

Henri Rousseau at the Barnes Foundation



(The Snake Charmer, 1907. Musee d'Orsay, Paris.)

A once-in-a-generation exhibition. A visionary artist revealed.

Step into the lush, hypnotic world of Henri Rousseau, one of the boldest forces in modern art.

Born in 1844, and with no formal art training, Rousseau defied the odds to become a cult figure to avant-garde legends such as Pablo Picasso. His paintings—dreamlike, symbolic, and deeply strange—range from imaginative visions of the jungle to portraits that capture his neighbors and loved ones.

*Henri Rousseau: A Painter's Secrets is the first major US exhibition in decades dedicated to this pioneering French painter. Featuring nearly 60 works—including world-famous highlights like *The Sleeping Gypsy*, *The Snake Charmer*, and *Unpleasant Surprise*—the exhibition invites you to see Rousseau in a whole new light.*

Henri Rousseau

BARNES

About Henri Rousseau



Born May 21, 1844, in Laval, France, Henri Rousseau attended the lycée there until 1860. While working for a lawyer in 1863, Rousseau was charged with petty larceny and joined the army to avoid scandal. He never saw combat and did not travel outside France, but his colleagues' adventures in Mexico inspired him to create legends of his own foreign journeys. Upon his father's death in 1868, Rousseau left the army. The following year he entered the Paris municipal toll-collecting service as a second-class clerk; he was never promoted although he has traditionally been called "Le Douanier" (customs officer). In 1884 Rousseau obtained a permit to sketch in the national museums. He sent two paintings to the Salon des Champs-Elysées in 1885, and from 1886 until his death, he exhibited annually at the Salon des Indépendants.

By 1893 Rousseau retired from the toll service on a small pension and began to paint full-time. The same year the artist met the writer Alfred Jarry, who encouraged him and introduced him into literary circles. In 1899 he wrote a five-act play entitled *La Vengeance d'une orpheline russe*. A waltz he composed, "Clémence," was published in 1904. Rousseau became friendly with Robert Delaunay by 1906. In 1908 he began to hold musical and family evenings in his studio. Late that year Picasso arranged a banquet in honor of Rousseau, which was attended by Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and Marie Laurencin, among others. (Pictured: The Football Players, 1908).

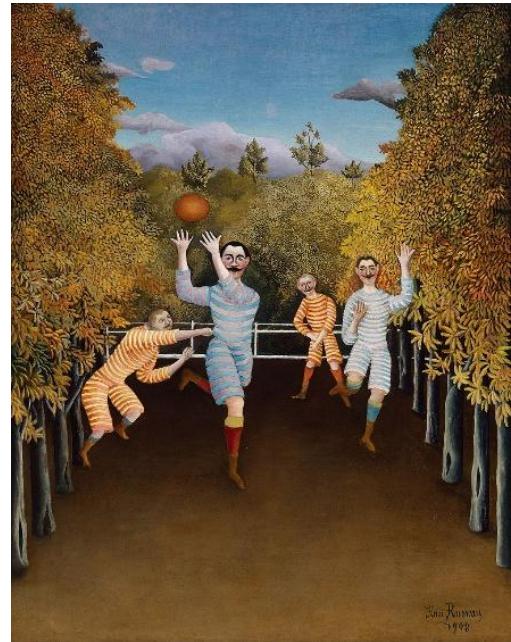
By 1909 Rousseau's paintings were acquired by the dealers Ambroise Vollard and Joseph Brummer. His first solo show was arranged in 1909 by Wilhelm Uhde and took place in a furniture shop in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Rousseau died on September 2, 1910, in Paris. The same year an exhibition of his work in the collection of Max Weber took place at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery "291" in New York. He was given a retrospective at the Salon des Indépendants in 1911.

(Text source: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/henri-rousseau>)

About the Retrospective:

"The outsider who came in: Henri Rousseau retrospective opens at Philly's Barnes Foundation." By Peter Crimmins, WHYY News, 10/20/2025.

Known for his strange jungle scenes and dreamscapes, Henri Rousseau was a self-taught artist in late 19th-century Paris who struggled to be recognized his entire career.



His life was burdened with debt and criminal prosecution. When he was able to rise from obscurity, he was ridiculed. Now, his works are collected by nearly every major art museum in the world.

“Rousseau’s ambition outstripped his success in his lifetime,” said curator Nancy Ireson of the Barnes Foundation.

“Rousseau had terrible things said about him in the press. Journalists said that he painted with his feet, with his eyes closed. They called him all sorts of things. He didn’t sell his works,” she said. “Yet he keeps making art. He clearly has this unshakable self-belief.”

