The Elles Series: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s Unusual Approach to Prostitution

Anna Dobbins

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THE ELLES SERIES: HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC'S UNUSUAL APPROACH TO PROSTITUTION

by

ANNA ELIZABETH DOBbins

Under the Direction of Maria Gindhart, PhD

ABSTRACT

This essay will examine the new attitude with which nineteenth-century artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec approached the subject of prostitution. Toulouse-Lautrec's focus on the subject culminated with his production of the *Elles* series in which he offers a look into how the prostitutes lived within the brothel, the mundane aspects of everyday life. This series shows how these women were confined by their surroundings and is a divergence from the typical approach to depicting the *maison close* and the prostitute depicted by artists like Edgar Degas. By looking at his previous works on the subject and works by Degas one begins to see how Toulouse-Lautrec offers a new viewpoint.

INDEX WORDS: Toulouse-Lautrec, Brothel, Maison close, Prostitution, Lithographs, France
THE *ELLES* SERIES: HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC'S UNUSUAL APPROACH TO PROSTITUTION

by

ANNA ELIZABETH DOBBINS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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by

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DEDICATION

I am deeply grateful for the love and unwavering support my parents Scott and Lisa Dobbins have provided throughout my academic journey. Special thanks to my sister Ashley Hallin and all the love, encouragement, and special memories we have shared.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 2015 exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay, *Splendour and Misery: Pictures of Prostitution, 1850-1910*, there has been a renewed interest in the topic of prostitution in the art of nineteenth-century France.1 Grounded as well in the seminal work of scholars Hollis Clayson and Charles Bernheimer, the current interest in art depicting nineteenth-century prostitutes is primarily centered on the sexual aspect of their profession.2 In nineteenth-century Europe and specifically France artists became increasingly interested in the prostitutes and their illicit encounters. While this subject gained favor, few artists took on the task of depicting the everyday lives of these women.3 This essay will provide a new outlook on the subject by arguing that Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec created a more complex identity for nineteenth-century Parisian prostitutes in his works by focusing less on the explicit sexual nature of their job and gives a fuller sense of their lived experiences.

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1 The show ran from September 2015 to January 2016 in Paris and February 2016 to June 2016 in Amsterdam at the Van Gogh Museum.
2 The scholarly discussion around prostitution almost exclusively focuses on the sex and work of the women. This renewed interest can be found in the works of Nienke Bakker and Richard Thomson.
3 For background on prostitution in the art of nineteenth century France, I would suggest Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Bernheimer shows how society interacted with art and literature to create a narrative for these women. He examines how prostitutes were portrayed in popular culture in art and literature. Clayson also has a dedicated chapter that deals with the brothel, and though this chapter focuses almost exclusively on Degas it has provided some key information for further exploration into the art on prostitution. While to some Degas would seem a more likely subject, his monotypes have been thoroughly discussed in the literature on prostitution in art by not only Clayson, but also many other scholars. While her text focuses almost exclusively on Degas, she mentions Toulouse-Lautrec in passing saying that “it is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s single-minded concentration on brothel prostitutes in his art in the 1890s resulting in fifty pictures between 1892 and 1894 alone — that has forged an indelible link between fin-de-siècle Parisian art and the theme of prostitution.” Clayson, 3-5.
The nineteenth century opened the door for artists and authors alike to begin uncovering the world of prostitution in a new way. By this time they were not concerned with telling the story according to past structures based on morality or mythology. Instead they began to examine this “topical issue” by depicting real prostitutes, women who to some might be recognizable. As Nienke Baker points out:

Brothels have been represented for centuries in painting, but always with a historical or mythological setting or moralistic overtone. In the mid-nineteenth century the brothel entered art as a modern, topical issue, in keeping with novels on the subject in a time of constant social discussion on the dangers of prostitution and the pros and cons of regulation. What attracted artists to this subject? Was it a personal fascination with a forbidden world, a feeling of sympathy with the prostitute, or a desire to explore new material for the imagination in a contemporary subject?4

From Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* in 1865 to the Great War the subject of prostitution became more and more prevalent in society.5 Prostitution had seeped into the literature, poetry, art, and theater of the time. Though this topic became a familiar one, not all those who chose to take on this subject approached it with the same style or the same attitude.6

Artists and authors alike chose to show these women as immoral sexual beings who were to be reviled, pitied, and looked down upon.7 The works of art produced, at a

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5 Dr. Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet said the profession is “a torrent that cannot be stopped, but which can be channeled up to a point.” (336) And “there are none more prevalent than unemployment and penury, the inevitable consequence of inadequate wages” (103), quoted in Bakker, 50-51. While by the late nineteenth-century Parent-Duchâtelet’s monumental work had been set aside, it allows for a view of how the basis of regulation was established.
6 Bakker, 14-20.
7 Said of the first images of prostitution outside of the press, they were meant to serve as a window into “the type of beauty peculiar to evil, the beautiful in the horrible...” Charles Baudelaire and Jonathan Mayne. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays* (London:
glance, seem to be only concerned with the profession of these women and their sexuality. Holidays, meals, dressing, regulation, bathing, and other everyday aspects of life are frequently overlooked. However, a limited number of images showing women and the more mundane aspects of life within the brothel do exist. There is a body of works that focus on this side of prostitution by Felicien Rops, Félix Vallotton, and, most influentially, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The scholarly discussion around prostitution almost exclusively focuses on the sex work of the women, and rarely goes beyond the profession. Mundane details can be telling of how life was for these women, and by examining these images one begins to see the hidden identity of the prostitute formed. An identity that allows the viewer to see the prostitute as an individual and not just a type.

