



# LE RIRE

JOURNAL HUMORISTIQUE

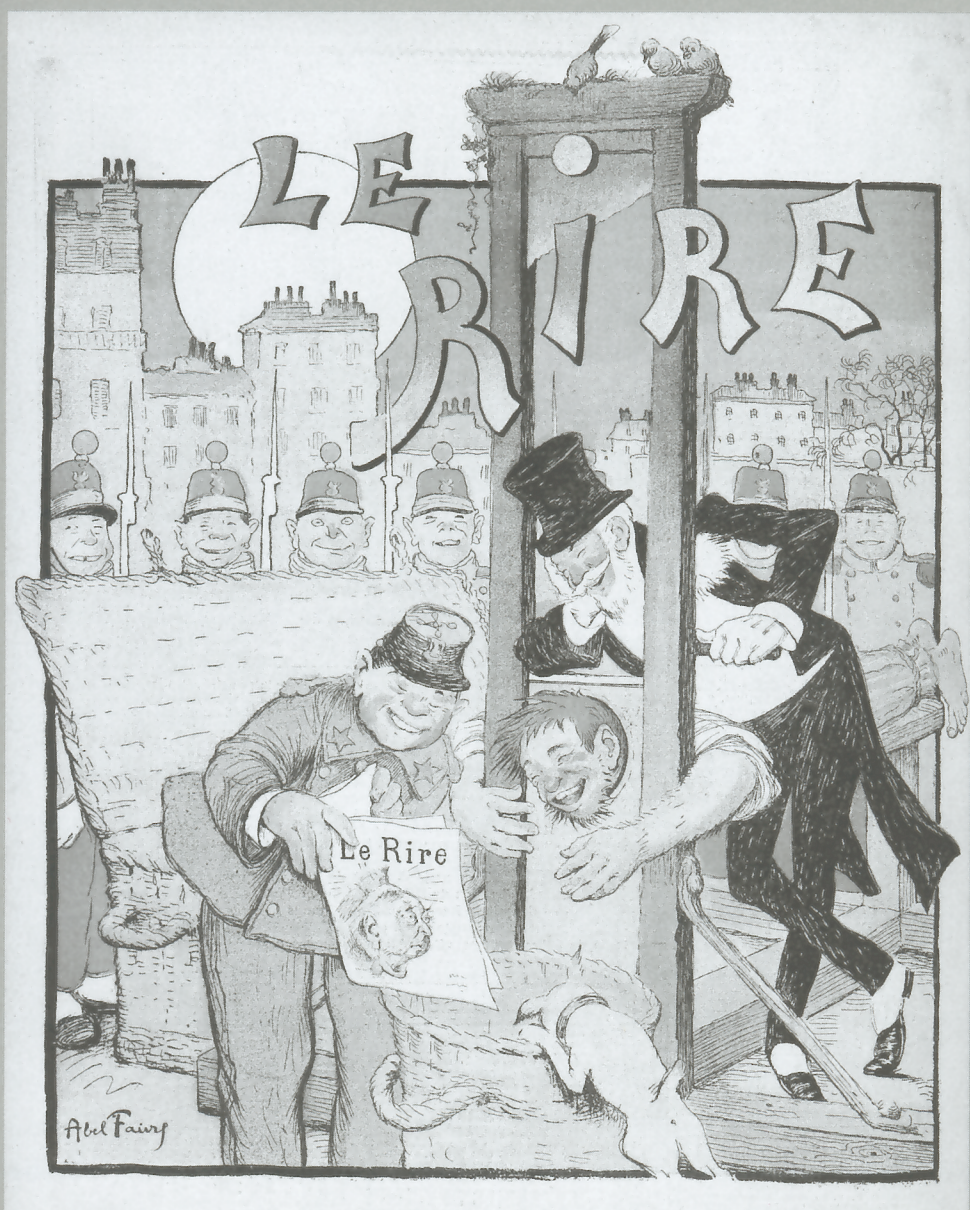


PARIS DURING THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

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*Le Rire*, journal humoristique was one of the most popular and successful among a profusion of illustrated papers published in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century. Founded in 1894, it was issued on a weekly basis well into the mid-twentieth century. This exhibition is drawn from the Library's holdings from the years 1894 to 1909: a period during which *Le Rire* featured the work of the most accomplished and avant-garde French illustrators of the day.



Abel Faivre, 1867-1945. Reproduction of Abel Faivre's Watercolour for the Cover of the Eighth Semi-annual Collection of *Le Rire*. No. 221, January 28, 1899.



Several factors contributed to a climate in 1890s France - and, more specifically, Paris - in which the illustrated journal could flourish. Advances in printing technologies and photomechanical reproduction permitted superior and more economical copying of graphic work. *Le Rire*, for example, could offer artists an opportunity to have their work published in full-page colour illustrations of high technical quality.

