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Gabriel P. Weisberg

exhibition review of

Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge

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Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge

The Courtauld Gallery, London

June 16–September 18, 2011

Catalogue:

Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge,

Edited by Nancy Ireson with essays by Nancy Ireson and Anna Gruetzner Robins.

London: The Courtauld Gallery in Association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011.

144 pp., numerous illustrations in color and black and white, some not numbered; selected bibliography.

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Installed in the Courtauld Galleries, in two rooms, *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge* provided a visitor with the unusual display of all the major works produced by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec featuring his muse and friend Jane Avril—born Jeanne-Louise Beaudon in Belleville on June, 9 1868.^[1] In one room, displayed in cases and on the walls, were photographs, documents and other works by friends and lovers that showed how compelling a subject Jane Avril was to others besides Toulouse-Lautrec (figs. 1 and 2). In placing Toulouse-Lautrec and Avril within a larger historical context, the exhibition was successful in demonstrating how significant a celebrity icon Jane Avril was during the 1890s. The utilization of primary documents and period photographs fleshed out aspects of her often complicated life so that it was possible to understand where she had come from and what her life had been outside the circle of Toulouse-Lautrec and his colleagues in the Moulin Rouge cabaret and in Montmartre. This noteworthy exhibition (one which had never been done before) made it poignantly clear why Toulouse-Lautrec was attracted to the personality, creativity, and unusual beauty of Jane Avril. It also continually raised other significant questions for those aware of the Montmartrian culture at the end of the nineteenth century, although many of them could not be satisfactorily resolved in the show or its accompanying catalogue.



Fig. 1, Installation view of *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge*, Courtauld Gallery, London.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 2, Installation view of gallery with display cases showing documents related to Jane Avril.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

From her first appearance at the Moulin Rouge to her presence in this exhibition, Jane Avril asserts her personality through Toulouse-Lautrec's works, becoming a celebrity figure that was both troubling and unique. While she was often not a mainline performer at the Moulin Rouge, remaining in the background in many performances, she was foregrounded by Toulouse-Lautrec in his studies. The painter showed her wandering the streets of Montmartre or observed her close-up in a studio environment where she posed for the artist (figs. 3 and 4). [2] In *Jane Avril Leaving the Moulin Rouge* (1892) Toulouse-Lautrec created a psychological portrait that exposes the introspective nature of the model lost in her own thoughts and unaware of, or untouched by, the other passersby (fig.3). The artist's attention to her intelligent and sensitive face reveals Toulouse-Lautrec's keen understanding of her personality. Since Toulouse-Lautrec portrayed Jane Avril outside the focus of her performances at the Moulin Rouge, we may wonder what the artist wanted to convey about one of his most endearing models. Was there more to this relationship than has been believed? Had Lautrec found a kindred artistic soul? Questions such as this remain unanswered in the exhibition and in the essays for the accompanying catalogue although they were hinted at in the installation and in some of the catalogue entries.[3]



Fig. 3, Installation view showing [far left]
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril Leaving
the Moulin Rouge*, 1892.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 4, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of
Jane Avril*, 1892.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

With the *Portrait of Jane Avril*, (ca. 1891–92, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute) the question of artistic ties between Toulouse-Lautrec and Avril is raised once again (fig. 4). The excellent Courtauld catalogue note on the painting suggests that Jane Avril loved artists although further elaboration on this issue is not fully examined (64). Why did she love artists? Who were some of the other artists she admired?[4] Toulouse-Lautrec reciprocates in this painting where all the attention is focused on the strength of Avril's personality. His ability to highlight her face forces the viewer to look at it first when studying the image. The originality of this portrait, one of the standouts in the exhibition, suggests that there was much more in this relationship than meets the eye. This painting also underscores another central theme of the show: to go beyond Jane Avril as a performer, to leave behind the Moulin Rouge, and to concentrate on Avril's aura, albeit occasionally haughty, often introspective, and always fashionable (fig. 5).