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Phaidon, 1964), 433, Bakker, 120. There is also a catalogue of literary work on the subject of prostitution. See Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables; Emile Zola’s Nana.
8 This was overlooked for women more generally as well. The everyday was only significant when it concerned men.
9 Rops was a Belgian/French painter who moved to Paris in the 1870s following a failed marriage. His art was affected by his move to Paris with a shift to working on images of erotica and prostitution. Vallotton, a Swiss/French painter moved to Paris to study at the Académie Julian. He was influenced by the works of Ingres which can be seen in his paintings of prostitution.
10 Bernheimer, 157-160.
2 ARTIST BACKGROUND

Why did he choose to show the nineteenth-century prostitute in this way? The answers to these questions can possibly be found in his life and upbringing. As noted catalogue for the Musée de Toulouse-Lautrec in Albi, France:

Toulouse-Lautrec was much more than a simple customer of the brothels that were so numerous in late nineteenth-century Paris. At once a participant and spectator, he saw and drew everything. He got involved in the everyday lives of the prostitutes, was liked by them and knew many of them personally. Some became friends and sat for him in his studio.11

This sense of belonging and fitting in with the people of Montmartre would allow Toulouse-Lautrec the ability to blend in and afford him a different kind of access to these women, such as living within the brothel on Rue de Moulins for a time and observing and making sketches of the women. He was a such still a man, a client, and a voyeur.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born in Albi, France, in 1864 to first cousins Alphonse Charles Comte de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa and Adèle Zoë Tapié de Celeyran. While Toulouse-Lautrec became the apple of his mother’s eye, his father left soon after his birth for a hunting lodge in the Loire Valley. His father chose to make this his permanent residence and lived apart from the family for several years. There began to be a hint of something wrong with young Toulouse-Lautrec when he was just a baby; there was an issue with his foot that the doctor told the family to keep an eye on, and he did not start walking until he was seventeen months old, which was unusual.12 By the

11 The Musée Toulouse-Lautrec Albi, 32–33.
12 Julia Bloch Frey, Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life (New York: Viking, 1994), 16-18. This biography by Frey is considered to be the most comprehensive work on the life of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.
time he was seven, his mother noticed that there were some issues with his
development. As a child he was small and often sick, and he suffered from pain.\textsuperscript{13}

Adèle saw her son as her forever burden whom she kept a watchful eye over well
into his adult years. To escape his overbearing mother, who spent much of her time
with him in Paris, Toulouse-Lautrec became a fixture in Montmartre, known as the
\textit{butte} by Parisians. Toulouse-Lautrec found a sense of freedom within Montmartre
culture, as the people and the atmosphere were accepting of him. In the nineteenth
century, Montmartre was seen as unclean, had cheap rent, and was a place to which the
marginal people in society could escape.\textsuperscript{14} Montmartre was the place one would find
young girls who wished to be actresses dancing the cancan at the Moulin Rouge or
where one might find dancing halls and singing cafes.\textsuperscript{15}

The lively nightlife of Montmartre was a popular subject for artists in the
nineteenth century with the large number of possible scenes and settings. Though the
people around him could often tell that he was not from the working class, Toulouse-
Lautrec chose to be a part of this segment of society. He chose to accept people from all
walks of life, and this is seen within the art that he produced.\textsuperscript{16} Rather than showing the
prostitute as someone to judge and condemn, Toulouse-Lautrec’s approach to life and

\textsuperscript{13} Frey, 43-47. Toulouse-Lautrec and his mother were quite close, with his father often absent
from their life. As a child and well into his adult years she was very overprotective of him.
When he moved to Paris, his mother would often visit for extended periods of time.
\textsuperscript{14} Frey, 3-5, Bakker, 96-97.
\textsuperscript{15} “The Rat Mort by night has a somewhat doubtful reputation, but during the day was
frequented by painters and poets. As a matter of fact it was a notorious centre of lesbianism, a
matter of which, being very young, and a novice to Paris, I knew nothing. But this gave the Rat
Mort an additional attraction to Conder and Lautrec. It was there that I first met Toulouse-
Lautrec, Anquetin and Edouard Dujardin … The luncheon at the Rat Mort cost two francs,
which was rather a large sum for me.” Stated by William Rothenstein in 1887, quoted in Frey,
375.
\textsuperscript{16} Frey, 5-10.
art allowed him to show these marginalized women as people. Time and again, he humanizes them.

When looking at his oeuvre, one finds a pattern. He chooses to go against the grain and not simply follow tradition. Instead he focuses on the underbelly of society and life in Paris. It was said of him in 1884 by fellow painter, Francois Gauzi, that:

At the Atelier Lautrec shows disdain for the subject-matter recommended by Cormon, themes chosen from the Bible, mythology, and history. He considers that the Greeks ought to be left to the Pantheon and firemen’s helmets to David. He derides painters [who are] obsessed by the technicalities of their profession....He loathes gloss...  

While going against tradition was not new by this point in the nineteenth-century art world, Toulouse-Lautrec’s choices of subject matter, style, and execution took his art to another level. In his art, however, Toulouse-Lautrec almost always chose to depict an interior. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he does not focus on the outside and street scenes of the modern prostitute, but instead he turned his attention to the interior and often the private moments within the brothel.  

Through his personal experience within the brothels in nineteenth-century Paris, his works provide a new perspective surrounding the prostitute. His images help to construct an identity for these women that goes beyond their profession. He does this by depicting the prostitute in everyday life, by examining the perils of being a prostitute, and by evoking empathy for his subjects. Toulouse-Lautrec shows these women from the


\[18\] Frey, 5-10, Bakker, 242.
perspective of another prostitute or someone within the brothel.\textsuperscript{19} He provides a view inside the brothel and evokes an empathetic feeling from the viewers.

