

MacKenna S. Hanson

Professor Anderson

Art History 3920-001: But is it any Good?

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**I AM IN COMPETITION WITH HENRI de TOULOUSE-LAUTREC;  
*or,*  
HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND TRUST THE PROCESS**

## SECTION I. THE INCITING INCIDENT: *PORTRAIT OF JEANNE WENZ*

I probably spend more time in the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) than I do anywhere else, excluding my bedroom and my bathroom. Nearly every single day that it's open, I go in. Whether I decide to enter through the Modern Wing and get blinded by those strikingly white walls, or enter through the grand old entrance and get accosted by the drum brigade, or enter through the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's creepy little hallway—it's a decision that changes daily. No matter which option I choose, I will nearly always end up in Gallery 242, hanging around the Toulouse-Lautrec paintings.

One day, like many other days, I was in Gallery 242 and decided to look at the Toulouse-Lautrec paintings that weren't *At the Moulin Rouge*. Difficult, I know, but his other works deserve recognition—so went my thought process. My eyes drifted to the left of *At the Moulin Rouge* and landed on *Portrait of Jeanne Wenz*. Her enigmatic stare, her short haircut, her confident, slim chin; they all drew me into the picture, and I decided that I should give the information plaque a read.

Blah, blah, she was someone's lover, she might have been his lover, okay. What's new? Every single 'muse' in art history has turned out to be the artist's lover, or else caught in some kind of sexual drama in the artist's life. (Picasso's various... indiscretions unfortunately seem to have proven the rule, not the exception. See Diego Rivera, Dante Rossetti, Francis Bacon, Auguste Rodin, and many more!) That wasn't what interested me. What interested me was the fact that Toulouse-Lautrec painted *Portrait of Jeanne Wenz* when he was 22 years old—"still a student," according to the plaque. And I, a fellow art student, then at the ripe age of 19, thought:

*Well, I need to be better than him by the time I'm 22.*

Then I didn't question it.

That thought sat inside me for months, not once critically examined. Every week, I left the Art Institute. I returned through its many doors. I sat in Gallery 242 and even sketched a bit of *At the Moulin Rouge*, as is the wont of every historically-inspired artist. Finally, one day, as I was staring at *Portrait of Jeanne Wenz*, now at the age of 20 and vowing to be better than Toulouse-Lautrec by the time I was 22, it hit me.

Why was I thinking this way? Why was I pitching myself against an accomplished illustrator, painter, and creator; someone whom I deeply admired? Someone who had their works in a world-renowned museum, who was already crowned a cultural icon, and who, most importantly, was dead?

That rush of clarity left me cold. It was disturbing—this strange, unobserved anger I'd been stoking against one of my favorite artists, someone who could never do anything to elicit my personal fury because, as stated before, he was quite dead. I was resentful, I was bitter, I was envious, I wanted to be both just like him and better than him.

*Why?*

## SECTION II. WHO WAS HENRI de TOULOUSE-LAUTREC?

Let's begin by investigating the painting that started all of this. *Portrait of Jeanne Wenz*, painted in 1886 in France, is an oil painting of Jeanne Wenz, an artist and mistress of one of Toulouse's friends, Frederic Wenz.<sup>1</sup> As stated prior, Toulouse-Lautrec painted this when he was 22 years old and attending the Parisian ateliers of Léon Bonnat and Fernand Cormon, both accomplished artists. During this time, he began to paint prostitutes, as seen in *The Streetwalker*,

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<sup>1</sup> "Portrait of Jeanne Wenz." n.d. Art Institute of Chicago. Accessed November 19, 2023. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/42949/portrait-of-jeanne-wenz>.

which depicts a popular prostitute of the time nicknamed La Casque d'Or (Golden Helmet). Thus began a lifelong interest in the dirty, sordid, and raw world of everyday people. This is notable because he himself was not an everyday person. Born to wealthy parents, he was a member of the aristocracy. As was the fashion of wealthy folks at the time, his parents were first cousins, which resulted in Toulouse-Lautrec's dwarfism—by breaking his legs in his youth, a genetic abnormality was spurred into action, and they never grew to adult length.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, he established himself as a prolific illustrator, creating posters and prints for clubs, shows, and other commercial endeavors. He frequently attended nightclubs, had numerous lovers, was incredibly social, and overall a bright star until his untimely death at thirty-six due to complications of alcoholism and syphilis.<sup>3</sup> So there we have it—a classic art world bad boy, someone who lived fast and died young. Why was he compelling to me?