Fig. 5, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril at the Entrance to the Moulin Rouge*, ca. 1892.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Toulouse Lautrec's lithograph for the cover of *L'Estampe Originale* (1893) highlights another side of Avril's personality taking his cue from the growing emancipation of women in society, and the novel interest many women took in the visual arts, Toulouse-Lautrec provides a tell tale clue to Jane Avril's personal interest in the arts. She is visiting the shop of a master printer, père Cotelte, and holds in her hands a proof of an image, perhaps the very image that shows her looking at this lithograph. Toulouse-Lautrec has given Jane Avril a privileged position: she is looking at an artwork, passing judgment on it as if she were a connoisseur. The catalogue entry documents how Jane Avril specifically posed for the print reproducing a sketch for the work (84). But where the catalogue and the show fall short is in trying to provide answers as to why Toulouse-Lautrec posed Jane Avril in this way. Had she become a collector of art works on her own? Was she someone with creative talent who produced her own art images? While none of these issues have been substantiated here, research on Jane Avril suggests that she was a creator on her own.^[5]

The fact that she was eventually involved in a romantic relationship with another artist, Maurice Biaï (1875–1926), a talented printmaker whom she later married, raises another issue only hinted at in this show with one ca.1895 lithograph by Biaï of Jane Avril as a performer (fig. 6). Why she was attracted to Biaï, who is almost totally unknown, is particularly puzzling. Perhaps realizing that she couldn't dance forever, she hoped to find some security in the relationship as well as a home and a legitimate family name for her son. To the credit of the show organizers, they have brought Biaï out of obscurity, found a documented reference to the date when Avril and he were married in 1911 and an attestation that Biaï adopted Avril's son (102).^[6] Aside from the one work by Biaï in the exhibition, and information that the relationship was particularly stormy and fraught with dissension, there is no more information about Maurice Biaï or the relationship between him and Avril. A trip to New York City after 1900 is noted, but the reason why this was undertaken is never mentioned. Actually, research has revealed that Biaï was sent to New York by his family with the hope that he would settle down, and perhaps forget Jane Avril. However, heeding Biaï's wishes that she come to New York, Avril followed him. Both came back soon after.^[7] While in New York, Biaï had a retrospective of his work at the Max Williams Gallery, an exhibition that was covered in a review in *The New York Times*.^[8] The range of works shown, when examined in depth, reveal that Biaï had an extensive career as a printmaker whose works often showed a silhouetted figure with red hair that could suggest the presence of Jane Avril, similar to the way in which

Toulouse-Lautrec used Avril in his works (figs. 7 and 8). Although Biais utilized images from German magazines of the time, as noted in a recent essay, he was a popular creator whose presence in the art world around 1900 brought him into the circle of Julius Meier-Graefe and his very progressive gallery La Maison Moderne in Paris.^[9] Biais was much more than a troubled creator as suggested in the exhibition catalogue; rather, he was a personality in the art world whose career was flowering by 1900. Because of this, he was able to provide—at least for a while—a home for Avril and her son in Jouy-en-Josas, not far from Paris.^[10] Unfortunately, Biais suffered from a lung disease, and was unable to maintain a stable home for his wife and son; by the 1920s, he moved to the south of France on his own, where he died in 1926.^[11] When Jane Avril passed away in 1943, during the Nazi occupation of Paris, she was interred in the Biais family vault at Père Lachaise cemetery with her name noted on the tombstone.^[12] What needs to be fully revealed in the future is the extent of Jane Avril's relationships with so many artists of her time especially writers and visual artists, her relationship with Biais being one among many. Since the Courtauld exhibition is about Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, the organizers cannot be faulted for not looking any further into Avril's associations with other artists; they have accomplished an eminently worthwhile study of their stated goal, yet it would be fascinating in the future to see another exhibition or a book where the emphasis would be Jane Avril and others (102). How many more of these associations there might be is only hinted at in the show itself. There is considerable room for continued research into Maurice Biais, his work, and his ties with the Parisian art scene and his long-standing association with Jane Avril at a time when Toulouse-Lautrec was immortalizing her.



