

# BELLE ÉPOQUE

By Caroline Von Krockow

*Circle Friend, Caroline von Krockow explores the enduring fascination of La Belle Epoque with a must-see exhibition in Rome and a whistlestop tour around the Parisian Belle Epoque.*

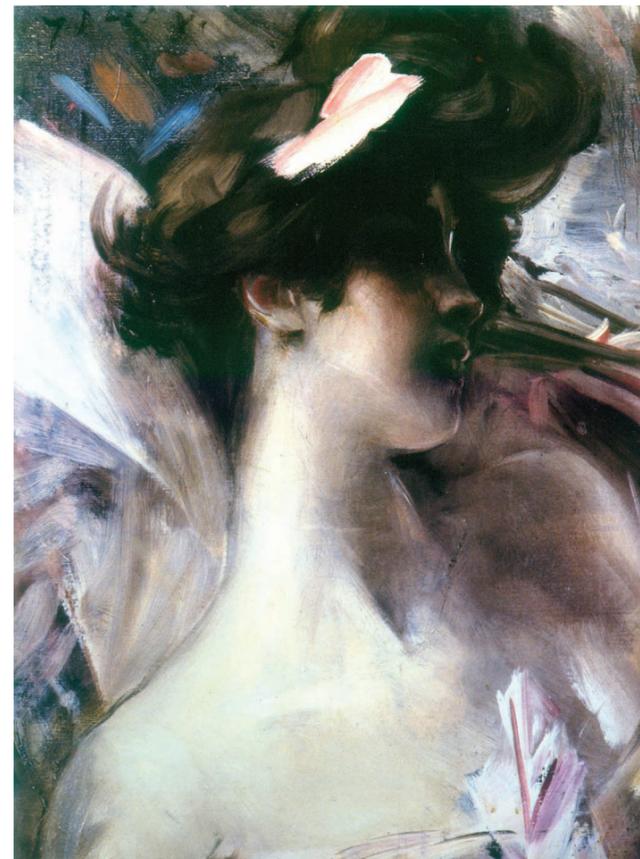
A major exhibition devoted to Toulouse-Lautrec, the quintessential bohemian painter of fin-de-siècle Paris, has just finished at the Museo dell'Ara Pacis in Rome. The show features around 170 works from the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition ran 4 December 2015 to 8 May 2016.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is considered the most celebrated master of the print and poster in the Parisian Belle Époque period. One of the most distinguishing features of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec art is his portrayal of the most diverse aspects of humanity in everyday or entertaining situations. He drew most of his inspiration from Montmartre in Paris, and the majority of his works depict the nightlife and popular haunts in this quarter.

*"...novelty is seldom the essential. This has to do with one thing only; making a subject better from its intrinsic nature." Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*

The show is intended to give visitors a complete picture of Toulouse-Lautrec's graphic output through posters, illustrations, sheet music covers and playbills, some of which are absolute rarities, since they were printed in signed and numbered limited editions with a dedication by the artist.

Curated by Zsuzsa Gonda and Kata Bodor, the show displays around 170 lithographs from the Budapest collection. It includes eight large-format posters and two covers of albums, each composed of about 10 lithographs, devoted to the French singer, actress and writer Yvette Guilbert. In addition to the works of Toulouse-Lautrec, the exhibition includes rare photos and film clips from the beginning of the 20th century which evoke the Parisian Belle Époque.



CAROLINE VON KROCKOW has a very personal connection to the Belle Époque. She has written a novel called *The White Rose*, which soon coming out. The story jumps between the heroine's experiences of today's London and her fascination with her colourful great-grandmother whose youth coincided with the Belle Époque. Let her now tell you more 19th-century bohemian demi-monde, with its actresses and prostitutes, and artists.

It's sparkling like diamonds in the sky and illuminating the city of light—clear and bright. I am standing in front of the gigantic gem and looking up at the impressive iron structure, now hosting *Le Jules Verne*, a Michelin star restaurant, which is part of the Ducasse empire. Only yesterday Natalie Portmann was having dinner here with Benjamin Millepied, the new artistic director of the Paris Opera, or was it Laeticia Casta with her new beau?

