

JUNGLES HENRI IN PARIS ROUSSEAU

Poster pack for teachers

This pack can be used to plan a visit to the exhibition and as a stimulus for classroom discussion. Our aim is to provide a useful resource beyond the life of the exhibition and to support varied classroom projects. The pack will equally be useful for teachers who cannot visit Tate Modern as the images on the five large-size posters have been carefully chosen to give an overall flavour of the works and themes in the exhibition.

Each poster measures 59.4 x 42cm (so that when folded, there are four A4 panels)
On the back of each poster is photocopiable information, including:

- Work in Focus with discussion points
- Classroom activities for primary and secondary level
- Links with QCA Schemes of Work
- Links with other works in the exhibition, with colour images
- Links with contemporary artists and artworks

Introduction

Henri Rousseau's biography has tended to dominate discussion of his work, to the extent that he is probably as widely known as 'Le Douanier' (Customs Official) as by his own name. Pejorative or not, this nickname is not in fact accurate. Rousseau never achieved this rank; he was a lowly 'gabelou' (toll collector) in the Octroi (Paris Customs Office) until he retired early to devote himself to his art. However, it does give some indication about Rousseau's position as somewhat of a conundrum in the history of modern art. A self-taught artist, he had great aspirations to become an academic Salon painter and a public government-sponsored artist, yet it was the avant-garde who championed his work, revelling in the very naïvety that many mocked. His visions of exoticism in the jungle were in fact visions of his mind, culled from plants and animals he could see in Parisian hothouses and the zoo. Rousseau saw his compositions as images of reality, yet it is precisely their stylisation and awkwardness that has appealed to so many in the days since his work was laughed at in the Salon des Artistes Indépendants. His methodology of collaging elements from disparate sources, from both 'high' and 'low' culture, to create a reflection of his own very personal vision is disarmingly modern. Some commentators have suggested that it was a precursor for Picasso's 'invention' of papièr-collé in 1912 and it has even been called 'proto-postmodern'.

This pack has been published to accompany the exhibition *Henri Rousseau: Jungles in Paris* at Tate Modern, London, 3 November 2005 – 5 February 2006.

School groups are most welcome to visit the exhibition. Please be advised, to obtain the educational discounted rate of £4 per head, tickets **must** be booked and paid for at least two weeks in advance by calling the education and groups bookings line on 020 7887 3959.

Sponsored by Aviva plc.

Work in Focus: *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)*, 1891

Painted in 1891, over a decade before the theme of the jungle began to dominate Rousseau's work, this painting prefigures the artist's concerns in many later works. In the midst of a violent tropical storm which ravages branches of the trees in the background (whilst leaving foreground grasses strangely static), a tiger perches in a gravity-defying manner on a raft of foreground fronds. The wide-eyed and startlingly red-gummed predator looks as if he is poised to pounce on prey beyond our frame of vision. Some commentators have also indicated he could be frozen with shock as the storm rails around him. Dense and exotic vegetation pushes up against the surface of the painting in an all-over patterning, leaving only glimpses of the sky beyond. A subtle white and grey glazing over the entire surface of the painting depicts the intense downpour in the jungle.

Whilst the poet and Rousseau champion Guillaume Appollinaire claimed that the painter had vivid memories of tropical forests from military service in Mexico, Rousseau admitted he had in fact never, 'travelled further than the glass houses of the Jardin des Plantes'. His jungle scenes were entirely Parisian imaginings, assembled from observations of exotic plants in the Jardin des Plantes (botanical gardens in Paris) hothouses, caged wild animals in the Paris zoo or stuffed examples found in dioramas in the Natural History Museum, illustrations in popular publications such as 'Betes Sauvage', and oversized domestic plants and trees. In the right foreground of this painting is a rubber plant, and further left the distinctive forms of "Mother in Laws Tongue" (Sansevierias). The source for the tiger was a Eugène Delacroix pastel drawing of a tiger and lion in combat. Transposed awkwardly into the vegetal composition by means of a pantograph (mechanical enlarger), the tiger has been simplified to harmonise with the fantastically rhythmic composition. This 'collaging' of elements from different sources into a new image is characteristic of Rousseau's process in many of his works.