\textsuperscript{19} Bakker, 130-132.
3 TOULOUSE-LAUTREC’S EARLY WORKS ON PROSTITUTION

Scholar Charles Bernheimer states, “Lautrec’s prostitutes are not commodities. Their personalities have survived the objectifying force of the capitalist transactions to which Degas shows them succumbing.” By examining the works of Toulouse-Lautrec, we begin to see a new artistic perspective of the brothel. Instead of creating images that were highly sexualized like those of Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec has created a catalogue of works that only subtly reminds the viewer that the subject is prostitution. His images are subdued and calm, they are not overtly sexualized for viewer effect.

Degas’ monotypes on the brothel focused on the interior as described in literature and from memory. While offering a viewpoint of the brothel, they provide a different perspective than those of Toulouse-Lautrec. They look at the sexual nature of the profession. His images almost exclusively depict nude women who are gathered waiting on clients, and often there is a man within the composition. Even in his works of the women alone or in groups, the women are still naked. These works offer us another perspective and another side of the story. By examining how these women lived, the viewer has to consider their job and what it entails. Degas’ focus is on their bodies, which is seen in the images as there is little to no background detail. Instead the details are in the figures he depicts.

This can be seen in The Madam’s Name Day [fig. 1], where the madam of the house is surrounded by the girls who work for her. In this humorous rendition of what could be considered a brothel “family portrait,” the naked women are gathered, and while the wall is yellow and the floor is red the viewer’s eyes are drawn to the women.

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20 Bernheimer, 198.
21 Bakker, 122-124.
The background colors are there to enhance the black and white approach to depicting the women. As one begins to further examine Degas’ monotypes, the images seem to showcase an orgiastic atmosphere within the brothel. Numerous naked women are intertwined with one another as their clients come in and out of the composition.  

We see this continue with *In the Salon* [fig. 2], where Degas has shown the interior waiting room of the brothel. The women, again naked, wait to be chosen by clients. The depiction of figures lying on sofas intertwined with one another allows for the bodies of the prostitutes to speak. Their body language is meant to draw the client in, to make him choose her. The scene is grounded by the madam and client who are fully dressed and representative of the outside world. Yet, here again we see the focus on sex and the client-prostitute relationship. Degas is depicting images that reinforce the idea that these women should be viewed as lesser.

In contrast, Toulouse-Lautrec is depicting what he sees; he provides a look at the everyday activities of these women. His images are less sexualized; they are a prosaic look into the world in which these women live. Toulouse-Lautrec’s women are typically clothed in gowns, and their bodies are not offered up to the viewer. Instead he encapsulates them in shapeless garments meant to de-sexualize. While clothed, they are still waiting for clients. One of the main differences between the works of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec is that some of the women Toulouse-Lautrec depicts are women with identifying characteristics. Degas shows a “type” of woman; his figures begin to run

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23 There is a hint of lesbianism here as with several works by Toulouse-Lautrec such as *The Sofa, Au Lit, and Le Divan Rolande*.
25 Bernheimer, 195-199.
together each looking more and more like the next. In Toulouse-Lautrec’s scenes, on the other hand, we can recognize Madam Baron, Popo, and Rolande.

While images of the prostitute seem today to have been prolific during this time in Paris and throughout Europe, these scenes within the brothels, maison closes, were not always available to the public. In his exhibition at the gallery of Maurice Joyant in 1896, Toulouse-Lautrec kept his works of prostitutes hidden in a small room only available to those he deemed worthy, namely his friends and other men (as long as they were not art dealers). This self-censoring of images was not unique to Toulouse-Lautrec. For example, Degas’ many monotypes on the subject were not released until after his death when they were discovered in his studio. They only became known when Ambroise Vollard used them as illustrations for the 1934 short story “La Maison Tellier.”

Degas’ brothel scenes are filled with naked women gathered wearing only stockings and high heels as they wait for their clients. All the women he depicts are similar, they fit a type for the artist who is pulling his inspiration from the life of the characters in Edmond de Goncourt’s La Fille Elisa (1877), which tells “tragic stories of girls who find themselves in prostitution due to poverty and meet with a bad end.” Many of his images are directly quoted from the novel. Degas was not alone in his knowledge of the work of the Goncourt Brothers; Toulouse-Lautrec was also very aware of the work and after hearing that there was to be a reprint of the La Fille Elisa, he was

26 Bernheimer, 198.
27 He also chose not to exhibit At the Salon of the Rue des Moulins because he did not want to cause a scandal. Bakker, 130.
28 There were over 70 other brothel scenes in Degas’ studio, but it is believed that his brother destroyed these as they were too explicit in content.
29 Bakker, 122-123.
30 Bakker, 122.
eager and willing to take on the illustrations. However, the Goncourt Brothers, having a low opinion of the artist, rejected his idea. Toulouse-Lautrec then decided to decorate his own copy of the novel with 16 watercolors.⁴¹

Painted around the same time as his other works on prostitution, *Salon de la Rue des Moulins* [fig. 3] shows the main room of the brothel where the women would wait on their callers for the night. This work is more detailed and fully colored in comparison to some of his other works, in particular the *Elles* series. Seated on large faded red sofas the women wait scattered on the right side of the composition. In contrast to the salon scenes by Degas, these women are separated and not entwined with one another. They occupy their own space, and they are staring blankly into space, yet they are not looking out at the audience. The only figure inviting the viewer into the composition is Madam Barron as she sits in her pink dress and looks out at the viewer. To the far right we get a hint of the subject matter of another of Toulouse-Lautrec's works, which will be discussed below, with the women lifting her skirt around her waist. As the women are fully dressed, is this image of prostitutes waiting on their clients or are they waiting on their medical inspection?⁴² Given the overall atmosphere of the work and the fact that these women are dressed, it is likely that instead of waiting on clients these women are in fact waiting on their medical inspection.

