



Moulin Rouge (1952) Art Appreciation

Description

Written and reviewed by Larry Gleeson

[Moulin Rouge \(1952\)](#), directed by John Huston (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Chinatown*), stars Jose Ferrer, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Colette Marchand, and Susan Flo, and is based on the novel, *Moulin Rouge*, by Pierre La Mure. The film was nominated for six Oscars winning two, one for Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Color (Paul Sheriff, Marcel Vertes), and one for Best Costume Design, Color (Marcel Vertes). Houston makes the artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (Jose Ferrer), the central character in the fictional narrative. The casting is excellent. The musical score (Lambert Williamson) doesn't miss a beat. The mise-en-scen is basically responsible for the film's two Oscars.



The film opens with a text overlay introducing the theme of *Moulin Rouge*:

“His palette is caked, his brushes are dry, yet the genius of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is as fresh and alive as the day he laid them down. Here, for a brief moment, they shall be restored to his hands, and he and his beloved city and his time shall live again.”

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, born into an old, prominent aristocratic family was a Post-Impressionist (Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Serault) painter, caricaturist, print maker, draftsman, and artist. Toulouse-Lautrec broke his legs in adolescence. His legs stopped developing giving him a distorted appearance.



After suffering ridicule at the hands of a woman of equal social standing, Toulouse-Lautrec moved to the Montmartre, the center of bohemian life in Paris. During this time, he began imbibing in alcohol, frequenting brothels, cabarets and dance halls — many of the individuals he encountered became his subject matter. In addition, Toulouse-Lautrec was an early pioneer of poster design, and became a fixture of Parisian nightlife, particularly at the Moulin Rouge, the most popular and scandalous entertainment venue. Many of the Moulin Rouge characters also became fodder for his art. Eventually, Toulouse-Lautrec developed alcoholism, and due to complications, died at the age of 36. His legacy was a collection of elegant, provocative work of bohemian 19th Century Parisian lifestyles.



Throughout film history several films have been made about the infamous Moulin Rouge. A French film was released in 1940, featuring the extraordinary American-born French singer, dancer and actress, Josephine Baker, as Princess Tam-tam. In addition, a 1934 Pre-code, Hollywood musical comedy featured Constance Bennett and Francine Tone as well as a recently restored 1928 silent film with a synchronized soundtrack. The most latest was the somewhat bizarre 2001 musical, *Moulin Rouge!* by Baz Luhrmann, featuring Nicole Kidman.



Director John Huston was seemingly more interested in recreating Toulouse-Lautrec's art works than the accuracy of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's life with his *Moulin Rouge* titled film. Toulouse-Lautrec's art works are a visual smorgasbord and are on full display throughout. Huston also hired a color consultant. The resultant mise-en-scene is full of oranges, yellows, and pinks splattered across a

blue-green backdrop (*Shape of Water*). With rarely a dull moment, Huston hit his mark as his *Moulin Rouge* is eye-catching with colorful costumes, colorful characters, and a compelling narrative. Huston even managed to create a happy ending element that brings a smile to a face. Highly recommended.



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