Patterning and rich colour dominate, a symphony of stripes composed of innumerable green hues, with the vivid punctuations of its complementary red in the tiger's gums and the exotic blooms in the background. Commentators have linked the finely worked surface pattern with medieval tapestries, such as 'The Lady with the Unicorn' which Rousseau had seen, as well as with perspective-free Persian miniatures and decorative arts such as marquetry.

At the time this painting was made there was a renewed interest in ideas of the exotic in France, following the World's Fair of 1889 when city dwellers could experience elaborate reconstructions of native life in French colonies. Popular culture during this colonial era had introduced people to flora and fauna from distant places. Frances Morris argues that Rousseau's jungle paintings de-familiarised these far-off places, making them once again exotic and fantastically idyllic.

Work in Focus: *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)*, 1891

'In Rousseau's paintings the wild creatures are liberated from their cages, set to roam and play, fight and devour each other in fantastic hot house plantations.'

Frances Morris, Exhibition Co-Curator

Discussion Points

- Discuss the ambiguities of Rousseau's choice of title for this painting. He once described it as representing a tiger surprising explorers in the jungle. Do your students think the image supports this intention? Does the tiger appear vicious and predatory, or stunned and static? Could the tiger itself be in a state of shock from the cracking lightning, the booming thunder and the wind that rips through the trees behind him? Ask younger children to close their eyes and imagine what it would be like to be caught up in a tropical rain storm.
- Vincent Gille, Exhibition Co-Curator, says of Rousseau's work, 'Pleasure and joy is what these images are really about. A shiver of excitement, a window swinging open onto the marvellous, a 'gulp of happiness', in the words of André Breton'. Discuss how the painting affects the emotions of your students, analysing the elements of the painting which instil these emotions and the associations the students have from their own personal worlds and experiences, for example places they may have visited e.g. botanical gardens such as Kew.

Classroom Activities

Primary

Animal Characters

It has been said that Rousseau's animals are more 'characters' than realistic depictions of wild beasts. Using the painting as a starting point, explore ideas about the 'character' of the tiger (you could consider animal characters from books on this theme, such as Rudyard Kipling's 'Jungle Book'). Other animal characters could be created from Rousseau's other paintings and children could devise a story based upon these characters. This can be used as material for creative writing and/or for developing imaginative artwork telling the 'story' of the tiger which the children have devised. A possibility is for the class to produce a 'storyboard' in which each student makes an image as part of the narrative.

Secondary

Journeys into the Fantastic

Rousseau has been called a 'stationary traveller'. Students can develop creative work on the idea of using their everyday experience to 'travel' to a 'fantastic' place. This can be done as a drawing/painting, a photography and/or digital imaging project. First, students need to collect first hand observational material from their familiar environment through drawing or photography e.g. from their gardens, their walk to school, the school environment. This might include plants, trees, buildings, animals, and people, depending on what kind of subject matter is of interest. If the material is drawn, a photocopier can be used to change the scale or duplicate elements from which a final composition can be collaged and worked into a painting. Similar methods can be used with photographs, or if working in digital photography, use can be made of digital imaging programmes such as Photoshop or Paint Shop Pro to cut out and change the scale of elements, and to collage them together to create a 'fantastic' environment in which the familiar is made strange.

Links to QCA Schemes of Work

Picture This!

Mother Nature, Designer

Investigating Pattern

Recreating Landscapes

Links

Links to other Rousseau works

In contrast with 'Surprised!', Rousseau's later jungle paintings featuring predators tend to depict a savage attack taking place in the centre foreground against a dense backdrop of exotic plants. Compare the paradoxical stillness of these images with the movement seen in the greenery in the background of 'Surprised!'

