



THE JOSLYN

CAFÉ SOCIETY: ART AND SOCIABILITY IN PARIS, 1855–1914

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Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864–1901), *Divan Japonais*, 1893, lithograph, 31 15/16 × 23 3/4 in. (81.2 × 60.3 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Estate of Lenore Polack, 2022.17.19, Photograph courtesy Bill Ganzel, Ganzel Group Communications, Inc.

ABOUT CAFÉ SOCIETY



Albert André (French, 1869–1954), *The Café*, 1917, oil on canvas, 15 × 18 in. (38.1 × 45.7 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the American Federation of Arts, 1943.60, Photograph © Bruce M. White, 2019

CAFÉ SOCIETY

Café Society: Art and Sociability in Paris, 1855–1914 examines the development of the French café and its impact on modern art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The exhibition considers the multitude of factors that led to the rise of café culture, café typology (from bistros and brasseries to cafés-concerts, dance halls, and cabarets), and the significance of the café as a site for artistic dialogue, expression, and experimentation. Paintings, drawings, and prints by Vincent van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, James Tissot, Edgar Degas, and more, demonstrate the importance of this subject for French and expatriate artists. Among all these remarkable artworks, *Divan Japonais* by Toulouse-Lautrec stands out for its compositional innovation and glimpse of Parisian nightlife, art, and patronage.

ARTIST OF THE NIGHT

Born in 1864, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a French artist whose work revealed the variety and modernity of Paris as the city grew into a metropolis. He was a prolific artist who worked across media from drawings to oil paintings to lithographs. In his posters, the artist used lithography's bold outlines, striking silhouettes, and unusual points of view to immerse the audience in the liveliness of cafés-concerts. Toulouse-Lautrec depicted Parisian nightlife across social classes, capturing people and events in both private and public spaces. The artist was interested in painting individuals with unique “public personae,” and he revealed how the outward identities were presented through their clothing, behaviors, and facial expressions. Many of his lithographs feature famous subjects, such as dancer Jane Avril and singer Yvette Guilbert, both on and off stage in Montmartre, a northern district of Paris. The artist also lived in this bohemian neighborhood for most of his artistic career. Montmartre brought together people from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds, while abundant cafés-concerts and dance halls provided spaces for both entertainment and artistic expression. Toulouse-Lautrec portrayed the unique pleasure and chaos Montmartre offered its residents and visitors in his artworks. His posters transformed advertising into an art form and helped establish the artistic poster as a cultural phenomenon.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864–1901), *Divan Japonais*, 1893, lithograph, 31 15/16 × 23 3/4 in. (81.2 × 60.3 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Estate of Lenore Polack, 2022.17.19, Photograph courtesy Bill Ganzel, Ganzel Group Communications, Inc.



DIVAN JAPONAIS

The café-concert was a type of café that appeared in the 1840s, where patrons could eat and drink while enjoying performances. Edouard Fournier commissioned Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to design a poster for his café-concert, the Divan Japonais. This café, with its Japanese-inspired décor and lanterns, was in Montmartre. The poster's complex composition brings together fashion, culture, and spectatorship, inviting the viewer to consider the social experience of attending a café-concert. In this lithograph, Jane Avril, the elegant, red-haired woman dressed in black, sits in a relaxed pose with her hand extended forward, holding a fan. Her figure dominates the foreground, and she seems to enjoy the performance at the Divan Japonais. Although Toulouse-Lautrec portrayed her as a patron in the poster, Avril was also a renowned Parisian dancer in the late nineteenth century. Seated to her right is Édouard Dujardin, critic, editor, and founder of the journal *La Revue wagnérienne* and of *La Revue indépendante*, whose attention is on Avril, rather than on the performer, Yvette Guilbert. While, Guilbert's face is cropped out of the composition, her long neck and signature black gloves would have been recognizable to people familiar with the café-concert scene and its famed performers. While Avril looks to the stage, Dujardin appears focused on his seatmate—creating a lively exchange of gazes across the pictorial field. Toulouse-Lautrec conveyed the dynamics among patrons, performers, and viewers in one image, suggesting the fluidity of identities in this culture that would come to be defined by spectacle.

LITHOGRAPHY

Invented in Germany in 1789, lithographic printing revolutionized the way artists reproduced and distributed images. This technique relies on the principle that grease and water repel each other. Making lithographs begins with an image drawn in reverse using a greasy crayon or ink on a limestone block. Artists treat the stone to prepare the image for printing, leaving blank areas water-moistened so they repel ink while the ink adheres to the greasy drawing and transfers to the sheet. In the early nineteenth century, many Parisian artists adopted this inexpensive technique to mass-produce posters.

Prints and portfolios were not always considered forms of high art. French artist Jules Chéret's technological innovations made color lithography possible at larger scales, and his refined aesthetic and decorative sensibility popularized the artistic poster. Building on Chéret's pioneering approaches to color lithography, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec experimented with other elements of the medium. Influenced by Japanese ukiyo-e woodcuts, many of his artworks have flattened perspective, cropped compositions, and intensive use of vibrant colors. These Japanese woodcuts entered the European art market after Japan reopened trade in 1854, and many avant-garde artists including Toulouse-Lautrec drew inspiration from their distinctive style.



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CAFÉ NIGHTLIFE

Café nightlife flourished in the second half of nineteenth century. While French artists celebrated café culture, emphasizing the café's role as a social and cultural site, they embraced the possibilities of lithography. Their promotional posters highlighted café performances. At night, live entertainment was a major attraction for cafés, where artists gathered to drink coffee or wine and watch the performances. Dancers and singers boosted the fame of these cafés-concerts and attracted increasingly affluent and fashionable audiences. Accordingly, performers and their stage acts became popular subjects in artworks.

With frequent visits by artists, writers, poets, and art connoisseurs, cafés also functioned as cultural institutions for inspiration and social connections. These collaborations further reinforced the interplay among all parties in Paris café society. Cafés and performers commissioned artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Jules Chéret to create publicity posters for different venues. These prints have become significant artworks that visualize the café culture for viewers today. The relationship benefited everyone: cafés attracted larger audiences, performers gained renown, and artists earned greater visibility, fame, and commissions.

Many figures appeared repeatedly in the work of multiple artists, reflecting the interconnected social and artistic circles. In Toulouse-Lautrec's 1893 print, *Divan Japonais*, Jane Avril is the protagonist, and Yvette Guilbert is a peripheral figure. One year later, another artist, Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, featured Yvette Guilbert in his poster at the well-established café-concert, Café des Ambassadeurs. In contrast to Toulouse-Lautrec's audience perspective in *Divan Japonais*, Steinlen presented the scene from the performer's perspective in *Yvette Guilbert/Ambassadeurs*. To Guilbert's left, the large crowd below the stage claps, indicating the performer's popularity. Closer to the stage, the conductor and the orchestra underscore the elaborate productions at the Ambassadeurs. These posters reveal the thriving café-concert culture in their time and the success of individual performers.

Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen (Swiss, 1859–1923), *Yvette Guilbert / Ambassadeurs*, 1894, lithograph, 71 3/4 × 31 1/8 in. (182.3 × 79.1 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Estate of Lenore Polack, 2022.17.18, Photograph courtesy Bill Ganzel, Ganzel Group Communications, Inc.

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