Urbanization and a more educated citizenry had created a clientele eager for information, opinion and diversion. Journals such as *Le Rire* were popular with audiences interested in the many debates that took place during the Third Republic on issues of social conflict and injustice, and the need for progressive change.

The Republican government had given significant opportunity for the establishment of new journals in 1881, when it liberalized the laws that had controlled the press. This freed artists from the restrictions that stifled criticism of Church and State. In 1882, however, a subsequent law qualified that this freedom of the press should not extend to images deemed obscene or offensive to public decency. Some twenty years later, in 1901, Métivet's *Censorship and the Nude* (No. 1) provided a guide for illustrators, detailing the zones of the female body, which, if bared, would most likely draw the attention of the censor - in addition to, presumably, the attention of the reader.

Artists of the Belle Époque were drawn to journal illustration for professional and ideological reasons. The journals could offer sustained employment - many illustrators worked for more than one journal - and could introduce the work of the illustrators to new audiences. Journals such as *Le Rire* provided an alternative to the limited support and conservative taste of the Salons. The social and political convictions of many avant-garde artists made the illustrated journals attractive, partly because their broad distribution - issues of *Le Rire* were printed in runs of as many as 300,000 copies - had the potential to democratize the visual arts. In addition, the journals provided a forum in which the artists could voice their opinions on the controversial issues of the day. When asked where he was exhibiting, the artist Forain is said to have replied, "*Dans les kiosques*" ("On the newsstands").

*Le Rire* was less partisan than many illustrated journals of the period, some of which were devoted to specific political causes such as republicanism, monarchism, socialism or anarchism. Instead, *Le Rire* mirrored the broad anti-establishment pre-occupations, and the questioning of established truths, which reflected the mood of the times. The fact that *Le Rire* supported the work of a great number of avant-garde artists also meant that it represented a wide range of views.

## OBSESSIONS

One of the most persistent themes of the satirical illustrations found in *Le Rire* is the issue of class division and conflict. There is unflinching criticism of the values, privileges and pretensions of the Republican bourgeoisie, as represented by the conventions of married life, the chicanery of doctors and lawyers, and the failings of the military, Church and State. Depictions of adulterous husbands and wives, as well as of prostitutes and mistresses, provided an opportunity for artists to mock bourgeois morality, with an insistent criticism of society's tolerance for the sexual exploitation of economically vulnerable women by bourgeois men. The relentless depiction of the sexual attitudes and escapades of *all* classes of society was a preoccupation in the pages of *Le Rire*. This often resulted in images that were considered salacious at the time, but which sometimes appear fatuous to today's observer (Métivet, No. 9; Willette, No. 10). Whether or not we respond to the intended innuendo or bawdiness of the illustrations, we can still appreciate them today for their technical skill.

Many of the illustrators supported or identified with socialist or anarchistic views, and their work reflects sympathy for the burdens suffered by the poor. Anti-clericalism and anti-militarism offer further condemnation of middle-class society, as seen here in the work of Roubille (No. 11) and Ostoya (No. 12).

## PREJUDICES

French heads of state and politicians did not escape criticism and belittlement, although respect was generally maintained for France itself. Foreign countries and their rulers did not fare as well. The humiliation of the French as a result of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 was not forgotten, and manifested itself in relentless vilification of Germany and its leaders (Veber, No. 16). The England of Queen Victoria and its colonialist agenda were viewed with contempt (Caran d'Ache, No. 13); Edward VII (Léandre, No. 14) and the English people (Bac, No. 15) were pictured as hapless and unsophisticated.

The excesses of Tsarist Russia were mistrusted and pilloried, and the European Jew was treated with suspicion and disdain. Although the depictions of conquered peoples seem racist to modern eyes, illustrators did not overlook opportunities to criticize imperialist exploiters.

## ENTHUSIASMS

Despite this seriousness of citizens in fin-de-siècle Paris, it was, after all, the Belle Époque (or it was at least "*belle*," as it has been observed, for some), and the intent of



the journal was *le rire* - laughter. Its pages contain plentiful representation of the entertainments of the day: Montmartre and bohemian life, the cabaret, the café-concert and the theatre (Toulouse-Lautrec, No. 19; Sem, No. 20), circuses and street entertainments (Ibels, No. 17), fairs and universal exhibitions (Cappiello, No. 18), public dances (Mirande, No. 21), and the attractions of the boulevards and parks of the capital city.

There are romanticized depictions of sojourns in the countryside, often exploited for the opportunities they provide for erotic encounter. (These idylls are in marked contrast to the withering disdain of the artists for provincial bourgeois life.) The contemporary excitement for automobile racing and the seaside are also captured here by Devambeze (No. 22) and Faivre (No. 23).