The Repast of the Lion, 1907 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
Fight between a Tiger and a Buffalo, 1908 (The Cleveland Museum of Art)

Links to contemporary artworks

Peter Doig is a contemporary British painter. Like Rousseau, his landscape paintings are the final result of a process of combining visual elements from different sources, often so-called 'low' cultural sources. In Doig's case these may include photographs of places he has taken, images culled from holiday brochures, magazines or record covers. Doig subjects his source image to transformational processes which may include photocopying, painting onto them, collaging, re-photographing or distressing the image. The end result is far removed from his original source and for Doig creates a new meaning by stimulating memories or associations with places.

Work in Focus: *The Merry Jesters*, 1906

Like other paintings by Rousseau, this painting presents the viewer with puzzles and ambiguities. Why are a group of monkeys of different species grouped tightly together apparently fooling around with a backscratcher and an implausibly suspended milk bottle, as well as an unidentifiable stick or tool held by the monkey on the right hand side? Where have they come across these items? Why do they stare out of the picture at us, frozen in motion as if discovered at their games, the proverbial 'cheeky monkeys'? Why do they appear almost human in their poses, actions and expressions?

Rousseau's title for this painting suggests that that the activity we have glimpsed in this painting is merely jest. But the absurdity of the image, particularly for 21st century eyes which are much more familiar with the natural behaviour of monkeys in the wild through natural history television programmes, could lead the imagination to construct weird and wonderful narratives of bizarre occurrences with explorers deep in the jungle. Perhaps the scenario might remind us of performing animals at zoos which were often taught to do 'human' things to entertain society. There seems something of the pantomime or performance in the way the jesting monkeys stare back at us from the centre of their 'stage backdrop', lit with the intensity of a production. Rousseau's paintings have often been referred to as being like stage sets due to their layering of two-dimensional shapes, which can be likened to flat theatre scenery positioned on a stage.

Rousseau's monkeys are decidedly anthropomorphic. Nowhere to be seen are the elegant acrobatics of such creatures in the wild; the monkey in the background seems to grasp onto the tree as if unfamiliar with such things. The monkeys in the Monkey Palace in the Paris Zoo which Rousseau may well have used as source material had no vegetation at all with which to interact so he may have had to imagine their behaviour in their natural habitat. As with all Rousseau's jungles, however, this is far from being a truthful depiction of their natural habitat but is an assemblage of vegetation from native European trees and plants and exotic species seen in the Parisian hothouses. An oversize white foxglove on the left-hand side is echoed by the pale bird perched on the right side. The composition is remarkably balanced with a glimpse of Parisian sky between the dense foliage at the top.

Work in Focus: *The Merry Jesters*, 1906

'I don't know if you're like me... but when I go into the glass houses and I see the strange plants of exotic lands, it seems to me that I enter into a dream. I feel that I'm somebody else completely.'

Henri Rousseau

Discussion Points

- Discuss students' ideas as to how the monkeys have come to be playing with these objects in the jungle. Can they imagine a story to explain why?
- Discuss the extent to which students recognise any of the foliage in the picture – which of it would be native to France, which would Rousseau have had to see in a hothouse?
- Discuss Rousseau's use of pattern in this image – what shapes recur? How has the artist created well defined shapes using very dark colours contrasted with light ones?
- Discuss what students know about the behaviour of monkeys in the wild. How would they appear really in their natural habitat? Would they play? How would they interact with one another?

Classroom Activities

Primary

Creative Poetry

Poet Kathleen Jamie has written a poem inspired by 'The Merry Jesters' for Tate etc magazine. The first verse begins:

Beneath not a forest
canopy, but calm
domestic skies,
grow myriad greens,
a fan of jagged black.

See the (www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue5/rousseau2.htm) for the full poem. Following careful looking at the painting and discussion about what the children think is happening, ask them to write down words to describe the colours, shapes and animals in the painting. From these, the children can create their own poem about the painting.

