

Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec



Photograph of Aristide Bruant
Courtesy Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum

Aristide Bruant

Aristide Bruant was a popular singer and proprietor of a small café-concert. A café-concert was a nightclub where entertainers presented songs and skits on a small stage while the audience sat at tables, eating and drinking far into the night. Unlike high-class café-concerts in the fashionable sections of Paris, Bruant's place in Montmartre attracted working-class patrons who applauded loudly when he sang bitter songs about the "woes of the cold, the ragged, and the homeless." If they liked his songs, they joined him in the rousing chorus. If they didn't like his song, they hissed.

Bruant identified with the ill-treated urban masses, and dressed like a bohemian artist. Indoors, he wore a black velvet jacket, wide-brimmed hat, and red flannel shirt. Outdoors, he wore a black cape, red woolen scarf thrown over his shoulder, and sewer cleaning boots.

In reality, Bruant was a mild mannered, cultivated man, but onstage he played the part of a loud, swaggering, boisterous host. He enlivened his songs with the vulgar street slang of the working class, and hurled insults at his guests.

This behavior came about quite by accident. When Bruant opened his café-concert for the very first time, only three people showed up. After singing his entire repertoire to a nearly empty house, he vented his frustration on the hapless three, insulting them with ridicule. To his great surprise, the three cheered, thinking it was part of his act. They returned with friends the next day hoping for a repeat performance. The savvy Bruant realized that he was onto something, and decided to be as ill-tempered and inhospitable to his guests as possible. His business and his career thrived.

After Aristide Bruant achieved considerable success in Montmartre, he was invited to perform at Les Ambassadeurs, an upscale café-concert on the Champs Elyssés. Hoping for a great turnout, he commissioned Toulouse-Lautrec to make a publicity poster for the show. The manager of Les Ambassadeurs disapproved of the bold design of Lautrec's poster, but Bruant liked the poster and insisted that it be displayed all over Paris. If not, he would not perform. In the end, Bruant won out. A journalist complained, "Who will deliver us from the likeness of Aristide Bruant? ...You can't go anywhere without finding yourself face to face with him." (Julia Frey. *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*. New York: Viking, 1994, 184.)

In 1895, Aristide Bruant retired, married an opera singer, and lived the life of a country gentleman. Still alert to the needs of the poorest people of Paris, he ran for a seat in the Chamber of Deputies. It is said that he sought votes by singing to his audiences instead of making speeches. He received enthusiastic applause, but lost the election.

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Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec : Aristide Bruant

Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant, 1892

First Viewing

Identify the following in the poster:

- Red scarf
- Cape
- Hat
- Staff
- Glove
- Sleeve
- Sailor in doorway



Focus On Style

How is the figure broken up into simple but expressive shapes?

Aristide Bruant's bright red scarf stands out as a bold flat shape against his solid black jacket. The scarf fills the space between chin and shoulder, thickening his neck so that he appears strong and forceful.

How are the flat shapes composed so that one part relates to another?

The portion of the scarf that is slung over Bruant's shoulder exactly parallels his walking stick. The portion of the scarf hanging down over Bruant's chest extends the lines of his hat and hair.

How does cropping pull the figure forward into the viewer's space?

Both elbows of Aristide Bruant extend beyond the edges of the poster so that Bruant appears to be very close to the viewer. It also suggests that he has a massive chest and equally forceful personality.

How does a well chosen line define the figure's interior form?

A small clearly defined red cuff is sufficient to suggest Aristide Bruant's sleeve and indicate the angle of his arm. No further lines are necessary.

How does the lettering contribute to the poster's overall composition?

Aristide Bruant's name is "framed" on two sides by his bright red scarf. Selected letters are placed behind the figure's head, pushing the figure forward.

How does the color of the lettering increase legibility?

The word "Ambassadeurs" is split. Most letters are outlined in black against yellow. The last few letters are light against dark blue.

Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec : Aristide Bruant

Compare and Contrast

Toulouse-Lautrec enjoyed working in a variety of mediums. The large poster of Aristide Bruant (below) makes use of simple flat shapes while the small lithograph (above) allowed the artist to demonstrate the versatility of his line, from the precise lines of the face to the scribbled crayon lines and fluid brush marks of his clothing.

- In which portrait does Aristide Bruant appear to be aware of you? What is his opinion of you? What subtle differences do you see in the eyes and mouth? What kind of temperament is suggested by each image?
- Which image is a better example of Toulouse-Lautrec's fascination with theatrical lighting? Where does he place his strongest light? What purpose does it serve?
- In each image, how does Bruant's body relate to the edges of the paper? How much space surrounds him? Does he appear to be standing still or moving? How close does he appear to be to you?
- What is the most arresting or striking part of each image? Aristide's face? Or Aristide's body?



Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant, 1892
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.4



Aristide Bruant
Lithograph
Blanche Adler Memorial Fund,
BMA 1849.7.7

Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec : Toulouse-Lautrec's Style

"No other artist had dared to simplify so far – to depend so much upon a few lines and shapes."

FLAT SHAPES, BOLD SILHOUETTES, AND EXAGGERATION

- Reduce the human figure to a flat shape.
- Eliminate extraneous details of figure or clothing.
- Exaggerate telling details or gestures.
- Create a lively silhouette.
- Crop figure to create unusual and unexpected shapes.

ANIMATED LINE

- Use clear bold lines to define the figure's outer boundaries.
- Use well-chosen contour lines to define the figure's interior form.
- Use active animated lines varying from thick to thin to energize the figures and their clothing.

DYNAMIC SKEWED SPACES

- Crop figures to pull them forward into the viewer's space.
- Employ strong diagonals to energize the composition and suggest movement or deep space.
- Position objects in foreground, middle ground, and background so that transitions are abrupt rather than gradual. The viewer "jumps" from one layer to another.
- Create a lively silhouette.
- Crop figure to create unusual and unexpected shapes.

ARTIFICIAL THEATRICAL LIGHTING

- Create the effect of artificial stage lighting on the performers.

LETTERING

- Make the words legible, considering size of lettering and contrast with the background.
- Make the image direct attention to the text or act as a frame for the text.
- Consider how the direction of the lettering can contribute to the overall composition.
 - * Diagonal lettering can provide energy.
 - * Horizontal lettering can stabilize a diagonal composition.
 - * Curved lines of lettering can reinforce curved lines of the composition.
 - * Lettering that moves behind the image can appear to push the image forward toward the viewer.

Quotation:

Selz, P. and Constantine, M., editors. *Art Nouveau: Art and Design at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Museum of Modern Art (exhibition catalogue), 1959: 36.

Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec : Slide Discussion

Flat shapes are carefully composed so that one part relates to another.



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Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant, 1892
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.4

Figures may be exaggerated for expressive purposes.



The dark silhouette of Valentin the Boneless (La Goulue's lanky dancing partner) exaggerates his long nose and protruding chin and suggests his uncanny ability to assume impossible postures.

Moulin Rouge (La Goulue) 1891
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.1

Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec : Slide Discussion

Figures may be transformed into bold silhouettes.



The dark silhouette of Valentin the Boneless (La Goulue's lanky dancing partner) exaggerates his long nose and protruding chin and suggests his uncanny ability to assume impossible postures.

Moulin Rouge (La Goulue) 1891
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.1



The jacket, sleeves, pant legs, and tails of Caudieux's tuxedo become a unified bold shape that flutters as he rushes offstage.

Caudieux, 1893
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.7

Onstage with Toulouse-Lautrec : Slide Discussion

Figures may be severely cropped.



A hand, an eye, and a wild hairdo are all that we can see of the bass player in the lower right corner.

Jane Avril, 1893
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.6



Caudieux's cropped arm, hand, and legs suggest that he will soon be beyond our field of vision as he rushes offstage.

Caudieux, 1893
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.7



With his elbows pushing the cape outward beyond the frame, Aristide Bruant appears to have a massive chest and equally forceful personality.

Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant, 1892
Lithograph
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection,
BMA 1951.69.4