation. Originally titled, *Storm in the Jungle*, this is a large painting. He used a pantograph to enlarge the original sketch, and then he simply colored it in. He did this with all of his scenes thus showing his lack of training as an artist. These works are fantasy images. He believed in himself and his work so much, that when he painted frightening images such as this, he would scare himself and have to open a window for air! The plants he saw in the botanical gardens in Paris inspired the flora he painted here. He vastly enlarged them to create his own version of a jungle.

*The Waterfall*, 1910, Oil on canvas, 46 x 59 inches

Painted in the last year of the artist's life, this represents a departure from the rather violent images of his previous works. This is a serene painting of a tribal person wading in a stream by a waterfall while antelopes stand nearby. If we look closely it appears that the person is holding a branch out as if to be offering it to the deer. It does continue the absurd concept of earlier works, however, as the antelopes would never relax with humans in the wild. The plants and trees are again oversized and painted in wide, flat brushstrokes with very little shading.

This, and the fact that he lines up the plants in flat groupings, gives the painting an overall stage-like effect.

***Tropical Forest with Monkeys***, 1910, Oil on canvas, 51 x 64 inches

At first glance this appears to be another serene image, yet if we look closely behind the brilliant red leaves in the foreground, we can see a large, rather ominous looking snake slithering towards the monkeys. The monkeys seem to be aware of the snake, but not overly concerned. Also, when looked at carefully, what do we see the monkeys doing? They are fishing in the stream with fishing poles. This seems like an absurd concept, but maybe Rousseau is reflecting the intelligence of monkeys. The other unreal idea is the fact that we see several species of monkeys together. It was more important to the artist to show us the different monkeys than to worry about whether they would be hanging out fishing together in nature. The vegetation is beautifully painted in this piece. Rousseau painted similar species of plants in horizontal lines instead of intermixing them throughout the painting.

## **PROJECT**

Need: Pencils, heavy paper, oil pastels

Using pencils, have the students sketch a jungle scene with animals. Try to have them follow the style of Rousseau with the large, repeating shapes of the grass, trees and flowers. Suggest that they use a horizontal line to show depth and leave some area to show sky. When they are pleased with their design, let them color it in with the oil pastels. Show them how to layer and blend their pastels for shading.

## **SOURCES**

[www.kinderart.com](http://www.kinderart.com), infoplease.com

National Gallery of Art online

Henri Rousseau by Dora Vallier

Henri Rousseau by Dorean Ehrlich

History of Modern Art by H.H. Arnason

**A copy of Dropping in on Rousseau, by Pam Stephens and Jim McNeill, is available in the Art Appreciation closet for use by Art Appreciation volunteers.**