Fig. 6, Maurice Biais, *Jane Avril*, ca. 1895.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view of *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge*, Courtauld Gallery, London.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 8, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Divan Japonais*, 75 rue des Martyrs, 1893.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

What the Courtauld exhibition has done very well in the second room of the installation is to provide valuable and, until now, little known information about Jane Avril's life, especially her artistic life. There the organizers included photographs and documents pertinent to the historical narrative. There are documents about her early life, specifically those pertaining to her stay at the Hospital Salpêtrière where doctors first noted her interest in dance, as well as photographs of Jane Avril as a performer used at the time to advance her career. Other documents, also extremely valuable to viewers, are those that concern the cabaret and nightclubs where Avril performed, particularly when they record her involvement with places other than Moulin Rouge, where her performances are already well known. While there is a program from the Moulin Rouge in the show, examination of other programs housed in Paris libraries could have provided further evidence of where Jane Avril performed on given nights (figs. 9 and 10). The organizers were looking in the right places, but did not push their research far enough to enlarge the breadth of Jane Avril's performances and what she achieved visually. Apparently, despite Toulouse-Lautrec's immortalizing her, she was not always—or even often—a headliner on a given night in Parisian performances or plays.



Fig. 9, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril*, 1899.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 10, Unknown photographer.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Despite some reservations as to the depth or accuracy of some research for the show and the catalogue, the exhibition was a major achievement. In bringing together a wide range of works by Toulouse-Lautrec depicting Jane Avril, the organizers visually demonstrated just how important she was for this artist. In partially reconstructing her life, the atmosphere in Paris where she performed, and in linking her with others, they have gone far in illustrating how important a figure Jane Avril was for Parisian popular culture in the latter part of the nineteenth century. That there is still considerable room for continued research that might provide answers to Avril's relationship with Toulouse-Lautrec remains open for speculation. In spite of a few reservations about the need to find and say more about Avril and her relationships with artists beyond Toulouse-Lautrec, this provocative exhibition deserves to be studied, and the catalogue read and used, as it provides an excellent model for other types of exhibitions that have unusual subjects at their core and which expand the issues surrounding the making of celebrity culture so pertinent in our own times.

Gabriel P. Weisberg
University of Minnesota
vooni1942[at]aol.com

Notes

[1] See *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge*, ed., Nancy Ireson (London: The Courtauld Gallery in Association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011), 16, 24, note 24. See also Jane Avril, "Mes mémoires" first published in *Paris-Midi*, from August 7 to 23, 1933, then in Jane Avril, *Mes Mémoires suivi de Érastène Ramiro Cours de danse fin-de-siècle*, textes établis, annotés et présentés par Claudine Brécourt-Villars et Jean-Paul Morel, avec la collaboration de Patrick Ramseyer pour les notices biographiques (Paris: Éditions Phébus, 2005). Several studies about Jane Avril beyond her *Mémoires* that informed this exhibition and its catalogue are the works by Jose Shercliff, *Jane Avril of the Moulin Rouge* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1952), and François Caradec, *Jane Avril au Moulin Rouge avec Toulouse-Lautrec* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001).

[2] Sarah Sik and Lynsi Spaulding, former graduate students in art history at the University of Minnesota, did extensive research to uncover aspects of the life of Jane Avril in "The Enigma of Jane Avril, The Emergence of Celebrity Culture in Montmartre" unpublished research report, The University of Minnesota, April, 2007. A Faculty Grant-in-Aid to Gabriel P. Weisberg by the University of Minnesota supported their research in the summer of 2006.

[3] These questions were also raised in the documentary notes prepared by Sik and Spaulding in 2007.

[4] Introduced into the artistic milieu of her time through the contacts she made while appearing in various Paris dance halls and cabarets, Avril became the darling of writers and painters. She returned the favor of their friendship and even owned works by Renoir—her portrait—as well as works by Daumier, Forain, Guillemet, and Picasso. Even Cazin, she notes, asked her to choose a work among his works. See Avril, *Mes mémoires*, 61, 63–64.