This Moorish style brothel was a favorite of Toulouse-Lautrec. He frequented the establishment and became friends with some of the women there. In this work there is

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⁴¹ This was not the only example of a rejection of the artist. Though he was an admirer of Degas, it is reported that this admiration was one way, Degas having been quoted as saying, of Toulouse-Lautrec's work, “It all stinks of syphilis.” Bernheimer, 195. Zsuzsa Gonda and Kate Bodor, *The World of Toulouse-Lautrec* (Budapest: Museum of Fine Arts, 2014), 126-127.

⁴² This idea is introduced in Bakker, 130.
the unusual aspect of the Madam, seated on the front sofa wearing a long pink dress with a high collar, looking out and making eye contact with the viewer. This is highly surprising in that rarely does Toulouse-Lautrec depict these women engaging with the viewer. Since most of his works leave the viewer with a voyeuristic perspective, it is interesting that in this work, we as the viewer are invited in. Perhaps Toulouse-Lautrec is making a statement about the women and their treatment within these spaces by allowing the viewer in, and as such the viewer takes on the role of the client.

In his pastel drawing, *Rue des Moulins, 1894* [fig. 4], we see two women in line holding their dresses up around their waists and exposing themselves to an unseen medical worker. At this time regular medical inspections were a required part of the job for prostitutes who worked legally, as these women were at risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis, though clients were not examined. Toulouse-Lautrec places these women in a bright red room with harsh lighting, and he uses this color to contrast against the pale white skin of the women, and this stark change in color creates a sense of anxiety and emotion within the viewer. The observer is given a voyeuristic perspective and is not invited into the scene, as the women are looking away. His contemporaries were shocked not only by his choice of subject, but also in how he chose to show these women. By showing this not-so-popular scene, the artist gave his audience a look into the lives of these women who had become popular subjects for painters such as Manet and Degas. He has taken this subject of the prostitute and humanized it by treating these women differently.

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34 Bernheimer, 196-199.
35 Bernheimer, 198.
While most of his works focus on life within the brothel, one of his first images of a prostitute, *A St. Lazare* [fig. 5], is a print dealing with the aftermath of being found to have a venereal disease. Based on the song of the same name by friend and colleague Aristide Bruant, Toulouse-Lautrec depicts a woman writing at a desk wearing a dress and bonnet. The first verse of the song states,

I’m writing to you from jail
My poor Polyte
Yesterday I don’t know what came over me
During the check up
There are diseases you cannot see
When they break out
All the same today I’m among the crowd
At Saint-Lazare!36

This song touches on what happens when someone was found to have a job-related illness as a prostitute. St. Lazare women’s prison and detention center for prostitutes, run by nuns from the Marie-Joseph order, is where one would be sent, and while there they would receive treatment.37 Clothed within the composition, her body is not the focus. This print takes the prostitute out of the brothel and places her in the “world,” although this is done by the woman being in prison. They have been taken from the prison of the brothel to the literal prison of St. Lazare.

Many of the artist’s images give the impression that these women rarely left the brothel. They were imprisoned within the walls of the *maisons closes*: they ate, slept, and socialized there. In *Three Ladies in the Refectory* [fig. 6], we see meal time within

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36 “C’est d’la prison que j’t’écris, Mon pauv’ Polyte, Hier je n’sais pas c’qui m’a pris, A la visite C’est des maladies qui s’voient pas, Quand ça s’déclare, N’empêche qu’aujourd’hui j’suis dans l’tas… A Saint-Lazare.” Quoted in Bakker, 34

37 Bakker, 34.
the brothel, with the three women seated around a table appearing blank and
uninterested. A fourth figure represented in the reflection of the mirror allows the
viewer to see that she is telling a story. Their faces are blank, the two blonde women
appear dressed in undetailed pink dresses, and they lack distinct facial features, while
the woman at the head of the table retains parts of her identity.

As we thematically progress through Toulouse-Lautrec’s works on the subject of
prostitution, we begin to see how he chose to depict these women. Instead of conflating
their profession to either praise or condemnation, he focuses on their life.38

38 Bakker, 130.
Figure 1  Edgar Degas, *The Madam’s Name Day*, 1876-1877  
© Musée National Picasso
Figure 2 Edgar Degas, *Au Salon (In the Salon)*, 1879-1880 or 1876-1877
© Musée National Picasso
Figure 3 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Salon de la Rue des Moulins*, 1894
© Musée Toulouse-Lautrec
Figure 4 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Rue des Moulins, 1894 © National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Figure 5 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, A St. Lazare, 1889
© Metropolitan Museum of Art
Figure 6 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Three Ladies in the Refectory*, 1893-1894
© Museum of Fine Art Budapest
4 ELLES SERIES

From 1892 to 1895, Toulouse-Lautrec produced a body of work which focuses on the prostitute and culminated in the production of the *Elles* series. Toulouse-Lautrec spent these years living with prostitutes, watching them, and using them as models. In 1896, publisher Gustave Pellet printed a series of works by Toulouse-Lautrec that focuses on the profession of prostitution. The *Elles* series includes a cover, a frontispiece, and ten prints that provide a window into the private lives of the nineteenth-century Parisian prostitute.

His *Elles* series, printed in a run of 100, shows the life of the prostitute. Though sets like these were popular among collectors, the *Elles* series did not sell well, and this is attributed to the fact that they were not the erotic images the publisher expected. Pellet and other publishers printed many sets of erotica during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but the *Elles* series does not contain the same erotic quality as others. Instead the series provides an invaluable window to look at what Toulouse-Lautrec experienced for himself within the brothel.