I was initially drawn to him because of his paintings. He's generally more well known as a lithographer and illustrator than painter, and my introduction to him was an exception to that reputation: I learned of him through his painting *At the Moulin-Rouge*, one of my favorite works of art. However, after investigating him further, I discovered his illustrative career and felt that he was a kindred spirit. All too often, illustration and design are derided as “decoration”<sup>4</sup> and to see a successful painter also be a successful illustrator was revelatory.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael, Cora. 2010. “Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901).” *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. May 2010. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/laut/hd\\_laut.htm#:~:text=In%201882%2C%20Lautrec%20moved%20from](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/laut/hd_laut.htm#:~:text=In%201882%2C%20Lautrec%20moved%20from).

<sup>3</sup> Michael, Cora. 2010. “Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901).” *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. May 2010. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/laut/hd\\_laut.htm#:~:text=In%201882%2C%20Lautrec%20moved%20from](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/laut/hd_laut.htm#:~:text=In%201882%2C%20Lautrec%20moved%20from).

<sup>4</sup> Archimbaud, Michel. (1993) 1993. *Francis Bacon: In Conversation with Michel Archimbaud*. London: Phaidon.

(When I was young, I often agonized over what I would do with my art. I knew, without fail, that I wanted to be an artist—but what kind? Would I be a painter? An illustrator? A fashion designer? A writer? I strongly believed I had to pick one or the other. Seeing Toulouse-Lautrec’s paintings and posters was one of the first cracks in that mentality.)

My interest in Toulouse-Lautrec deepened when I began to really consider his subject matter. His confounding, strange subject matter. At first, I simply admired his technique; his musky color palettes, his energetic brushstrokes, his stylized rendition of reality. His art popped into further clarity when I realized, oh, he’s hanging out at a nightclub to paint this.

He wasn’t cloistered in an ivory atelier tower, painting some milquetoast nude Greek statue to appease salons. He was painting random people. I figured, well, I, too, enjoy painting random people and things. At the very least, *considering* random people and things is a huge part of my practice—just walking around and taking pictures of the way light might hit a chunk of trash on the ground is inspiring. Toulouse felt more “real” to me than those other Old Master artists, not bourgeois and fancy like Sargent or Monet or Michaelangelo or any of the ones who painted for the Pope. (I had this thought before I learned of his wealthy familial background).

These qualities made him—and by extension, his *skill*—attainable, on some level, in my mind. And if I could attain that skill, then I needed to do it faster than him. I needed to do it better.

Thus began my feud with Toulouse-Lautrec.

### **SECTION III. WHAT MAKES ART VALUABLE?**

We’re taking a detour now. Let’s talk shop—more specifically, value. How can we classify value? The most immediate answer is that of commercial value; in other words, capitalist value. One of the great struggles of every emerging artist is the question of pricing.

How do you price your own work? There is no clear answer. You can price it ludicrously high if you believe it to be good enough. You can price it for less than a cup of coffee. You can give it out for free. There are industry standards, but they're not rules, and everyone does it differently.<sup>5</sup> The existence of this problem proves that art is not designed to be priced in a capitalist mindset. If it was, there would be immediate answers to "How much should this cost?" beyond "It should cost however much you feel it costs."

So, having established that money is a deeply flawed way of *valuing* art, how else can we value it? Subjectively. We can value it based on what it means to us. If someone's deceased grandma painted a picture of a lovely tree, that lovely tree will mean much more to the grandma's grandchild than to some Wall Street stockbroker. And if faced with a hypothetical to acquire a Picasso work or the tree picture, but not both, the grandchild may choose to keep the tree picture over the Picasso. A blue-chip Picasso artwork would mean a lot more to the stockbroker than to the grandchild. This leaves us in a tricky position—if money is a flawed way of judging value in an artwork, and two different people can hold radically different values towards the same work of art, then how can we possibly know what to put in cultural institutions like the Art Institute of Chicago?

Taste.

Taste is an indefinable quality that every human being possesses. Loosely speaking, taste is someone's preferences for fashion, for art, for design, for cuisine, for culture. Everyone's taste is different, yet there is a collective taste as well. That collective taste is often dictated by *decorum*—defined by Dr. Giovanni Alois as "the [element] that could subliminally shape our

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<sup>5</sup> Heather Darcy Bhandari, and Jonathan Melber. (2009) 2017. *ART/WORK*. Nd. Simon and Schuster.

conceptions of race, class, gender, and sexuality without us realizing it.”<sup>6</sup> From the moment of birth, our taste does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by those around us. By our parents, our teachers, the advertisements we see, the media we watch. As Dr. Aloï eloquently said, it’s “insidious” in nature, omnipresent and invisible. Although decorum helps us out by structuring society to be livable (for example, it’s in poor taste to urinate in public), it also has undue influence over our individual tastes and what we enjoy in artwork.