The virtuosity and stylistic variation of *Le Rire's* illustrators, their caustic observations of society's failings and their celebrations of life's pleasures provide us with a compelling and rewarding view of the passions, glories and follies of the Belle Époque. Leafing through the pages of journals such as *Le Rire*, it becomes easy to understand the claim of the citizens of fin-de-siècle Paris that their city was indeed the centre of the world.

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Jacques Lethève. *La Caricature et la presse sous la III<sup>e</sup> République*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1961.

Marcus Osterwalder. *Dictionnaire des illustrateurs, 1800-1914 : illustrateurs, caricaturistes et affichistes*. Paris: Hubschmid & Bouret, 1983.

Charles Rearick. *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment & Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Jean-Claude Simoën. *Le Rire : la «Belle Époque» dans toute sa vérité*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981.

# CHECKLIST

1. Lucien Métivet, 1863-1932. *Censorship and the Nude*. No. 371, December 14, 1901.
2. Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, 1859-1923. *After Mid-Lent / - No danger of a student coming to help us now!* No. 72, March 21, 1896.
3. Jean-Louis Forain, 1852-1931. - *So, Baron, do you call your wife by her first name? / - Yes, sometimes, in front of her lover.* No. 73, March 28, 1896.
4. Henri Gustave Jossot, 1866-1951. - *What about him? / - That's Tony-Truand, a social democrat who's absolutely loaded! He has an annuity of at least 60,000 francs!* No. 3, November 24, 1894.
5. Félix Vallotton, 1865-1925. - *Hey! Coachman! This is the gentleman who escaped. Take him back to the Jardin-des-Plantes!* No. 190, June 25, 1898.
6. Charles Huard, 1874-1965. - *The new vicar is quite attractive, don't you think? / - He has nice eyes, but I think he looks too much like Voltaire . . .* No. 259, October 21, 1899.
7. Charles Léandre, 1862-1930 or 1934. - *This is the first time this year that we've brought our little girls to the art exhibition.* No. 40, August 10, 1895.
8. Hermann-Paul (pseudonym of René Georges Hermann Paul), 1874-1940. *Conjugal Bliss / - I may not have much of a bosom, but I've got enough for a decent woman.* New series, No. 84, September 10, 1904.
9. Lucien Métivet, 1863-1932. *Ruy Blas / - Madame is served.* No. 332, March 16, 1901.
10. Adolphe Léon Willette, 1857-1926. - *But, seeing the wolf is so much fun . . . ! It's something Grandma's never done.* No. 35, July 6, 1895.
11. Auguste Roubille, 1872-1955. *Hard Times / - Obviously, Catholics are holding onto their faith . . . but we're afraid they're holding onto their dough as well.* New series, No. 197, November 10, 1906.
12. Georges d'Ostoya, 1875-? *Review Board / - Refused due to weak constitution . . . / - I did so want to become a soldier . . . / - Add: "and also to mental weakness."* New series, No. 226, June 1, 1907.
13. Caran d'Ache (pseudonym of Emmanuel Poiré), 1859-1909. *The Author/Monsieur Cecil Rhodes / - Money is the blood of others.* No. 315, November 17, 1900.



14. Charles Léandre, 1862-1930 or 1934. *The Belly Dance / Grand Gala Given by Emi-Lou-Bey in His Moorish House in the Élysée for Edward VII*. New series, No. 14, May 9, 1903.
15. Bac (pseudonym of Ferdinand de Sigismond Bach), 1859-1952. "The impassioned dignity of the English people during Coronation celebrations was universally admired." (*London newspapers*) No. 399, June 28, 1902.
16. Jean Veber, 1868-1928. *Hitting the Nail on the Head: Highlight of the 1900 World's Fair*. No. 140, July 10, 1897.
17. Henri Gabriel Ibels, 1867-1936. *Fast Talk / - Come on in! Come on in! Follow the crowd!* New series, No. 280, June 13, 1908.
18. Leonetto Cappiello, 1875-1942. *On the Streets of Paris / Sada Yacco, the Japanese Star*. No. 306, September 15, 1900.
19. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1864-1901. *At the Folies-Bergère / The Brothers Marco / (Study of the Dislocated)*. No. 59, December 21, 1895.
20. Sem (pseudonym of Serge Goursat), 1863-1934. *Albert Brassieur in the Show at the Varietés* [sic]. No. 376, January 18, 1902.
21. Henry Mirande, 1877-1955. *July 14 / - You're Nénessé and Tigre d'Ornano's kid? / - You don't say! Well, well, two will get you three! / The Red-faced Man: - What an anniversary! Surely I'd have sweated less blowing up the Bastille!* No. 441, July 15, 1911.
22. André Victor Édouard Devambez, 1867-1943. *Paris-Berlin Automobile*. No. 349, July 13, 1901.
23. Abel Faivre, 1867-1945. *The Beach*. No. 354, August 17, 1901.

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