



## Toulouse-Lautrec and the Brothels

1. *Toulouse-Lautrec dans son atelier*, 1894  
 2. *Marcelle*, 1894, Oil on cardboard.

### 1. LAUTREC, A WITNESS OF HIS TIME

In common with his contemporaries, Toulouse-Lautrec took an interest in the subject of brothels and prostitution. He produced and exhibited a large number of works on the subject between 1891 and 1895.

While most painters of modern life show the brothel as a place of pleasure and vices, and represent the prostitute as a vulgar and venal type, Toulouse-Lautrec stands out from the rest by creating images without making moral judgments and without voyeurism.

A regular visitor to the “saloons”, Toulouse-Lautrec offers us a real reportage on this fringe society. He minimises the erotic or vulgar aspect and only rarely mentions the commercial exchange and the client. He depicts moments in the private life of these women and describes their workaday world: the waiting, the medical check-ups, resting, domestic life etc.

### 2. FROM SKETCH TO GENRE PAINTING: BETWEEN ANONYMITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

Lautrec took sketches from life and made small format studies in oil on cardboard inside the brothels to use later in his studio for larger compositions, genre painting and finished portraits, perhaps executed with prostitutes as his models.

The representations are neither sexual nor pornographic. The bodies, made humdrum, scarcely modelled, are suggested using a few flesh tones or disappear under a garment or a sheet. Toulouse-Lautrec prefers to note a gesture, an attitude, an intimate or tender moment and evoke a sitter’s mood, sometimes in the purest tradition of the psychological portrait.

The scenes are melancholic, without indulgence and Toulouse-Lautrec’s figures demonstrate that every prostitute is a human being.

### Brothels in the 19th century

Prostitution was a social issue of great concern in 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1796, Napoleon had a register drawn up of Paris’s prostitution. In 1802, medical inspections became obligatory for prostitutes. In 1839, a law stipulated that prostitution could only be carried on inside closed brothels or “houses of tolerance”.

From that time on, the “bordel” (from “bordes”, neighbourhoods outside the precincts of the city) was subject to strict regulation: its opening had to be registered with the prefecture, its presence had to be signalled with a number on a coloured plaque and with continuous lighting, a register had to be kept of the “girls”, health checks were tightened, with the exclusion and confinement of syphilitics, etc.

For the prostitutes, life in a brothel was strict and difficult. Trips outside were limited or forbidden. Life was collective: the girls ate and slept together, and they waited for customers together. The madam, who took over half the earnings, was also the sole provider of all their daily needs (linen, soap, food, etc.).

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the proliferation of regulations saw the progressive decline of the brothels and spread of clandestine prostitution whilst feminist leagues and political voices campaigned to have them closed. This finally happened in 1946, with the “Marthe Richard” law, passed on April 13<sup>th</sup>, which closed 1500 brothels in France.