The collective taste presented in a museum, therefore, is a merging of the individual tastes of educated arts administrators and curators (educated in university institutions practically defined by their adherence to collective decorum), and the wider taste of the nation's culture at large. The AIC deems Toulouse-Lautrec’s art important enough to dedicate nearly the entirety of Gallery 242 to his work.

Taste and decorum often combine in ways that aren’t obviously detrimental. In fact, they can be enjoyable—to a specific kind of person. For example, I attend a decorous university, and with my university student status I gained access to Toulouse-Lautrec’s work. I was presented with it in a clean, orderly manner which falls neatly into the upper echelons of high class. Everything about my museum experience was tailored for me, in regards to both my individual taste and the collective’s taste—I’m interested in art history, I’m interested in the fine arts, I take great pleasure in standing in a silent room with my hands neatly clasped behind my back, viewing these fine works of art in a fine institution.

The stars aligned and my individual taste has turned out to be in line with the museum’s taste. This does not necessarily mean that I have *good* taste. It is very easy to point out bad taste, but it is much more difficult to determine good taste.<sup>7</sup> The museum is generally thought of as

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<sup>6</sup> Aloï, Giovanni. 2018. *Speculative Taxidermy Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (Columbia University Press)

<sup>7</sup> Pope, Alexander. 1804. *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*. New York: A.L Burt.

having good taste because it aligns with the decorous qualities mentioned above. It is in-tune with the national culture, it presents the public with work that (ideally) appeals to the public so it can generate revenue, and occasionally it might put on a more daring show after the success of a major blockbuster. The AIC's excellent *Remedios Varo: Science Fictions* arriving on the heels of the middling yet wildly popular *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde: The Modern Landscape* comes to mind. However, whether the museum's taste is good or whether my taste is bad is an arbitrary question; unanswerable and one which can be squabbled over for the rest of eternity.

We can be left with the conclusion that taste is a much more complicated and much more truthful way of valuing art than monetary pricing. And given that Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings are given such a place of honor in the AIC, we can determine that his paintings are deemed by the collective—or perhaps, the Arbiter of Taste, which we will discuss later—as both valuable and in good taste.

The facts are this: I have my own individual taste. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's artwork aligns with my taste. It also aligns with the collective taste. Yet I still felt the immediate urge to dominate his success upon viewing his work instead of simply appreciating it. This brings us to a very important point—the capability of a working artist's artwork to *generate revenue*.

#### **SECTION IV. CONCLUSION**

The point of something is not always clear.

Let's say someone spends countless hours hand-crafting a joke. They've put literal blood, sweat, and tears into this joke, and people only laugh at it for half a second then turn their attention to other things. What was the point of all that time, all that skill? Is there anything genuine in the joke at all? Why did they waste their time and skills on that joke?



Creating something for fun is what the Arbiter of Taste<sup>8</sup> abhors. The Arbiter of Taste is many things. It is the AIC. It is the administration of an art school. It is the judgment panel of a national grant. It is your conservative uncle who said you shouldn't pursue art because there's no money to be made. It is a branch of government regulating the kind of art people are allowed to create.<sup>9</sup> Creating something silly and stupid, something in *bad taste*, for your own enjoyment is antithetical to the tenets of capitalism—it isn't being made to meet a demand, it won't appreciate in monetary value, it won't have any monetary value at all. It exists outside of that system.

That is why I love art.

Unfortunately, although some art may exist in a space outside of capitalism, the artist doesn't. The artist's tastes have been manipulated since birth to align with capitalist tastes—this hypothetical artist loves the museum, loves the art being shown in blue-chip galleries, loves all the marketing associated with fine art. I fit a lot of those characteristics. I recognize that the museum is an Arbiter of Taste, and I agree with most of those tastes. I aspire to belong to a big, fancy gallery where I'll be famous and I won't have to worry about rent anymore. I love going to art fairs, which are commonly regarded as dens of ruthless capitalism where art is reduced to an investment for people with too much money. While all of this is true, I also recognize that my genuine emotions have, at least in part, been generated by my involuntary involvement with the American capitalist machine. I make art because it's what I was born to do, but as soon as my art leaves my hands, it becomes an "art object," and a price is assigned to it. The number of that price then determines my lifestyle—whether I will be comfortable, or whether I will be destitute.