This set of lithographs allows for further exploration not only into the lives of the women at these brothels but also the influence of Japanese woodblock prints, which Toulouse-Lautrec admired. Toulouse-Lautrec looked to the work of Utamaro and his prints involving courtesans and the ways in which Utamaro depicted these women.

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39 Each print itself has a story to tell. While at the BnF in Paris I was given the opportunity to view numerous of iterations the same print which allowed for exploration into what each had to offer. Every print is different they have been preserved differently and there are slight differences in the printing. This allows for different details to be highlighted in each one. I also had the opportunity to view the entire series at the High Museum of Art.

40 Bernheimer, 195-196.

These images of the Edo red light district show women in both erotic and everyday scenes. In an album he was particularly fond of, Yoshiwara, we see where Toulouse-Lautrec began to pull his colors from: “he adopted a particularly refined scale of blues, pinks, and greens.” These are the colors we see in the *Elles* series and throughout his works on prostitution.

While Japanese prints were quite fashionable in nineteenth-century Paris, Toulouse-Lautrec’s quotation from Japanese prints is stylistic, and, while they depict the same subject matter, these prints are less erotic than many Japanese prints of prostitutes. Toulouse-Lautrec adopted the practice of foreshortening, the reproductive aspect of using lithography (much like woodblock prints), and the use of silhouettes from the Japanese prints of which he was fond. By using foreshortening within his prints, he places the audience on the same level as the figures within the composition. This can give the viewer the sense of being within the composition, without actually being invited in. While he is pulling inspiration from the French and Japanese works, he is ultimately changing his view of the subject.

Each of these detailed lithographs is 21 by 16 inches and varies in color and style. About half of these are monochromatic with little variation in color, while the other half are vibrantly colored with five to six colors and a more detailed background. All but one of these lithographs shows a private moment within the brothel, one where these women are alone or with another prostitute. This series, unlike his others, contains no

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43 Frey, 266–267, 281-284.
text, no guide to reading what he is depicting. He provides no narrative in text or in the images as they are not scenes to be played out one right after the other. While the series was initially exhibited at the Salon des Cent in the Galeries de la Plume, it gained little to no attention and did not sell as well as anticipated.45

This was not the only time this series was shown, as three prints were exhibited at the Salon des Independants the following year, and the complete series was shown in Brussels at the La Libre Esthetique. While this series of prints received a fair amount of publicity (and was reasonably priced at 300 francs), very few complete collections were sold, and by 1898 the unsold prints were returned to the artist. This lack of interest and purchasing of the prints is likely the explanation as to why there are few collections of this series as a whole.46 Some of the attention the works did receive was negative about the subject.

With works by artists like Manet and Degas so readily available, how do these images differ? According to Maurice Barrès it could be used as a teaching lesson: “Lautrec ought to be subsidized by parents to inspire young people with a horror of illicit relations.”47 It seems that the horror surrounding not only Toulouse-Lautrec’s work but also the works of Degas and Manet is more about the subject matter, prostitution. These images are no longer inherent works of naked/nude women who are strictly seen as sexual beings. Instead, by humanizing these women and placing them in a context where anyone can relate, it creates a sense of anxiety for the elite of the time. No longer

46 Gonda, 131.
47 Frey, 418. Ironic no, that these images were considered to be a teaching point for moral validation, were there not more explicit images that would have been better?
could the elite sit back and pretend that these women and these situations did not exist, they were instead challenged to look at these works as representative of this segment of society.

While the theme is not different from that of Manet or Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec’s works show the subject matter in a new light. This difference is that he is choosing to show the audience the interior private activities of these women. He is humanizing them. Toulouse-Lautrec’s works, while at times similar in technique to Degas, focused on a new type of image. Degas focuses more on the women, their sexuality, and their profession, while Toulouse-Lautrec begins to de-eroticizes these women. Toulouse-Lautrec spent some time living in Parisian brothels; during his time there he made sketches and drawings of the life of the prostitute. Toulouse-Lautrec shows what happens behind closed doors, so let's start at the beginning.

The Couverture [fig. 7] and Frontispiece [fig. 8] are the same image, with the Couverture in black and white and the Frontispiece in color. In this print which depicts a woman standing alone with her back to the viewer, we get a hint of the subject matter of the series and of the profession of the woman with the top hat on the bed. The hat alludes to the fact that there is likely a man in the room, a client. Toulouse-Lautrec, however, does not give the man a presence in the room outside of the hat. The image is about the woman and her role within the brothel. As she pulls her hair off her back so that she can reach the back of her dress the viewer understands that she is beginning to undress. Yet, since she has turned her back to the viewer we are greeted with anonymity as we do not know at whom we are looking. With this first image we begin to see the
subject of the series: prostitution.\textsuperscript{48} With the way she is pulling her hair to the side as she begins to undress and the top hat placed on the bed, one can see the subtle indications as to what the woman does for a living. These and other small hints occur in many of the works within this series.

This image was used not only as the album folder and the frontispiece, but also as the poster to promote the album. The posters had text added about the series and the show following their release stating, “Lithographies editees par G. Pellet 9, Quai Voltaire à Paris Exposées à la PLUME 31, Rue Bonaparte à partir du 22 Avril 1896.” It is also in this image that we begin to see, especially in regards to the composition, the influence of Japanese prints.

