

Henri Rousseau 'Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)' 1891



Artist: Henri Rousseau (1844-1910)
Title: Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)
Date: 1891
Materials: oil on canvas
Size: 130 x 162 cm
Location: National Gallery (London)

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter

- This was Rousseau's first jungle painting, yet the subject matter was not unusual at the time. There was the tradition of '*animaliers*' (animal painters) within the academic tradition, especially animals from India, Africa, and the near East. Such animals and lands were considered 'exotic'.
- Rousseau's main influence for this subject was Delacroix's drawings and final painting 'Tiger and Snake' of 1862 as well as the works of Clement, and Gérôme. The 1885 Tiger exhibition at the École des Beaux Arts had been popular.
- The painting depicts a tiger, illuminated by a flash of lightening in the midst of a raging storm. Is the tiger surprised or is he surprising missing characters? The title does not clarify this ambiguity. Could the tiger also be frozen in shock as the storm whips around him?

- The tiger's prey is beyond the edge of the canvas, so it is left to the imagination of the viewer to decide what the outcome will be. Rousseau later stated that the tiger was about to pounce on a group of explorers.
- The vegetation is not naturalistic nor does it mimic jungle vegetation accurately. Rousseau included a rubber plant in the right foreground, as well as mother-in-law's tongue further left, popular C19th indoor plants.
- The tiger appears in at least three more of his paintings but not until later in his career.

Formal analysis of style

- Rousseau's unique and distinctive style with its exaggerated scale, simplified forms and blocked vibrant colour is closely related to folk art traditions and have hence often referred to as naïve.
- A tiger perches in a gravity defying manner on a raft of foreground fronds, a wide-eyed and startlingly red-gummed predator.
- Composition dominated by vegetation with exaggeratedly large scale of the foliage. Dense vegetation pushes up against the surface of the painting, leaving only glimpses of the sky beyond. Trees and grass bend and twist in the wind. Hypnotic interweaving of verticals and diagonals. Diagonal of the tiger echoed in one of the thick branches of the tree above it. This sense of forward motion of the tiger further enhanced by the branches and the leaves blowing in the wind from the left. Sense of immediacy and movement enhanced by the cropped composition.
- The form of the tiger has been simplified to harmonise with the fantastically rhythmic composition.
- Patterning and rich colour dominate. A symphony of stripes composed of innumerable green hues, with the vivid punctuations of its complementary red found in the tiger's gums and the various exotic plants. NB: This painting differs from Rousseau's other jungle paintings in its feeling of movement.
- A dark and ominous stormy sky with rain lashing down. The tiger is illuminated. The flash of lightening creates a sense of drama.
- Sense of compressed space; all action pushed to the foreground.
- Personal and innovative style yet it is possible to discern in this picture the earliest traces of contact with Gauguin's work.
- Commentators have linked the finely worked surface pattern with Medieval tapestries, such as 'The Lady with the Unicorn', which Rousseau would have seen.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The Artist:

- Rousseau first worked as an inspector at a toll station. No formal training. He only took seriously to painting after retirement.
- It was claimed, either by the artist or by friends of his, that Rousseau had experienced life in the jungle during time in Mexico in 1860 where he had served

as a regimental bandsman. In fact, he had never left France, and it is believed that his inspiration came from the botanical gardens of Paris, such as the Jardin des Plantes (which included zoological galleries with taxidermy specimens of exotic animals), caged wild animals in the Paris zoo, oversized domestic plants and trees, and from prints and books.

- His imagination teemed with exotic images of mysterious and menacing tropical landscapes. According to Apollinaire, Rousseau felt the imaginative reality of the scenes he was painting so intensely that he had to throw open the window to escape from their self-induced spells.
- At the end of the nineteenth century the French populace was captivated by 'exotic' and dangerous subjects, such as the perceived savagery of peoples and animals of distant lands. In fact, tigers on the prowl had been the subject of an exhibition at the 1885 École des Beaux-Arts. The world fair of 1889 allowed Paris city dwellers to experience elaborate reconstructions of 'native life' in French colonies.
- "His technical and conceptual naivety endowed him with the innocent eye of a savage (*sic*) without his ever leaving Paris." (Honour and Fleming)
- He was known to Gauguin, Seurat, Signac, Pissarro, Redon, Renoir and Toulouse Lautrec but there is no proof that they took his work seriously.
- [After Gauguin's death In 1903 Rousseau renamed his scenes and they were no longer regarded as illustrative or folk art but akin to the 'non-Western' 'primitive' art promoted by artists such as Picasso.] His work attracted a small group of admirers, but otherwise he was regarded as a complete eccentric.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

- Despite their apparent simplicity, Rousseau's jungle paintings were built up meticulously in layers of oil on canvas, using a large number of green shades to capture the lush exuberance of the jungle. He used traditional brushes rather than the new flat ferrule square-ended brushes of his contemporary post-Impressionists.
- He devised his own method for depicting the lashing rain by trailing strands of silver paint diagonally across the canvas, a technique inspired by the satin-like finishes of the paintings of William-Adolphe Bouguereau.
- It has been suggested that Rousseau used a pantograph to transfer his sketches to the final large scale painting.
- A subtle white and grey glazing over the entire surface of the painting depicts the intense downpour in the jungle.

WAYS IN WHICH ART HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

- Exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in 1891 with the title 'Surpris!'. This painting brought Rousseau his first recognition, though he did not return to the jungle theme for 7 years.

- His submission of the painting gave rise to the first really serious, detailed article about him:

Monsieur Rousseau becomes more and more astonishing each year, but he commands attention and, in any event, is earning a nice little reputation and having his share of success: people flock around his submissions and one can hear the sound of laughter. In addition, he is a terrible neighbour, as he crushes everything else. His tiger surprising its prey ought not to be missed; it's the alpha and the omega of painting and so disconcerting that the most firmly held convictions must be shaken and brought up short by such self-sufficiency and childlike naiveté. As a matter of fact, not everyone laughs, and some who begin to do so are quickly brought up short. There is always something beautiful about seeing a faith, any faith, so pitilessly expressed. For my part, I have a sincere esteem for such efforts, and I would a hundred times rather them than the deplorable mistakes nearby. (Felix Vallotton, Le Journal Suisse, 1891)

'I stayed, completely petrified before your Surpris! What fierce energy you have given your wild beast!' (M. Cotton)

Despite being derided by many critics in 1908 Picasso organised a 'banquet' in honour of Rousseau in his Bateau-Lavoir studio for which Apollinaire wrote a poem:

*"We gathered together to celebrate your glory,
These wines that in your memory Picasso pours,
Let's drink them then, since it's the hour for drinking
Crying In unison: 'Long live! Long live Rousseau!'"*

Around 1908 the art dealer Ambroise Vollard purchased the painting and two others from Rousseau who had offered them at a rate considerably higher than the 190 francs he finally received. In 1911 Apollinaire organised an exhibition of 47 of Rousseau's works at the Salon des Indépendents. The painting was purchased by the National Gallery in 1972.

Bibliography:

Morris, F and Green, C (Eds) Henri Rousseau Jungles In Paris London: Tate Publishing 2005

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/henri-rousseau-surprised>