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Simon. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Lecture. Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>9</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 2019. "Culture in the Third Reich: Overview." Ushmm.org. 2019.  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/culture-in-the-third-reich-overview>.

And the Arbiter of Taste is the one who decides that number.

This subconscious awareness of my complete dependency upon my art to be tasteful enough to generate revenue so I can survive is why I felt so strongly about seeing a young Toulouse-Lautrec's work in the museum. If I was enshrined in that same holy place, I would finally be safe and secure. If I was big enough, important enough, clever enough and genius enough to be in the Art Institute of Chicago, I would have made my millions and been sitting pretty in the victor's history books. That is the vision of a happy future capitalism promises those lucky and advantaged enough to realize it. And because I, on some level, bought into it, I was envious of Toulouse-Lautrec.

It doesn't matter that he's dead, or that we are nothing alike (similar only in that we are both artists), or that my feeling was irrational. At that moment when I was looking at *Portrait of Jeanne Wenz* and feeling fury, I wasn't angry at Toulouse-Lautrec or his considerable skill. I was envious of what that painting represented—success. Financial success, social success, even legacy success; after all, someone is writing a paper about him 122 years after his death. And I was angry that I haven't achieved it yet.

“Yet” is a funny word here. It implies that there is still a possibility of achieving those things—because there is. But if I ever do, I won't know it. Even if, in some glittering future, I get a show at the AIC, it's impossible to live long enough to see how my art would affect people a century after my death. But that's the true insidiousness of this particular aspect of the capitalist mindset. A part of me believes that it is possible to achieve such acclaim because it *is*. The trouble comes from everything else. What privileges do I have, what privileges do I not have, how much luck do I have, how much talent—in capitalism's jargon, *genius*—do I have? I can try to explain some context, and I can even get into some reasons as to why I am advantaged or

disadvantaged in our current social and economic systems, but I can never answer these questions in any way that matters. I'll never know what the future holds because it isn't here yet. And I'm still left with this feeling—this bitterness, this envy, this anger.

So what do I do? Do I embrace that frustration? Do I let it fuel me, do I become motivated by spite? Plenty of successful artists have been spiteful, frustrated, or otherwise emotionally stunted—one need only examine the entirety of the American Abstract-Expressionism canon to see that. Or do I pick a different path? Do I become aware of the root causes of my competitive impulses, and do I work to understand them? Do I choose to embrace the *fun*, embrace the *joke*, embrace using my artistic skills for something *ridiculous* because that's the only thing that can't be touched by the Arbiter of Taste?

Art is a rebellion. The Arbiter of Taste—fascism, capitalism, institutional hierarchy, that innate need we humans have to control others—is inherently unstable. Such complete control is unnatural. Art *is* natural; we can see that by looking at human history.<sup>10</sup> From the oldest cave paintings to contemporary video, the urge to create art is mysterious, primal, and ever-present. That is why the Arbiter of Taste arbitrates art. It knows it cannot stop art's creation, cannot stop that art from touching people's hearts, so instead, it fruitlessly tries to control what art is produced and what art is seen. But it cannot be everywhere all at once, cannot succeed in its mission, because art exists beyond what the Arbiter of Taste believes it to be.

Art does not exist to benefit a system. The process of its creation benefits no-one, except, perhaps, the artist who made it. What is left behind in the process of making—the “art object” that the Arbiter of Taste is so obsessed with—that is not the true art. The true art is the process itself. The process of creation is not spurred or crushed at a government's whim. An executive's

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<sup>10</sup> Ministère de la Culture. n.d. “Lascaux.” Archeologie.culture.gouv.fr. Accessed 2023. <https://archeologie.culture.gouv.fr/lascaux/en>.

whim. A gallerist's whim. It exists beyond artificial, man-made structures. It lives in minds and hearts. It moves people in a way that nothing else can. The radical freedom of creation is more powerful than any system which tries to crush it, and that is why the Arbiter of Taste tries so hard to strangle it and cut it off at its knees. But the Arbiter of Taste is fighting a losing war. It will never stop failing, never stop losing, because someone, somewhere, will always create art in their *own* taste for the sake of creation and nothing more.

Art is the only thing that matters. *Art is the only thing.*

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