Out of the ten within the \textit{Elles} series, \textit{La Clownesse assise; Mademoiselle Cha-U-Kao} [fig. 9] is the only one not of a prostitute. In this work, we see Miss Cha-U-Kao seated in a setting devoid of a crowd or group. It is interesting that in the one print which does not have a prostitute he chose to show a lesbian performer from the Moulin Rouge, as he has numerous images of the brothel that explore the idea of lesbian interaction. The image, while different in nature, has similar qualities to those of the rest of the series as well as to many other works by Toulouse-Lautrec. When considering why Toulouse-Lautrec chose to depict this performer within the \textit{Elles} series, one must take into account the similarities between the professions of these women.

\textsuperscript{48} My visual reading of these images has been influenced by the visual analysis of Riva Castleman, \textit{Toulouse-Lautrec: Posters and Prints from the Collection of Irene and Howard Stein}; Nora Desloge, Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec, Phillip Dennis. Cate, and Julia B. Frey, \textit{Toulouse-Lautrec: The Baldwin M. Baldwin Collection, San Diego Museum of Art}; and Zsuzsa Gonda and Kate Bodor, \textit{The World of Toulouse-Lautrec}. I am using the titles used by Castleman.
Cha-U-Kao was a performer at the Moulin Rouge whose main audience was male, just like the prostitute. There are many correlations between late nineteenth-century performers and prostitutes. They were there for male gratification and delight, they lived troubled lives, and they were often looked down upon.49 While this image is not of a prostitute, it does show another type of marginalized woman at this time, one who is there to serve as an entertainer for male delight. This lesbian clownsnesse represents another facet of the lives of marginal women in nineteenth-century Europe.

In *Femme en Corset: Conquête de passage* [fig. 10], we see the first and only man within the composition. Instead of alluding to the man, Toulouse-Lautrec has chosen to place him within the composition. However, he is restrained and confined within the space as the woman dominates the composition. There is a similar quality to this print as there is to Manet’s *Nana* (1877) [fig.11] as the man and woman are occupying what feels like different spheres within the composition as if they are alienated from one another.50 While stylistically very different, these two works have a very similar composition, with a woman standing at the center/left of the frame while a man sits fully dressed at the edge of the right side of composition.

As the woman in the center begins to undo her bustier, a man wearing a suit and black top hat sits watching. While there is a lot of white space within the image, Toulouse-Lautrec has also contrasted this with the shading of the couch and floor in the foreground. Toulouse-Lautrec uses yellow throughout the room: in the dress of the woman, the hand of the man, and the birds on the couch. In the painting on the wall

49 Castleman, 116, Desloge, 144-146.
50 Gonda, 143-144.
above the couch one can see a satyr and a nude figure lounging.\textsuperscript{51} This is a reference to the woman’s profession of sexual commodification, and this is not the first time we see subtleties reminding us who the subject is.\textsuperscript{52} The face of the man has been obscured, but his identity is clearly seen within preparatory sketches as painter Charles Edward Conder. Toulouse-Lautrec obscured the face of the man, possibly to let him stand in for all the men who pass through the brothel, much like he chose to obscure some of the women within the brothel to give a sense that this could be anyone. It is thought the flying birds in the fabric of the couch speaks to the title of the work and the everyday occurrences at the brothel of passing conquests.\textsuperscript{53}

In \textit{Femme au Tub; Le Tub} [fig. 12] we begin to see more use of color in the domestic interior, with the black-grey dress of the woman (similar to that in the coverture), the yellow wallpaper with red accents, the red floor, and the wood around the fireplace. This more detailed image shows a woman bending with her back to the audience as she pours water into her tub from a pitcher. In this image we begin to gain a better understanding of the subject matter of the series and the profession of the woman. Bathing was a popular scene with prostitution, as these women were viewed as conduits for passing along disease. While not overtly sexualized, there is a bed within the composition and the bed faces a mirror at an angle where those on the bed can view themselves. On the left side of the room we see a fireplace with a bust of a man situated on the hearth.

\textsuperscript{51} Castleman, 132.
\textsuperscript{52} In Toulouse-Lautrec’s \textit{Leaving the Theater} we see a nude sculpture placed in front of a mirror to the right of the composition that reminds the viewer of the sexual nature of the subject.
\textsuperscript{53} Castleman, 132.
In this image, there is a flatness to the prostitute. As she is pouring water, she is partially placed between the basin and the pitcher. Toulouse-Lautrec has chosen to show the quietness of the brothel after hours. The woman is shown alone in her room, where she is getting ready for bed. The mirror, like many other small items in his works, alludes to the profession of the women. As the viewer, we have an unusual perspective. We are not located within the space or outside of it, but we are a voyeur who has been granted private access to this woman who is alone in a room within a brothel. Wearing a dress, her naked body is shielded from the viewer. There is a quietness within the composition as we peer into this room and watch this nightly routine.

This sense of quietness continues within the composition of *Femme qui se lave; La Toilette* [fig. 13], where the artist shows a partially nude woman from behind as she washes herself. She is standing at a sink basin, and we can see her reflection within the mirror. Above the mirror we see a small work of art with two figures lounging across the composition that alludes to her profession as a prostitute and to the brothel setting. This image differs from *Woman with a Tub* in that it is lightly colored and appears hand drawn. The only color we see are a few small spots of blue, and the rest of the image is left in a sketch form. The woman is leaning her body weight on the sink as she washes her neck. She is standing heavily on one foot, and one can see her exhaustion in her posture. The way in which Toulouse-Lautrec shades her curves alludes to this tired feeling, along with the light use of the color blue in the reflection of the mirror.