I start thinking back to the Belle Époque, when this landmark of Paris was described as a horrific giraffe and the Parisians could not wait until it would be taken down. The International Exhibition of 1889 showed achievements across a number of fronts – covering art, electricity, the telephone, horseless carriages. And then, of course, there was the Eiffel tower that was designed to commemorate the event. When it breached the skyline, public opinion was divided. Charles Garnier, Guy de Maupassant, and Alexandre Dumas wrote a protest letter to the government denouncing the structure. He was not alone. Leon Bloy, slated the iron structure for looking like “a truly tragic street lamp.”

France during the Belle Époque was moving from a tumultuous nineteenth century fraught with revolution and industrialization to a twentieth century marked by war, social strife, cultural upheaval and a redefining of class and gender categories. The period started with the consolidation of the Third Republic (1870–1914) and ended with the outbreak of the first World War. The International Exhibition of 1900 outshone the one in 1889 with the

resplendent new bridge, Pont Alexandre III, made of a single arch of steel and trimmed in stone rising above the Seine and linking the left and the right bank.

The Grand Palais, with its heavy stone on the outside and a light iron and glass structure on the inside was also built for the 1900 International Exhibition. At the time it was filled with sculptures, horse shows, and the first motor cars. Now Karl Lagerfeld transforms the space in order to mount the Chanel fashion show twice a year. At other times, Hermes hosts its equestrian competition here; while, during the FIAC and the Paris Photo the palace is filled with contemporary art lovers.

The Belle Époque was a period full of contrast where bohemians and high society mingled in *Le Chat Noir* and *Le Moulin Rouge*. In these establishments the seats were uncomfortable and the wine was bad, but the shadow plays organized by Henri Rivière amazed the guests. He had several assistants and used a large oxy-hydrogen back-lit performance area. Movement, color, and voices brought life to the shadow plays, and a lot



of the images were influenced by Japanese art. Then a line of pretty girls appeared on the stage, kicking their legs in the air, dancing the French can-can. They were followed by the dancers Cléo de Mérode and La Belle Otero, who overtook the stage with their exotic and erotic moves. During the performance many drank absinthe, a green substance made with wormwood. The procedure for drinking this spirit was most peculiar. First, one poured a bit into a glass, then one put a flat perforated spoon across the rim of the glass, placing a single cube of sugar upon it. Then one poured ice cold water from a small pitcher over the sugar cube, the liquid dripping into the glass and clouding the absinthe. The paintings of the aristocratic midget Henri Toulouse Lautrec, who particularly enjoyed absinthe, show the singers and can can dancers bringing to life this long lost time.

On the other hand elegant women ruled the famous French salons. Countess Greffule, for example, exerted her influence by introducing the Russian Ballet to Paris with Diaghilev, Chaliapin, Caruso and Debussy. Equally at home in the highest reaches of Parisian society and in the princely courts of Europe—kings, grand-dukes and ministers would mingle in her drawing room with scientists, scholars, poets and musicians. She also organized public concerts. She rented Paris's biggest concert halls and performed works such as Handel's Messiah. Her salon gave writers, like Anatole France, painters like Rodin, Manet and Renoir and musicians the pleasant opportunity to meet in elegant surroundings as though in a club. Marcel Proust immortalized her by basing the duchesse de Guermantes in his *In Search of Lost Time* on the Countess. In these salons women wore elegant Charles Worth robes, which were opulent, exquisitely designed dresses, giving women the famous hour-glass figure. At the same time Chanel was slowly entering the scene, starting to revolutionize female fashion by creating a simple, classic and elegant style. She would come to spend most of her time at the Ritz, which Cesar Ritz founded in 1898 in collaboration with the chef Auguste Escoffier. The Ritz is another iconic landmark, which embellishes the Place Vendome to this day and housed many celebrities. Chanel made the hotel her home for over thirty years. In fact, most of the architectural highlights of Paris, and Parisian female style as we know it today, are from the turn of the century, the period that came to be known as the Belle Époque.

PLUS CA CHANGE, PLUS C'EST LA MEME CHOSE.

La Belle Époque is the name given to the period in France between 1871 and 1914. It was only named as such after the First World War, whose unprecedented horror made the prewar period appear as a golden age. As such, the picture presented was essentially nostalgic, and it is this nostalgia that to some extent masks the realities of life as experienced by the bulk of the population. Behind the glittering manoeuvres of fashionable society and their artist acolytes, brilliantly portrayed in Maupassant's novel, *Bel Ami*, there lurked a much more unsettling reality.

