

**Rousseau, Henri** -- known as Le Douanier Rousseau (1844-1910). French painter who is one of the most celebrated of naïve (untrained) artists.

Born in Laval, France

Not a lot is known from his childhood - did win an award for vocal music and one for drawing.

His interest in music continued all of his life – he even composed a waltz for his wife, Clemence.

He entered the army after school as a saxophonist. He claims to have been in battle with Napoleon III (however, it is not fact) no records back it up.

His nickname refers to the job he held with the Paris Customs Office (1871-93), although he never actually rose to the rank of 'Douanier' (Customs Officer). Before this he had served in the army, and he later claimed to have seen service in Mexico, but this story seems to be a product of his imagination. He took up painting as a hobby and accepted early retirement in 1893 so he could devote himself to art.

His character was extraordinarily ingenuous and he suffered much ridicule (although he sometimes interpreted sarcastic remarks literally and took them as praise) as well as enduring great poverty. However, his faith in his own abilities never wavered. He tried to paint in the academic manner traditionalist artists, but it was the innocence and charm of his work that won him the admiration of the avant-garde: in 1908 Picasso gave a banquet, half serious half burlesque, in his honor.

Rousseau is now best known for his jungle scenes, the first of which is *Surprised!* (*Tropical Storm with a Tiger*) (National Gallery, London, 1891) and the last *The Dream* (MOMA, New York, 1910). These two paintings are works of great imaginative power, in which he showed his extraordinary ability to retain the utter freshness of his vision even when working on a large scale and with loving attention to detail. He claimed such scenes were inspired by his experiences in Mexico, but in fact his sources were illustrated books and visits to the zoo and botanical gardens in Paris.

A look at any painting by Rousseau reveals his use of a simple style that recalls childlike drawing. Rousseau taught himself to paint and did not master the technical skills employed by painters since the Renaissance to render perspective and volume. The first Rousseau pictures many Parisians had seen were exhibited at the 1886 Salon des Independents, a show by artists who flaunted the conventional rules of art. Even there, the common reaction was laughter. Visitors went out of their way to point out the naive appearance of the work of this artist who seemed unable to paint in a professional manner. It did not help that Rousseau, with his bushy beard, delivered his paintings to the exhibition in a wheelbarrow. Only a few artists, including some of the impressionists, recognized the value of Rousseau's compositions.

He died in 1910 – he was 65. Only 7 people attended his funeral.

Rousseau was buried in a pauper's grave, but his greatness began to be widely acknowledged soon after his death.

Henri Rousseau Self Portrait

