Covert Art

Entering a dream

1897


Early in his career, Rousseau (1844-1910) created this striking piece and, through it, began laying the foundation for his unique artistic vision, characterized by his fierce and fantastic style. Unlike his renowned contemporaries Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, Claude Monet, and Édouard Manet, Rousseau was not formally trained as an artist. A government bureaucrat until age 49, Rousseau exhibited his work for the first time in 1886 at the Salon des Independents in Paris and, even then, his work was unconventional and unsurprisingly unpopular. It took another 20 years before he was “discovered” at the 1905 Salon D’Automne where fauvism, an artistic movement characterized by its bold colors and nontraditional choice of subjects, made its debut. Rousseau’s work, once decried as primitive and naive, fit well under this umbrella. He emerged as a prominent artist with the jungle-themed *The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope*. Three years later, he was celebrated by a young Pablo Picasso, Gertrude and Leo Stein, and others at an event in Picasso’s studio. Rousseau’s paintings were in great demand. Two years later, in 1910, Rousseau died. His life span as a luminary lasted only about 5 years.

His work lives on and continues to captivate the collective imagination—his pieces are beautiful, but it is their hint of mystery that sets them apart from works of the same era and of the same movement.

*The Sleeping Gypsy* is an image of an exotic scene—a faraway landscape of a barren desert with a mountain range in the distance. There seems to be a body of water between the desert and the mountains. It is a scene that has within it many ambiguities. Is the main subject, “the gypsy,” male or female? The title of the painting in French indicates that the gypsy is female. But answers to the questions that emerge as one continues to look at the painting are less concrete. Is the lion a predator about to kill the gypsy or a protector? Is it day, or is it night? Is the scene depicting something real, or is it a dream? Is this a dream replaying a scene that Rousseau had witnessed?

Rousseau is best known for his jungle scenes, especially *The Dream*, a gigantic 7×10-foot painting in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This picture shows fecund plants, fantastic creatures, and a naked woman sitting on a divan. On the top right of this picture is a moon in exactly the same position as the moon in *The Sleeping Gypsy*. Given Rousseau’s fondness for depicting jungle scenes, one would assume that Rousseau had visited verdant locales far away from France; yet, the only exotic foliage he ever saw was in the Jardin des Plantes, a conservatory in Paris. He is quoted as saying, “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.”1,2

His first great painting was *The Sleeping Gypsy*. His last painting was *The Dream*. Almost every image he painted seemed to be a dream. The 1985 American Sleep Disorders Association poster of *The Sleeping Gypsy* that hangs on the wall of my office is as mysterious today as it was then.

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References