Officially, La Belle Époque ended with the outbreak of the 1914–18 war, almost exactly one hundred years ago, although, with hindsight it's clear that some of its illusions were beginning to look threadbare some time before that. Looking back it is extraordinary how, in this respect and many others, the period 1871 to 1914 mirrors events during the same span of time in our era. Apart from the acknowledgement that artistically the period between 1970 and 2014 cannot be compared to the era of Impressionism, Post Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and several other important 'isms', there seems to be an astonishing cultural and political overlap of the two eras. Both periods witnessed nothing less than a technological revolution. As the contemporary French writer and intellectual, Charles Peguy remarked, there had been more change during those thirty years than at any time since the crucifixion of Christ; a hundred years on, exactly the same thing can be said about our own scientific and technical advances.

At the time of the World Fair held in Paris in 1889, France was a country more or less at the cutting edge of progress in almost every field. In the years leading up to the First world War France was a leader in both motor cars and aviation. Bleriot made the first flight across the Channel in 1908; similarly, Roland Garros made the first air crossing of the Mediterranean in 1913. France had 600 car manufacturers and was the biggest exporter of cars in the world. Edouard Michelin had invented dismountable pneumatic tyres.

In science, Henri Becquerel had discovered radio activity in 1896. Louis Pasteur had invented the eponymously named process of pasteurisation and produced a rabies vaccine. Marie Curie had won not one but two Nobel Prizes – physics in 1903 and chemistry in 1911.

In entertainment, Auguste and Louis Lumiere invented the cinematograph and made the first successful film projections in 1895. By the mid-1890's France had two film producing companies, Gaumont and Pathe, and within ten years was producing about a thousand films a year. – almost as many as Hollywood.

France's artistic output in the period needs no elaboration. But it is worth mentioning that in the opinion of the art critic, Robert Hughes, the experiments by Braque and Picasso in what came to be called Cubism, were as revolutionary as Einstein's work on relativity.

Like today, this was a time of modernity, of destabilizing change whether in the endlessly succeeding avant-gardes in the art world, or the flood of new inventions and discoveries in science and technology. It was a time characterized by a frenetic, almost neurotic obsession with the new – one for which the new, 'shocking' dance of the Can-Can seemed an appropriate metaphor.

A century later, our own age shares many of the same characteristics. The digital revolution that has led on to the internet and the mapping of the human genome is an equivalent quantum leap into an uncertain future as was the new age of radio, the telephone, the internal combustion engine and the aeroplane back at the turn of the 20th century. In the same way it is producing doubts and fears alongside the hope of benefits to come.

Politically too, there are some interesting parallels between these two periods a hundred years apart. Following the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war, an uneasy peace existed between the two dominant European powers. Throughout the period there were innumerable international conferences attempting maintain the balance of power. The instabilities that led to the

formation of the European Union were already present in the Europe of a century ago. France had lost the war and naturally felt threatened; society at large was nervous, a nervousness that even the glittering image of La Belle Époque could not entirely disguise.

Today France is threatened again – by international terrorism that seems to be particularly concentrating its anger against the French. Add to that the machinations of Russian manoeuvres to the east, and Europe's current anxieties about being able to hold the European Union together in the face of these threats has parallels with a hundred years ago.

It is the same story with regard to internal politics. For all the glitz and glamour of La Belle Époque, the realities of life for the bulk of the French population were very different. France, particularly Paris, had a huge underclass living in dire straits. Near the Gare D'Austerlitz entire families lived on the street, or in filthy, crowded tenements with no sanitation. Further out there were horrifying slums made from cardboard and tarpaulin from where the unemployed would walk into town looking for junk they could fashion into something they could sell. These were the people who would soon be swept up into the maelstrom of the First World War and slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands. Some, like Jean Jaures, the famous French socialist foresaw what was likely to happen, and did his best to forestall it. But high society danced on, trying to hide their disquiet at the failure of the revolution that had led to a Third Republic, now mired in the scandal of the Dreyfus Affair and increasingly marred by corruption.

Today, we live in a world which is beginning to look alarmingly as if history is once again repeating itself. The world of fashion and celebrity today resembles in many ways the 'Beau Monde' of Paris in the 1890's. There is the same underlying disillusionment with the political establishment, the same widening gap between rich and poor; the same lurking fear of international catastrophe. The same neurotic obsession with the new, accompanied by a growing nostalgia for a past that can never be recovered. Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose. ☺