Theatre and Costume

Discuss with students any depictions of the jungle they have seen. For example, the recent Dreamworks movie 'Madagascar' was influenced by Rousseau's jungles. Have students seen the Disney film or the stage production of 'The Lion King', or the animated film of 'The Jungle Book'? Discuss how the depictions of the jungle and animals differ. Students can use their research to create animal costumes or masks, exploring use of materials such as papièr-mâché and fabrics, or they could design a stage scene for a production of a jungle story (their own or an existing one) and make a model of it.

Secondary

Animated Animals

Using the sources in the activity above, students can explore portrayals of jungles and animals in animation film. They can use this starting point to explore one of Rousseau's jungle paintings. Consider how the animals might move, what might happen next, will the peace be interrupted somehow? Students can develop their storyline into a storyboard and, if equipment allows, into an animated film. They could use plasticine animals in a still jungle setting created with layers of painted card, or they could animate drawings or paintings. Alternatively they could create a flipbook of the action, or construct a zoetrope showing the movement of their animal.

Links to QCA Schemes of Work

Picture This!

Mother Nature, Designer

Animating Art

Links

Links to other Rousseau works

Certain animals have often had particular characterisations in the popular imagination – the ‘cheeky’ playful monkey, the cold distance of the hissing snake, or the lion as the proud and powerful ‘king of the jungle’. What are the animal characterisations revealed in Rousseau’s jungle paintings? Explore Rousseau’s anthropomorphic treatment of monkeys further in ‘Tropical Forest with Monkeys’. Monkeys sit fishing in a pond just like people whilst a snake behind a clump of purplish leaves at the front opens its mouth to reveal its long forked tongue, as if he is angry with the two monkeys for fishing in his pond.

Monkeys in the Jungle, 1910 (Private Collection)

Links to contemporary artworks

Many parallels can be drawn between the work of contemporary British painter Chris Ofili and Rousseau’s oeuvre. Like Rousseau, Ofili selects and collages (often literally) from many sources, including popular culture. His paintings are obsessively decorative, with meticulously detailed pattern and swathes of glitter twinkling from between layers of shining resin. Whilst Rousseau’s work reflects French fin-de-siècle ideas of the exoticism of distant colonial lands, Ofili’s work addresses today’s issues of black cultural stereotypes and the diaspora. Born in the UK of Nigerian descent, Ofili began to use elephant dung in his paintings as he wanted to include something from the Africa of his ancestors. In ‘The Upper Room’ currently on display at Tate Britain, Ofili depicts 13 rhesus macaque monkeys as a metaphor for Christ and his apostles. Ofili is working within an art historical tradition in which monkeys have often been depicted as ‘little men’, standing for what is basest in human nature, and here he elevates them to the status of the holy. Art critic Adrian Searle has said of Ofili ‘The paintings would be silly if they weren’t so intense and felt, and painted with such compulsion. Henri Rousseau would be silly, too, if he hadn’t been so loving in his paintings, if the world he imagined hadn’t been so heartfelt.’

Work in Focus: *The Dream*, 1910

In common with Rousseau's other jungle scenes, 'The Dream' is a collaged composition based upon an assemblage of plants and animals seen in Parisian locations like the Jardin des Plantes and the Paris Zoo. However, it is unique in his oeuvre in terms of its complexity and levels of decoration, perhaps fitting as it was to be both his largest and his last jungle painting. Exhibition Co-Curator Frances Morris points out that this painting most clearly enunciates the theme of the exhibition at Tate Modern, 'Jungles in Paris', due to the addition of the reclining nude on the Louis Philippe couch, as if she has been transplanted directly from her Parisian boudoir. This subject places the painting in the art historical tradition of the reclining nude, from Giorgione and Titian to Manet's 'Olympia'. Rousseau may have based the woman on Yadwigha, a Polish sweetheart from his youth, but he may have also modelled it on a postcard of Louis Beroud's sensual painting of a 'Nude Woman Reclining' on a lion's paw. Rousseau's nude in contrast is stripped of her sensuality by the way in which she is stylised by the artist.