[“Henri Rousseau: A Painter’s Secrets”](#) is a major retrospective featuring almost 60 paintings from institutions around the world. It was put together by the Barnes Foundation, which has the largest collection of Rousseau paintings in the world, and the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris, with the second largest. (Pictured: “The Rabbit’s Meal”, 1908).

Per the title, Rousseau was secretive both in his life and his work. Relatively little is known about him, considering his status today as a major artist.

While growing up, his family lost their home in Laval, France, to debts and they lived in boarding houses. As a young man, he worked for a lawyer and began studying law but was convicted of embezzling money from his employer, then joined the army to avoid prison.

Rousseau worked most of his life as a low-level customs clerk in Paris, retiring in his 50s to paint full-time. He continued to run afoul of the law for unpaid debts on art supplies and for bank fraud, for which he was briefly imprisoned.

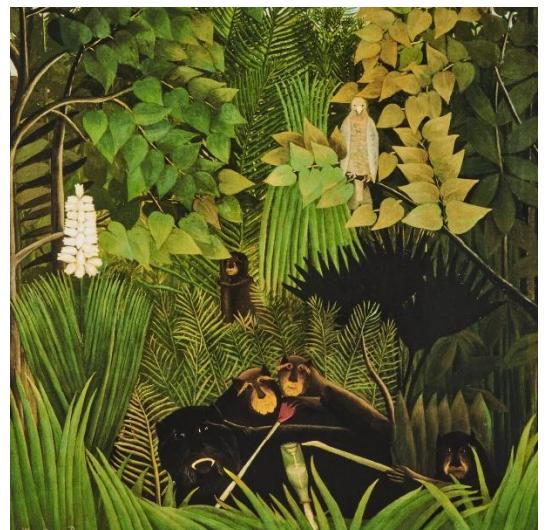
“He was not an honest man,” said Christopher Green, who co-curated the exhibition with Ireson.

“He was passing false checks with a friend of his who devised a rather complicated fraud,” he said. “The advocate who spoke for him held up one of his pictures in the court and said, ‘Could somebody who painted a picture like this really have known what a check was?’”

Rousseau likely knowingly leveraged his reputation as a naive artist for leniency, and it worked. The judge gave him a suspended sentence.

The “Secrets” of the exhibition title also refers to the canvases Rousseau painted, which have more questions than answers.

His flattened compositions have the simplicity of folk art. Most of the faces of his figures are facing squarely forward, and with rare exception, nobody is seen in profile. (Pictured: “The Merry Jesters”, 1906. *When Rousseau was on trial for bank fraud, his*



defense presented one of his monkey paintings as evidence that he was too naive to participate in such a scam.).

His compositions also show a sophisticated draftsmanship, precise brushwork and inspired use of color. His famous “The Sleeping Gypsy,” borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, features a multicolored pinstriped dress, echoed by her hair and the strings of a lute lying beside her. In some of his nighttime jungle paintings, the background foliage is layered black on black, creating subtle shifts of depth.

Almost all his paintings have an element of fantasy. The jungle paintings, which gained popularity toward the end of his life, have bizarre shifts of perspective and proportion, with gigantic flowers, trees that don’t quite make sense, deformed animals and incongruous figures, such as an American Indigenous person fighting a gorilla in what seems to be a botanical garden.

Rousseau never traveled outside of France and had no idea what a jungle actually looked like.

“What we do know is that Rousseau was really inspired by visits to the botanical gardens in Paris,” Ireson said. “He went often to the [Jardin des Plantes](#), which is in the city, and there he would enter the hot houses. He really loved seeing those different species of plant.”

Green described Rousseau as a story giver, not a storyteller.

“He gives you the materials for a story, but he doesn’t necessarily tell you how you’re going to tell this to yourself,” he said. “It’s very suggestive and sometimes quite ambiguous.”

Despite personal and professional setbacks, Rousseau remained steadfast in his own talent.

“It’s just extraordinary, the chutzpah of the man. The complete refusal ever to be discouraged,” Green said. “It can only come from a faith in what he was doing”

It was 15 years after Rousseau’s death, in 1910, before his talents were recognized widely, and even that was due to dealmaking. Berthe “Comtesse” de Delaunay sold “The Snake Charmer” to collector Jacques Doucet on the condition that upon the buyer’s death, the painting would be bequeathed to the Louvre Museum, which it was in 1925. Once in France’s national collection, Rousseau’s reputation for the next century was secured.

(Text Source: <https://whyy.org/articles/philadelphia-barnes-foundation-henri-rousseau-retrospective/>)