



The best on show

Aleid Jones reviews some of the best in new art exhibitions in London this season.

Whether or not you're an art enthusiast, London's latest art exhibitions are sure to enrich your cultural itinerary. Most of the major galleries are open daily to the public, but some exhibitions have timed entry system in operation so advanced bookings are highly recommended.

NATIONAL GALLERY

RUBENS: A MASTER IN THE MAKING

26 OCTOBER 2005 - 15 JANUARY 2006

By all accounts, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) was a man of rich and varied talent: unquestionably the most influential of all northern painters, he was also an international diplomat of some bearing (knighted by both the English and Spanish courts for services rendered), an acute businessman, a linguist and an intellectual. He generated in his lifetime 1000s of paintings in every genre going (historical, religious, mythological, portrait, landscape), works that were coveted by the most eminent patrons across Europe.

This winter's major exhibition at the National Gallery will trace, through more than 100 works, Rubens's evolution from hesitant pupil-assistant of a minor Antwerp artist to becoming the dominant international painter of his age. Central to his maturation was an 8 year study trip to Italy (1600-08) during which time he absorbed the work of Michelangelo and Raphael, and embraced the revolutionary chiaroscuro style of Caravaggio. On his return to Antwerp, Rubens created heroic images that amalgamate the different sources he had tapped: the exhibition will culminate with works created between 1609 and 1614 that ring out with his unique and powerful synthesis of Flemish culture and the ideals of the Renaissance.

Rubens was like Titian (the fiery Venetian who dominated European painting in the 16th-century, much admired by the artist) in his instinctive approach to oils. He gave life to paint, applying it thickly here and thinly there, pummeling it, using it as an expressive modelling tool. His bravura with

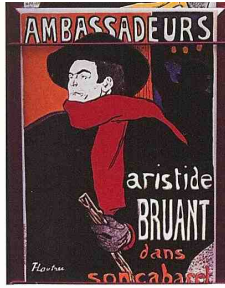
the brush (stand close and you will sense the sweep of his arm, the flick of his wrist) gives an irresistible immediacy to the stories.

Take the National Gallery's own Samson and Delilah (1610), a scene that quivers with silent betrayal. The velvet undulations of Samson's generous back contrast pointedly with the delicate scissor-snip operation being carried out. The foreground of the scene is awash, bathed in rivers of dense materials in red and gold, while in the background the sharp flicker of candlelight in armour crackles tension into the room. The Massacre of the Innocents (c. 1611-12) is a narrative at fever pitch, compelling in its brutality. Balanced and calculated compositionally, the image is visually rent asunder by vigorous lines of ascending, descending and diagonal movement. A feeling of profound pathos is created by ▶

Above: Peter Paul Rubens, 'The Massacre of the Innocents', about 1611-12, Private Collection. © Courtesy of the owner. **Below:** Peter Paul Rubens, 'Samson and Delilah', about 1610, The National Gallery, London.

THE NATIONAL GALLERY





the opulence of flesh, here subjected to terrible physical cruelty.

For me, the most charming picture in the exhibition is the little portrait of Rubens's eldest daughter, Clara Serena, which twinkles with incredible life. The fastest smudges of colour and the thinnest of outlines map out her clothes. Her penetrating happy eyes are visibly wet and real. A thick pasting of white paint on the right lights up the little features while ridges of pigment (called impasto) are applied to catch light on her forehead and down her nose.

A timed entry system is in operation so call ahead for advanced tickets (0870 906 3891) or book online at www.nationalgallery.org.

TATE BRITAIN
DEGAS, SICKERT AND TOULOUSE-LAUTREC:
MODERN LIFE IN BRITAIN AND FRANCE 1870-1910
5 OCTOBER 2005 - 15 JANUARY 2006

A group exhibit of sorts, this show will explore the cultural interplay between London and Paris in the late 19th-century, seeking to unpick the intricate web of artistic influences and friendships that underpinned the development of modern art in these two cities. The story will be divided into 4 sections, each one marking a decade in the evolution of styles.