The woman stretches out her left arm towards a lion and a lioness. Is she beckoning them towards her or trying to keep them away? This is Rousseau's most heavily populated jungle; as well as these animals there is a serpent, an elephant, two birds and a monkey to discover behind the fronds of exotic vegetation. Hardly visible except for his eyes, brightly coloured clothing and flute is the musician, who seems to transfix the creatures in the scene with his mesmerising music, like Orpheus. Improbably large technicolour lilies delineate the middle ground of the painting, their flat blooms as if seen in cross-section.

There may be a biographical element behind this painting; at the time of painting Rousseau was suffering unrequited love for a woman called Leonie. A source for the theme may also have been Emile Zola's novel 'The Dream' which recounted the tale of an unhappy love between a painter and an embroideress.

Perhaps the most surreal of all Rousseau's jungle dreamscapes, this painting gives a good indication of why Rousseau was championed by the Surrealist movement. His untaught 'vision' was exactly the kind of practice advocated by this group. André Breton said, 'It is with Rousseau that we can speak for the first time of Magic Realism... of the intervention of magic causality'.

Work in Focus: *The Dream*, 1910

'The woman, who has fallen asleep on the couch, is dreaming that she has been transported to the forest and is listening to the sounds of the flute player.'
Henri Rousseau on 'The Dream'

Discussion Points

- Discuss what the students think is going on between the woman and the lions. What do they think could happen next?
- Talk about the mood of the painting. Do students perhaps perceive an air of menace or does the scene feel like a jungle paradise? What elements in the painting contribute towards this feeling?
- Discuss the way Rousseau has constructed the image, using flat, almost cut-out elements that he has layered together. Also consider the treatment of the female nude. How has she been stylised?
- Henri Rousseau did not distinguish between his paintings and reality. An often-quoted Rousseau comment was 'One day, when I was painting a make-believe subject, I had to open the window, because I was overcome with fear'. Discuss the extent to which this painting is realistic.

Classroom Activities

Primary

The Myth of Orpheus

In Greek mythology, Orpheus was such a talented musician that when he played his lyre, not only the beasts but also the trees and rocks would move towards him and listen transfixed. See 'Orpheus' by Savery, 1628, in the National Gallery. Discuss 'The Dream' alongside this image. What kind of music/which instruments do the students think would be most attractive to animals? Students could develop their own sounds or music, perhaps 'sampling' or recording sounds that they like e.g. the sound of rain, wind or the sea. The outcome of this work can form part of a classroom installation, with a class-produced jungle image with lots of gathering animals, trees and rocks.

Secondary

Dreamtime

With your students, look at how other artists have combined apparently incongruous images to create a 'dream' image, for example works by Surrealist artists such as Salvador Dalí or René Magritte. Ask your students to imagine where they would like to visit in a dream. What would they see? What would it sound like? Feel like? What could they hear there? This could be developed into a personal 'dream' image, with each student carrying out the necessary research to picture their 'dream' background.

The Reclining Nude

This painting can be used as a stimulus to develop work on the theme of the reclining nude. Compare these examples:

Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*, c.1508, Dresden Art Gallery

Titian, *The Venus of Urbino*, 1538, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Velazquez, *The Toilet of Venus*, The National Gallery, London

Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Discuss the extent to which these paintings are/are not visions of male voyeurism and where Rousseau's reclining nude may be placed in this tradition. This study can be used as a starting point to develop personal work responding to the issues.

Links to QCA Schemes of Work

Mother Nature, Designer

A Sense of Place

Self Image

Recreating Landscapes

Links

Links to other Rousseau works

'The Snake Charmer' can be linked with 'The Dream' in terms of its dream-like qualities, the attentive stillness of the animals and the imagined melody of the musician, here a woman. Consider the artist's composition in this work in contrast to many of his other jungle works; here we are on the edge of the jungle.