[5] Sik and Spaulding, 2007. Although some authors allude to the possibility of Jane Avril being an artist, no creative works have yet been found.

[6] Jean-Pierre Adolphe Beaudon, father unknown, was born on July 17 1897. He became Jean-Pierre Biais after the marriage of his mother to Maurice Biais in 1911. See Ville de Jouy-en-Josas, "Acte de mariage célébré le 7 juin 1911," between Maurice Biais and Jeanne-Louise Beaudon. The same document notes that there exists of their union a child named Jean-Pierre-Adolphe Beaudon. Also see Jane Avril, *Mes Mémoires*, 117, note 120.

[7] On this topic see Avril, *Mes Mémoires*, 93–95.

[8] See "A Poster Artist. Maurice Biais at the New Gallery of Williams," *The New York Times*, October 19, 1901. A short mention about Biais in the United States also appeared in *The New York Times* on June 2, 1901, in which it is noted that Biais is visiting the country quoting him about his intention to go to "the Pan-American Exposition. On my way to Buffalo, I shall stop a little at

Chicago and Washington.” Whether Biaïis followed through with his intentions is unknown at this time.

[9] On Julius Meier-Graefe and Biaïis, see *Documents sur l'Art industriel au vingtième siècle. Reproductions photographiques des principales oeuvres des collaborateurs de la Maison Moderne commentées par R. Aubry, H. Frantz, G.-M. Jacques, G. Kahn, Meier-Graefe, Gabriel Mourey, Y. Rambosson, E. Sedeyn, Gustave Soulier, G. Bans. Avec neuf hors-texte par Félix Vallotton Les Métiers d'Art. Couverture de Paul Follot. Papier de garde et cadres de G. Lemmen. Ornaments du texte par Vogler. Typographie de E. Grasset* (Paris: Édition de La Maison Moderne, 1901). This publication includes a series of works by Biaïis: Silver mounts for vases, paper-knives in marquetry, a glove box in marquetry, picture frames in marquetry, and ink blotters in leather. He also created a poster advertising La Maison Moderne, not dated (ca. 1901–02). See also the essay by Sarah J. Sik “Pirated Posters: International Print Politics and The Graphic Art of Maurice Biaïis,” in *Paris 1900* (Oklahoma: Oklahoma City Museum of Art, 2007), 110–129.

[10] The exact address in Jouy-en-Josas is still unknown at this time even after contacting the Mairie of Jouy-en-Josas. Letter to the author of this review sent by Monique Le Saint and dated September 5, 2003.

[11] Biaïis who served in the military during World War I was wounded and gassed, probably contracting tuberculosis. Jane received news of her husband's death from the French War Ministry. Further research substantiates that Biaïis died in a sanatorium in Gorbio, Seine Maritimes, on April 8, 1926. See the death notice from the Gorbio City Hall dated July 8 2003, sent by the assistant to the Mayor.

[12] See document from the Père Lachaise cemetery, which verifies that Jeanne-Louise Biaïis, born Beaudon, is buried in the Cazalis-Biaïis tomb, 19th division, 2nd row, no. 4.

Illustrations

All photographs are courtesy of the Courtauld Gallery, London, and provided by Sue Bond Public Relations, London.



Fig. 1, Installation view of *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge*, Courtauld Gallery, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Installation view of gallery with display cases showing documents related to Jane Avril. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Installation view showing [far left] Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril Leaving the Moulin Rouge*, 1892. Essence on board. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of Jane Avril*, 1892. Oil on panel. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril at the Entrance to the Moulin Rouge*, ca. 1892. Oil and pastel on millboard, laid on panel. Courtauld Gallery, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Maurice Biais, *Jane Avril*, ca. 1895. Lithograph. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view of *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril, Beyond the Moulin Rouge*, Courtauld Gallery, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Divan Japonais*, 75 rue des Martyrs, 1893. Lithograph. Museum of Modern Art, New York. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril*, 1899. Lithograph. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Unknown photographer. *Jane Avril at the Moulin Rouge*, ca. 1892. Photograph. Musée Montmartre, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)