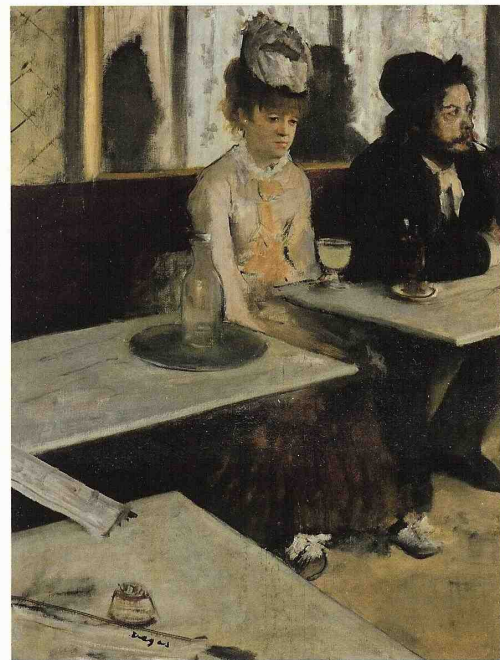
The 1870s focus on Edgar Degas (1834-1917), French painter and one of the founders of Impressionism. His soft pastel confections still delight the eye: the exquisite *Yellow Dancers* (1874-6) is all canary gauze and generous buns of chocolate hair. The 1880s turn to Walter Sickert (1860-1942), the English artist capable of, on the one hand, quiet images of bourgeois French culture but on the other, darker more sinister scenes from the underworld. *La Maigre Adeline* (1906) is painted with an economy that is almost cruel, pigment scraped thinly across her body. Uncomfortable yes, but what she is and how she looks are both brilliantly captured and conveyed. The 1890s is dominated by the Degas canvas *L'Absinthe* (1875-6), a portrait of 2 café drinkers gazing blearily out over their glasses that was instantly seized on by Victorian conservative society as the definition of amoral Gallic self-indulgence. This 3rd section focuses mostly on the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), an artist much enamoured of the world of the

Moulin Rouge and the famous dancehall in Paris's Montmartre district. Toulouse-Lautrec's images are seedy and dirty, filled with pale and intoxicated characters that seem to scuttle guiltily in the half-light. He is certainly one of the most interesting characters of late 19th-century Paris: influenced by Degas and Japanese prints, his work defines the bohemianism of the times. An aristocrat deformed by inherited illness and riding accidents, he apparently felt most happy with outcasts, openly living the brothel lifestyle, dying of syphilis aged 36. He paints without sentimentality or moralization but always with a dark human melancholy that I find deeply arresting. The show will conclude with an examination of the cross-fire of diverse influences that coloured painting at the start of the 20th-century.