Links to contemporary artworks

Compare Rousseau's imagined vision of paradise with the photographic images of German artist Thomas Struth in his book 'New Pictures from Paradise'. Struth's monumental and highly detailed images work within the language of painting. Unlike Rousseau's, Struth's depictions are gathered from real experience on photographic expeditions to Australia, China and the rainforests of Brazil, amongst other locations.

Marc Quinn, a contemporary British artist, constructed 'The Garden' installation for the Prada Foundation, Milan, in 2000. A mirrored room was filled with exotic plants that would not normally grow together. They were frozen in silicone at the height of their perfection, creating a vision of an artificial everlasting paradise. Quinn was pointing to questions of genetic manipulation and the role of science in today's world.

Work in Focus: *Myself, Portrait-Landscape, 1890*

In his portrait-landscape, a genre which the artist claimed to have invented, Rousseau towers above the Port of St Nicholas in Paris. Dressed in dignified black, with the insignia of the Salon painter - beret, palette and brush - Rousseau proclaims his ambitions as a professional artist three years before his retirement from his job in the Customs Service. Social aspirations are also evident in his choice of a full-length portrait: a format generally reserved for pre-eminent members of society. In a personal touch, Rousseau has shown the names of both of his wives (Clémence and Joséphine) inscribed onto his palette. In 1905, he also painted onto his lapel the award 'Palme Académiques', an honour which was presented to him in error (he was the wrong Rousseau) but which he clearly thought he deserved.

Rousseau uses areas of flat colour and largely disregards perspective in this image. Witness the tiny people walking along the river Seine. In choosing not to use this convention, Rousseau was rejecting optical illusion for the force of his personal vision. The Parisian backdrop declares Rousseau's love of the modern Paris and France's technological achievements. The only artist to have depicted the Eiffel Tower before Rousseau was George Seurat. Most artists considered the steel monolith built for the World's Fair in 1889 to be far too ugly and modern for the picturesque and historical Paris. It was the central attraction for the fair which celebrated French achievements at home and overseas on the centennial of the 1789 French Revolution. The hot air balloon also recalls the World's Fair, for the duration of which it floated above the city.

A boat on the left-hand side of the painting is decorated with a 'garland' of international flags. Many of the flags are from Rousseau's imagination but a French tricolour and a Union Jack can be discerned. The flags suggest Rousseau's aspirations to international acclaim. This painting is a good example of Rousseau's collage-like approach to constructing a painting from disparate elements, which seem to just hang together tentatively for the painting. It is also a good reflection of his independence of mind in producing paintings which did not follow the accepted conventions for either Salon or avant-garde painting.

Work in Focus: *Myself, Portrait-Landscape*, 1890

'Always I see a picture before I paint it – even if it is very complicated. I find things that surprise me, or that give me a lot of pleasure.'

Henri Rousseau

Discussion Points

- Discuss Rousseau's depiction of Paris in this painting. What perspective on the city does he present us with?
- Discuss Rousseau's compositional approach to creating this painting. What effect does it have to devote such a large area to the sky? What shapes or lines in the composition echo each other or create rhythms within the painting?
- Discuss Rousseau's depiction of himself – his clothing, pose, expression etc. What image does he intend to convey to the viewer?

Classroom Activities

Primary

I would like to...

This painting is about Rousseau's aspirations as an artist, not what he had actually achieved at this point in his life when he was still working full time for the Customs Service. Use the painting as a starting point for discussing with your students what they would like to be or do when they are older, or where they would like to go in the world. What are their favourite activities? How could they see themselves dressing? Where would they live? As research, ask children to find pictures of people doing what they would like to do. What would they wear? What objects would they need to do their job e.g. a doctor would need a stethoscope, a mechanic would need tools, a horse rider would need a hat and a whip, a musician would need his/her instrument. Each student can make a self-portrait based upon their aspirations, perhaps showing themselves in different clothes, or holding the objects they will need. This activity could be done using painting, drawing, mixed media, collage or photography.

Secondary

Identity

In this painting Rousseau is identifying himself very much as a modern Parisian academic Salon painter. Initiate discussion with your students about their own identities – do they identify with the city/town/village within which they live? Have they or their family travelled from somewhere else in the world with which they identify strongly? Or have your students visited somewhere with which they felt a strong affinity? Do they have clothing or objects which represent their identity, culture or background? Rousseau's 'Portrait of a Woman' is painted as if the woman had been in an early 20th century photographic studio where the subject would pose in front of a painted backdrop. On large paper rolls students can paint a backdrop of a scene of a place with which they identify. They can then pose for photographs in their chosen clothes and holding their 'identity objects'. This work could be done with a photographer in residence, or as a photography project.

Links to QCA Schemes of Work

Self Portrait

Self Image

Life Events

Links

Links to other Rousseau works

Compare Rousseau's self-portrait with the more conventionalised setting of the 'Portrait of a Woman', in which the pose and the setting is similar to that of a photographer's studio. Look at the potential for symbolic meaning with the plants behind the woman and the branch and small cutting that she holds in her hands.

Links to contemporary artworks

In 'Self-Portrait with Badges', 1961, British artist Peter Blake used the tradition of self portrait painting to declare his love for American popular culture. In the painting, he wears a full outfit of denim (at the time strongly identified with US youth culture), baseball boots and lots of badges, as well as carrying a magazine devoted to Elvis, who was becoming well known in the UK at that time.

The British artist Sonia Boyce has made use of her own image in her work to explore issues of race and the representation of black people in popular culture. In 'From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction', 1987, the artist uses a repeated 'passport photo' style image of herself alongside representation of black people from film to question how images of racial stereotypes have been created and their impact on the self image of British Africans like herself.

Work in Focus: *The Representatives of Foreign Powers Coming to Greet the Republic as a Sign of Peace, 1907*

In a bid to demonstrate his allegiance to the French Third Republic and in a vain attempt to attract government patronage, Rousseau painted a fictitious idyllic meeting of heads of state in the Place Maubert in Paris. It is an allegory of peace and harmony compered by Marianne, the personification of the Republic, on the left-hand side, clad in red and wearing the Phrygian cap of the Revolution. Her right hand points to the blue shield bearing the inscription 'Union des Peuples' (Union of the People); her left hand gestures towards the monument to Etienne Dolet in the background. Dolet was a humanist who was burnt for heresy in the square in the 16th century, the monument subsequently erected as a symbol of freedom of opinion, as espoused by the Republic. The representatives all hold symbols of peace in the form of olive branches which have been taken from the urns lining the front of the dais on which they stand. Inscriptions on the urns declare the principles of the Republic: peace, work, liberty, fraternity.

Together the representatives stand, although of course they never did stand together. Rousseau transcribed the features of the characters from almanacs and postcards, giving them brightly-coloured uniforms and ceremonial garb, and arranging the stiff two-dimensional figures in an awkward montage. Closest to Marianne are a black coated group of French presidents, along with the Francophile English King Edward VII. Crowned heads of Europe jostle next to them, along with the Shah of Persia and the ruler of Ethiopia. The implausibly small ruler of Italy stands alongside the Shah, and is joined to his left by personifications of Madagascar, Equatorial Africa, Indochina and North Africa.

It is a meeting arousing great celebration; a red canopy overhead displays international flags, whilst in the background the tricolour can be seen billowing from every window. A group of lively children dance in a ring around the monument, a motif which Rousseau probably copied from an illustration in the 'Petit Journal'.

Rousseau claimed that his painting was a great success because its debut at the Salon des Indépendants coincided with the second Hague convention where a great number of foreign representatives were meeting in the flesh. However, it appears that such timing was purely accidental on Rousseau's part and he failed to attract the patronage of the Republic, although a certain Pablo Picasso did purchase the painting later.

Work in Focus: *The Representatives of Foreign Powers Coming to Greet the Republic as a Sign of Peace, 1907*

'Rousseau saw himself, with some reason, as the quintessential public artist of the Third Republic... in the quest for a contemporary form of public-exhibition painting that expressed the freedoms and technical advances that the Republic had won for France.'

John House, Art historian/critic

Discussion Points

- Discuss Rousseau's use of colour in this painting, for example how he has created lively movement by how he has applied and distributed colour.
- Discuss how Rousseau has divided the composition into two parts and how these parts compare and contrast.
- Discuss the presence of the lion in the painting. Rousseau based this creature on the imposing bronze 'Lion of Belfort' by Bartholdi. What character does the lion in this painting appear to display?
- Discuss how Rousseau demonstrates his patriotism to the Third Republic in this painting.
- Discuss the presence of the personifications of French colonies and what general image of France's colonial project is being conveyed by Rousseau.

Classroom Activities

Primary

Symbols of Peace

This painting is an allegory to peace and includes symbolic use of olive branches which have long been used in art history to represent peace. Discuss with your students other symbols of peace e.g. doves, cranes, the white flag, the rainbow, the peace sign used by the anti-nuclear movement, the 'v for victory' hand sign, the ankh from Egypt. Follow this with a discussion about what represents peace to the students – perhaps it is a scene of birds in the sky, children playing, or friendship. Why do people wish to create peace? What happens if we don't work for this? This discussion can be used as a starting point for creating a 'peace corner' in the classroom, where the student display 'peace' pictures or symbols they have made, along with photographs which represent peace to them, and perhaps some objects such as an olive branch or white flag. This area of the classroom could become a 'reconciliation' space where children in conflict can try to resolve their differences and understand each other better.

Secondary

A Meeting of Minds

Rousseau's 'meeting of minds' in this painting was completely fictitious. Who would you like to get together? An amazing supergroup, perhaps with musicians who are now dead? Your family from all over the world? All the people you admire? What do you believe in? What about 'Make Poverty History' – who would you need to get together to achieve change to achieve that?

The artist Peter Blake created a collaged image for the cover of The Beatles' album 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' in 1967. The collage has the band members in the centre, with younger versions of themselves to the right, and a crowd of renowned people behind them including Bob Dylan, Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Lewis Carroll and Marlene Dietrich. What would your gathering of people do? How would you show your friendship or your shared interests/beliefs?

These ideas could be developed into a collage like Peter Blake's, a painting of the meeting like that by Rousseau, or perhaps a digital work using image manipulation software.

Links to QCA Schemes of Work

Objects and Meanings
Portraying Relationships
Self Image
Life Events

Links

Links to other Rousseau works

Compare this painting with another allegorical composition in the exhibition: 'Liberty Inviting Artists to Take Part in the 22nd Exhibition of The Societe des Artistes Independents'. The allegorical figure of Liberty, another reference to the Third Republic, floats in the sky welcoming below the contributors to the Salon with which Rousseau exhibited annually. Rousseau makes a link between the Republic's espoused principles and the democratic nature of the jury-free salon, underlined in his composition by the serial structure of the contributors. The city flag of Paris on the right-hand side celebrates Rousseau's affection for his city, whilst the international flags invite all nations to join together in democratic creativity.

Links to contemporary artworks

The contemporary painter Dexter Dalwood acknowledges his debt to Rousseau in the way that he utilises the 'cut-up' process in his compositions, putting things together in a self-consciously awkward manner. He has made direct reference to Rousseau in two of his paintings. In 'Versailles in the Jungle' (2003), he imagines the palace of the Congolese dictator Mobutu as a fantastical construction viewed through the framing of an exotic jungle borrowed from a Rousseau painting. In 'Birth of the UN' of 2004, Dalwood borrowed the composition of the 'Representatives of Foreign Powers', replacing the figures on the dais with a quote from a Willem de Kooning painting and the Dolet monument with a Barbara Hepworth sculpture. In doing so he is drawing parallel between the optimism of creation of the United Nations with a similar outlook on the future in the works of art being created at that time in the 1950's.

For more information on this artist and his affinity with Rousseau, see the Tate etc magazine, issue 5.