This image has a voyeuristic quality, inviting the viewer to watch what is taking place. This voyeuristic quality contributes to the uneasiness of the image. As the viewer we feel empathy for the woman but not in a way where we would judge or condemn. The sensuality of the image is felt in the “erotic mythological image” located above the
mirror, along with the woman’s bare breasts being reflected to the viewer. The sensuality of this image, like the one before, revolves around the mirror within the composition. There is also the recurring hint of anonymity, with the woman's hair falling in her face obscuring her features.\textsuperscript{54} As with several works within this series, Toulouse-Lautrec has obscured the identity of women, and he does this to allow the viewer to place anyone within the composition. By obscuring the faces, he is not using a type but is instead calling the viewer to look at the work and the woman within it and to understand that this could be anyone. This use of anonymity can be linked to the inspiration of Japanese prints which often feature silhouettes.

Nineteenth-century Japanese prints exhibit a flatness and a heralding of silhouettes, which can be seen within many of the works in the \textit{Elles} series. The figures are not shown directly from the front holding eye contact with the viewer, instead the figures are turned slightly or significantly. This choice of using silhouettes can be seen within the Japanese art tradition, and Toulouse-Lautrec takes cues from this in his art.\textsuperscript{55} This quotation from Japanese prints creates a fusion within his art, one that pulls in his Parisian artistic roots and influence from the East.

In \textit{Femme à la glace; La Glace a main} [fig. 14], the print is in a partially sketch form with little color used to accent the elements. The image itself is quite busy. A bed sits off to the right in nearly full view with its grand headboard, pulled back canopy, and thick sheets and pillows. To the left of the room is a chair placed in front of the fireplace. The chair is filled with clothes, and the mantle of the fireplace holds a sculpture of a reclining woman. There is very little coloring within the composition, with only the

\textsuperscript{54} Gonda, 140-141.
\textsuperscript{55} Frey, 295, 325-326.
yellow and brown of the chair, the skin of the woman, and the slippers bedside the bed. Here we begin to see other recurring themes form, such as the repetition of mirrors and art within art. In this work, the mirror is an object of vanity and practicality. The woman is looking at herself in a handheld mirror. The mirror is used in some of these images to get ready, and in some it is used as a reminder of the women’s profession.

_Femme qui se peigne; La Coiffure_ [fig. 15] is printed with a dark background and shows a prostitute partially dressed/undressed. She is seated on the floor combing through her hair. She is situated by a sink basin and mirror to the left of the composition while she occupies the center and right side of the image. She is dressed in a dark dress that, along with the dark background, contrasts against her pale white skin. By choosing to use a darker background and only two colors in the composition, the artist creates a contrast that makes her skin and specifically her breasts the focal point of the image, it is where your eye is drawn, again creating a voyeuristic quality. This image differs from the previous two because it has a possible sexual component. The angle we are offered of the women is one where her body has been put on display. When viewing this we do not necessarily feel as though we should feel empathy or loneliness for the woman. Out of the context of the series, it could be just a regular woman getting dressed for an evening out, as she is not inherently grounded as a prostitute. There is very little context within the composition as there are no immediate clues that the woman is in a brothel. This is a private personal scene where the woman is grooming which links it to others works within the series.

In _Femme au lit, profil; Au Petit Lever_ [fig. 16], we see Madam Baron and a younger woman who is likely her daughter, Popo, in conversation. Popo is sitting up in a large wooden bed under a red and white duvet, and this is played against the yellow
textured wall. The odd perspective within the composition flattens the image.

Toulouse-Lautrec adds color to only the figure of Madam Barron, in her bright orange-red hair. In this image, we begin to see another side of the profession: the one between Madam and prostitute. As prostitutes aged out of their work with clients, some would go on to become a Madam within the brothel. They knew better than anyone the day in and day out of the job. If one was born into the brothel by a woman who was a prostitute, one was almost guaranteed to follow in her footsteps. Toulouse-Lautrec has chosen to show a different dynamic within the brothel: the relationship between the women and specifically between mother and daughter. As this image shows, Toulouse-Lautrec explores not only the personal and private time of the typical prostitute but also the relationships between the women within the brothel. This is linked to *Femme au Plateau*, where we see the relationships with the brothel. He shows the tensions of their bodies and how they interact with each other. This work is more stylized than *Femme au Plateau*. The setting is more detailed with attention being shown to the background and objects within, yet there is no distinct hint at prostitution.

In *Femme au Plateau, petite déjeuner; Madame Baron et Mademoiselle Popo* [fig. 17], we see two women. The younger is laying in bed propped up on her arm surrounded by crinkled sheets as she gazes at the other older woman leaving the room. The other older woman leaves the room carrying a tray with breakfast. The colors within this work are minimal, and the scene is sketched out with red ink and feels almost unfinished. This print, unlike others in the series, is one where the figures are known. Madam Baron is the older woman carrying the tray and is the Madam of the house, while the woman laying in the bed is Mademoiselle Popo. In this scene we see mother and daughter. As Popo was raised in the *maison closes* with her mother working as a
prostitute, it was typical for her to follow her mother’s footsteps into the world of prostitution.56

*Femme Couchée; Reveil* [fig. 18] is another print where Toulouse-Lautrec has chosen to leave the final product as a sketch. In this work we see a woman barely awake as she peeks through the sheets. Her head and hand are the only parts of her body that are exposed to the viewer. Void of color, this print shows a woman who is fully encapsulated in the bed as if she is just waking from a coital trist. Her eyes tell a story. As she peers out from under the sheets, she gives a look of exhaustion. Her eyes are partially open, and her arm is clinging to the pillow she lays upon. While we can see her face enough to partially see her expression, her features have been obscured to keep her anonymity.