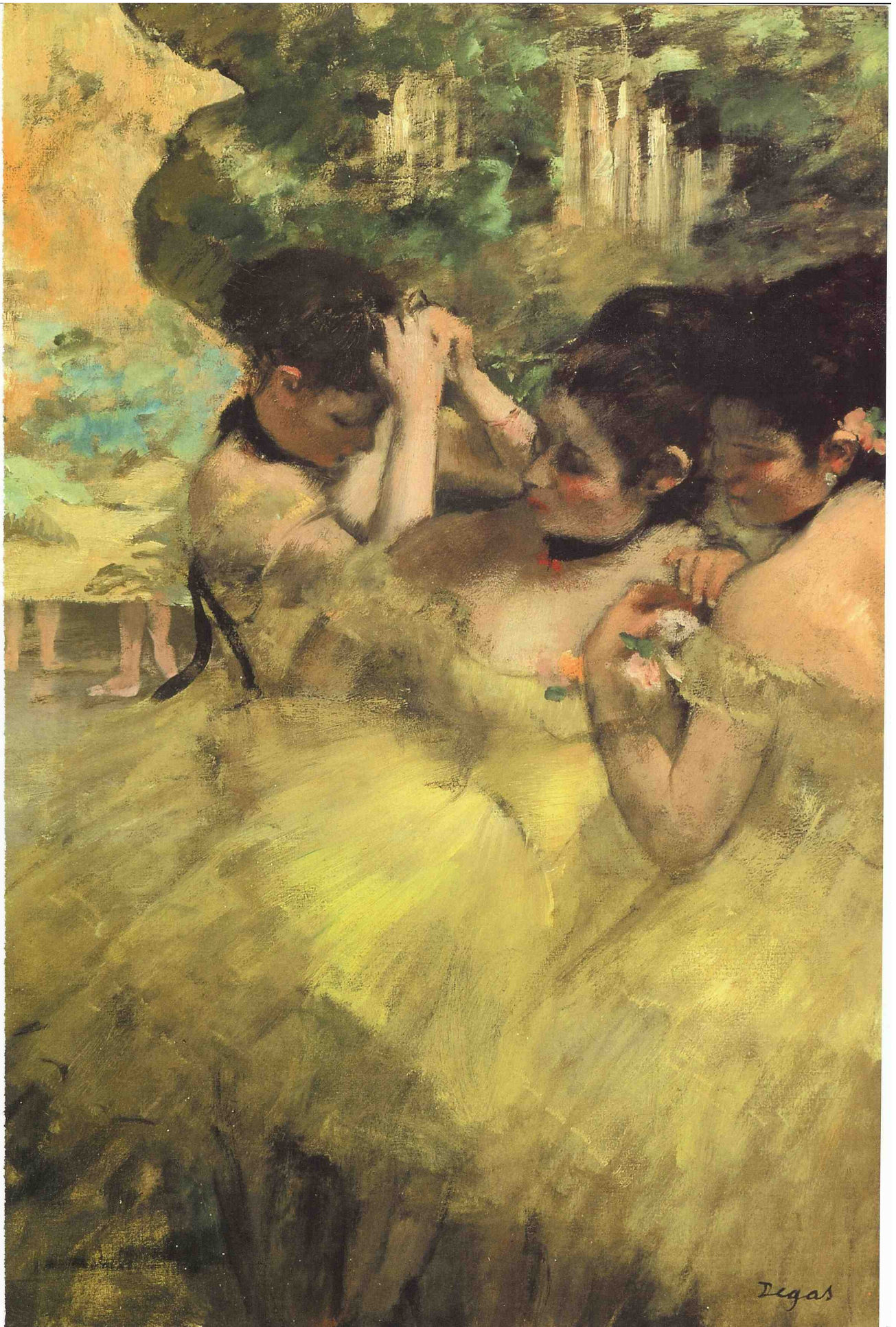
You can learn more about the work of Degas, Sickert and Lautrec by taking a highlights tour of the exhibition with a Tate Guide. To book call 0207 887 8888 or book online at www.tate.org.uk/tickets. ▶

Top: One of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's famous poster.

Below: Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *L'Absinthe* (1875-6), oil on canvas, 920 x 680 mm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. **Opposite:** Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Yellow Dancers* (1874-6), oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago.



PHOTOS: RIMN-HLEWANDOWSKI, NIEL BEER WITH PHOTO5iC





TATE MODERN
JUNGLES IN PARIS, THE PAINTINGS OF HENRI
ROUSSEAU
3 NOVEMBER 2005 - 5 FEBRUARY 2006

Tate Modern's exhibition will be the first of its kind in the UK for nearly 80 years. Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) is responsible for some of the most popular and memorable images of the modern era. Eventually acclaimed by early 20th-century avant-garde artists including Picasso and the Surrealists, he died long before anyone really championed his art. What eventually made his name (and what still looks fresh today) is the bold and primitive quality of his works, the dream-like strangeness that permeates his world.

Rousseau is perhaps best known for his jungle scenes, showing animals and birds in tropical locations, and it is these works that the Tate Modern show will focus on. Intriguing that the artist never left France (he worked most of his life as a customs official in Paris), so that rather than actual recordings, his exotic fantasies with dangerous beasts are hatched together from visits to the botanical gardens, the zoo, reproductions in books and

magazines. It rather reminds me of a person I read about that was keeping a tiger in a small city apartment: there must have been something in the savage dream that enchanted Rousseau's mind, that transported him from the mundane and had him brush into being again and again scenes of primal strength and wonder. And why shouldn't he? He was destroying exactly those vision-limiting shackles that Salvador Dalí spoke about in his Declaration of 1929.

My favourite Rousseau picture is the Tiger in a Tropical Storm (surprised!) of 1891, depicting a place so thrashed by spears of rain and an almighty wind from the left that I feel sodden, drenched and blasted to the core just staring at it. Look for the spider-thread of silver lightning in the sky, the tight furl of the foliage and the glowing amber orb of the animal's eye: as William Blake had it 'Tyger Tyger, burning bright,/ In the forests of the night.'

I highly recommend booking in advance either by calling 0207 887 8888 or booking online at www.tate.org.uk/tickets. ■

Below: Rousseau's Tiger in a Tropical Storm, The National Gallery, London.



THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON