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Henry Toulouse-Lautrec, Divan Japonais, 1892-93

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Henri Toulouse-Lautrec
French (1864-1901)
Divan Japonais, 1892-93

Lithograph
31 x 24 in.

Estate bequest of Mrs. Ray Smith, Jr.
2005.28.339



Divan Japonais encompasses not only Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic interests, but those of his environment and his time as well. Artistically, this poster shows the influence of Oriental art in the shallow perspective and asymmetrical design and of Japanese woodcut techniques in the bold, solid coloring; dynamic diagonals; and large, flat forms. Influences of Art Nouveau are seen in the flowing line of the instruments and the curvilinear profiles. The dot pattern that comprises the orchestra focuses our attention on the figures to the right; showing the influence of photography, the top is cut off, as if a moment caught in action.

Lautrec, whose experiments in lithography brought poster making into the art world, has been called the “stenographer of a new urban age.” In the great cities of Europe, industrialization, inward migration, and technological change combined to produce a vibrant urban setting, one that was both elegant and debauched. *Divan Japonais* visualizes the demi-monde of Paris in the late 1800s, expresses the pressures of modernity and social class, provides a snapshot of gender relations, and shows the increasing importance of lithography to represent the modern world. This poster shows Yvette Guilbert, the famous singer, and Edouard Dujardin, the critic, observe dancer Jane Avril, all three friends of the artist. Lautrec was a master at portraying personal drama, and here we see the elegantly dressed woman and the intellectual pretend interest in the performance. Their social refinement is belied by their unspoken thoughts; they create their own private performance in a social venue, and we take on the role of spectator as we gaze at them.

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