

14. The Sleeping Gypsy

Oil on Canvas

1897

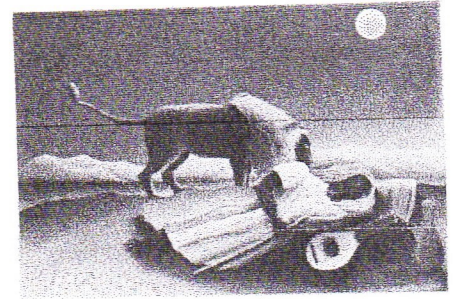
Museum of Modern Art, NYC

Henri Rousseau

French

1844-1910

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Painting Highlights:

In the following words, Rousseau described his painting, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, in a letter to the Mayor of Laval, the city of his birth (the offer was rejected): "A wandering Negress, a mandolin player, lies with her jar beside her (a vase with drinking water) overcome by fatigue in a deep sleep. A lion chance to pass by, picks up her scent yet does not devour her. There is a moonlight effect, very poetic. The scene is set in a completely arid desert. The gypsy is dressed in oriental costume." Also, an inscription on the frame reads, "The feline, though ferocious, is loathe to leap upon its prey, who, overcome by fatigue, lies in a deep sleep." The magic of this picture is the lion sniffing the sleeping gypsy but not harming her. Her mandolin, beggar stick and water jar are beside her. There is a mountain range in the background. The full moon appears to have a face. The light from the moon plays softly on the lion's back, mane and tail, and also on the instrument and the beautiful rainbow-striped dress. This seems to give the picture a serene and poetic feel.

Artist Highlights:

Rousseau has been called a "naïve" painter because he had no formal art training. He is quoted as saying he had "no teacher other than nature." Rousseau created several paintings which he called "portrait-landscapes." However, his best-known works are his jungle paintings. Rousseau never left France or saw a jungle. He received his inspiration from the botanical gardens and the natural history museum in Paris, and from illustrated books. He said, "When I go to the glass houses and I see the strange plants of exotic lands, it seems to me that I enter into a dream." In fact, his last painting, a very large jungle scene, is entitled "The Dream" (1910, MOMA). Rousseau painted every leaf of a tree and every blade of grass with simple, pure colors and clear outlines, and a smooth canvas with brushstrokes barely visible. The most striking aspects of his style are his flattened, almost childish figures. His scale, proportion and perspective seem somewhat skewed. Despite, and perhaps because of these flaws, his stiff jungle scenes have an air of mystery and other-worldliness to them—a dreamlike quality. Reactions to the paintings Rousseau exhibited over the years were quite varied. His work was often ridiculed, particularly by people who thought it was awkward and childish. For example, in 1891, one dissident journalist wrote, "Monsieur Rousseau paints with his feet with his eyes closed." Yet another critic complimented him saying, "the public has not yet reached the level of this genre." In any case, Rousseau's brightly colored, dreamlike paintings, many depicting exotic subjects, anticipated some of the major artistic movements of the 20th century, particularly Surrealism.

Influences: The botanical gardens of Paris were where Rousseau observed the plant life he so loved to paint. He also collected plant specimens on his Sunday outings to the woods outside of Paris. The Paris World's Fair also filled his imagination with its scenes of African and Asian villages and a Mexican palace. He was even inspired to write a play entitled 'A Visit to the Exhibition of 1889' which the Comedie Francaise told him would be too expensive to produce.

Presentation Ideas: Does this picture tell a story? Where is it? What time of day? Is it realistic? Is she dreaming? How does it make you feel?