



A Centennial of Independence, Henri Rousseau

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Henri Rousseau
French, 1892
Oil on canvas
44 x 61 7/8 in.
88.PA.58

Questions for Teaching

Take time to look closely at the work of art. What do you see?

What shapes do you see?
Which shapes are repeated and thus form patterns?

What colors do you see? What do the colors tell us about the mood?

What are the people doing? What else are they doing? (*People in the center are holding hands and dancing while some people are standing and observing. A drummer can be seen on the left-hand side of the painting.*)

What are the dancers wearing? (*They are wearing traditional peasant clothing and red Phrygian [or liberty] caps.*)

What are they dancing around? (*They are dancing around liberty trees that were planted during the French Revolution.*)

Does anything look out of place? (*One man in the foreground is looking straight at the viewer.*)

How does this work make you feel? Why?



Background Information

This painting by Henri Rousseau commemorates the hundredth anniversary of the proclamation of the **First Republic of France** in 1792. **Peasants** dance the **farandole**, a popular southern French dance, around three **liberty trees** and two female figures, one representing the First Republic, the other representing the **Third Republic of France**. Rousseau copied the dancers from a French magazine illustration but added waving banners, the liberty poles, and the allegorical figures. A wagon in the background is full of costumed musicians, reminiscent of

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parades the artist had seen. He used brilliant colors and solid forms to express the happiness of the scene symbolizing good government. To the right, the erect posture of the dignified republican leaders signals the solidity of the French Republic.

About the Artist

Henri Rousseau (French, 1844–1910)

Henri Rousseau attracted Parisian artists' attention at the 1886 Salon des Indépendants. Throughout his life he was ridiculed by the public and critics, but leading writers and artists sought out the self-taught painter's freshness of vision. In 1885 he quit his job as a customs inspector, or *douanier*, to pursue painting full-time. Though he claimed to have served in the army in Mexico, scholars have found no proof of this. His imagination made exotic landscapes out of Paris's botanic gardens and wild beasts out of toys and photographs.

Like other naive painters, Rousseau used a simplifying style, nonscientific **perspective**, and bright colors. His particular gifts were a sensitivity to color harmonies and knowing how to subordinate parts of the canvas to the rhythm of the whole. He painted still lifes; elaborate allegories; exotic, rural, and modern urban landscapes; portraits; and enigmatic studies of children. His compositions sometimes seem to be subconscious visions. Rousseau maintained an art school, where he taught painting, diction, and music. He also wrote three plays.

Rousseau had no hesitation in claiming for himself a place at the forefront of painting. He once remarked to his admirer Pablo Picasso, who was then borrowing heavily from African art, that they were the only great contemporary artists: "I in the modern manner and you in the Egyptian."