

# An artist's last words

*Kristen Martinets presents her senior thesis on Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*

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On April 28, Kristen Martinets presented her senior thesis in Anne Chapin's Art History class. About 30 people showed up to hear what Kristen had to say about an artist that has been pushed under the radar.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a post-impressionistic French artist, born in 1864. He was an essential figure in the theatrical life of Paris through the remaining 19th century. His collection of work encompassed the beauty, elegance and promiscuous activities of the self-indulgent culture of his time.

Toulouse-Lautrec was born to Alphonse Charles Comte de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa and Adèle Zoë Tapié de Celeyran. His parents were first cousins and as a result of his inbreeding, he faced a lot of health issues. First, he did not exceed past five feet tall because he broke both his legs when he was a teenager. The breaks did not heal properly and the result was growing an adult-sized torso while he remained with his child-sized legs.

Later into his adulthood, his mental health started to decline and he resorted to substances to cope. His drinking started to get out of hand and by 1898, he was a full-blown alcoholic. His drink of choice was absinthe and he used this drink for inspiration in his paintings. Toulouse-Lautrec was also dealing with complications from syphilis. It's estimated that he contracted the STI around the year 1890. When syphilis started to take effect on him, he began to use mercury for treatment. In 1898, he suffered a stroke due to all the toxins in his body, and as a result, his mother admitted him to an asylum.

In the asylum, Lautrec produced beautiful works of art. Most of the 50 plus paintings he made were themed around a circus. These paintings, in the end, were used as his ticket out of the asylum. In 1900, he had a brief period of sobriety, but that all changed in 1901. He suffered a second stroke and died at the age of 37.

His mental and physical health impacted the change in his art style. Through the years, one can see proof of how he executes his work.

His work throughout the years became brighter and heavily outlined so Lautrec could see what he was painting. His mark-making became shaky because he was in constant pain due to his partial paralysis later in life. But his inabilities and addiction didn't necessarily make his work "bad," Martinets said,

"He created some works to purposefully be more controlled and beautiful than his mental state," Martinets said. "I wouldn't necessarily say that a bright color palette is a bad thing—they are just his adaptations to make his work look good and clear to the viewer. Rather than sticking with a particular style and not adapting at all which, in turn, shows his decline a lot more and would have begun to look like a blob and an erratic mess."

It's important to remember Toulouse-Lautrec because he was an influential artist who may have inspired artists like Picasso and Warhol. He also persevered through his ailments and made history with art.

Martinets leaves us with this final statement: "A changed mental state from drugs or disease changes art, and even if you're not subjected to those things yourself, at least one of the artists who influences you would have most likely been subjected to a visually altering substance addiction or disease."

Even beauty can come out of the darkness.



Maurice Guibert / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

This photomontage by Toulouse-Lautrec's close friend Maurice Guibert is sometimes titled "Mr. Toulouse paints Mr. Lautrec" (ca. 1891). Guibert took a number of photographs of Toulouse-Lautrec in his studio.