This print, unlike many within the series, leaves the subject matter a bit ambiguous. In the other prints we see hints to the profession of the women in the art placed within the composition or in the references to men in the top hat or the subtle use of hair as a sensual element. However, in this print we do not see these hints, and there is no art on the walls or no reference to a man outside the composition. Instead, the subject matter of the series is left a mystery.

In the final image of the series, *Femme sur le dos; Lassitude* [fig. 19], a young woman lies across the bed with the sheet around her haphazardly. This image, printed on a blue tinted paper, is hard to fully see. With the dark blue of the paper and the light

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56 In the late 1890s red crayon drawings had a resurgence in popularity due to quotations from works of art from the Rococo. This resurgence touched not only the art of Toulouse-Lautrec but also the work of artists such as Degas and Renoir. This is also a quote from the erotic works of Francois Boucher. Mlle Popo stares seductively out at the viewer, while her mother does not invite the audience within the composition. Castleman, 118.
sketching of the work, it allows for unknowns. Has she layed back on the bed out of exhaustion or pleasure? Is she just finishing with a client or is she tired after a long work evening? This image is the most ambiguous within the series as it leaves things unanswered and does not fully ground itself within the series as a whole. There is a woman’s hat placed to the far left. This makes the space her own. Instead of placing a man’s top hat as he did in *Frontispiece*, Toulouse-Lautrec gives the woman ownership of the space by using a woman’s hat.57

In this series Toulouse-Lautrec treats the subject of prostitution differently. Instead of creating works with naked women in provocative poses, he has placed these women in their everyday routine. While they are seen in a mundane brothel setting, he has placed subtle reminders to what these women do for a living in the setting of many of the prints. By using recurring themes such as mirrors, art within art, and references to men, Toulouse-Lautrec has reminded the viewer of the subject of this series while also treating these women in a different way.

57 The hat is seen more clearly in preparatory sketches.
Figure 7 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Cover (Couverture)*, 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 8 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Frontispiece*, 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 9 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Elles: The Seated Clowness, Miss Cha-U-Kao (La Clownesse assise, Mademoiselle Cha-U-Kao), 1896 © High Museum of Art
Figure 10 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman in a Corset, Passing Conquest* (*Femme en corset; Conquête de passage*), 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 11 Edouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877
© Hamburger Kunsthalle
Figure 12 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Elles: Woman with a Tub (Femme au tub; Le Tub), 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 13 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman at her Toilet, Washing Herself (Femme qui se lave; La Toilette)*, 1896

© High Museum of Art
Figure 14 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman Looking into a Mirror Held in her Hand (Femme à la glace; La Glace à main)*, 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 15 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman Combing Her Hair (Femme qui se peigne; La Coiffure)*, 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 16 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman in Bed, Profile, Getting Up* (*Femme au lit, profil; Au Petit Lever*), 1896

© High Museum of Art
Figure 17 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman with a Tray, Breakfast, Madame Baron and Mademoiselle Popo* (*Femme au plateau, petit déjeuner; Madam Baron et Mademoiselle Popo*), 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 18 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Elles: Woman Reclining, Awakening (Femme couchée, reveil), 1896
© High Museum of Art
Figure 19 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Elles: Woman Lying on her Back, Lassitude (Femme sur le dos; Lassitude)*, 1896
© High Museum of Art
5 CONCLUSION

The work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec opens a new and unique window into the lives of nineteenth-century Parisian prostitutes. As stated above, “Lautrec’s prostitutes are not commodities. Their personalities have survived the objectifying force of the capitalist transactions to which Degas shows them succumbing.”

This significant observation by scholar Charles Bernheimer captures the essence of Toulouse-Lautrec’s work. He creates this new identity by de-sexualizing them and offering a new attitude accompanied by new perspectives for viewing them. While we are still within the brothel, each of the settings is focused more on the women than the brothel itself. We see the prostitute in unassuming places, alone in the brothel bedrooms (which become their bedrooms), doing their hair or getting dressed, and reclining alone in bed. Each of these setting offers something for the viewer that is not inherently linked with their profession as a prostitute. They simply become women.

The Elles series presents a new and different way of viewing the life of a prostitute in nineteenth-century Paris. Toulouse-Lautrec chose not to depict these women as sexual beings in provocative poses. Although there is sexuality and provocation in some of the prints within the Elles series, the sexual nature does not appear to be the main purpose and is not there for the viewer’s pleasure. Instead he is showing the audience life within the brothel, and he uses his unusual access within the brothel to do this. By choosing to focus less on the sexual aspect of the profession, Toulouse-Lautrec was able to offer a new way of depicting the nineteenth-century prostitute.

58 Bernheimer, 198.
By examining the *Elles* series we begin to see how Toulouse-Lautrec offers this unusual perspective of viewing the nineteenth-century prostitute within the brothel. The unique approach he offers is one that creates a more complex identity for these women. The viewer begins to take into account the non-sexual aspects of their lives. While the traditional cultural identity of prostitutes it often revolves around their profession and the sexual side of what they do, we must also consider the private side of their lives. These are people not commodities. Toulouse-Lautrec creates this more nuanced identity for the women in his images, one that takes into account not only their profession, but also the women themselves. Contemporary critic Jean-Louis Renaud stated:

The meaning of his work is still unclear to us, the desired effect cannot be seen. He portrayed Vice but not because he is attracted to it - since he avoided the obscene details - and not in order to moralize - since he did not want to emphasise the ugly; he represented it in its necessity, without commentary, irony, and legends, but banally, humanly and sadly.\(^{59}\)

Toulouse-Lautrec, much like his predecessors, dealt with the banality of the subject of prostitution by the 1890s. However, Toulouse-Lautrec began to offer a different outlook on viewing the women of the *maisons closes*.

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\(^{59}\) Quoted in Gonda, 135.
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