

About the Cover

Cover Essay: Window Within a Mirror

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I don't know whether you feel the way I do, but when I am in these hothouses and see the strange plants from exotic lands it seems to me that I am entering a dream. I feel like a quite different person.

Henri Rousseau

Our cover art, celebrating this special section on Biogeography, is *Exotic Landscape—Fight between a Gorilla and an Indian*—an unexpected play on biogeography by the French Post-Impressionist painter Henri Rousseau. This famous painting is part of a series of 26 jungle-themed works by Rousseau, starting with his spectacular *Surprise* in 1891—a stunning portrait of a tiger stalking an unknown prey during a tropical downpour.

The mysterious beauty of these images exposes the myth behind the often-quoted “naivety” of Rousseau's work. They reveal a depth of technical understanding and a masterly technique that he developed specifically through the series. In one of his last renderings of the jungle theme, *The Dream* (1910), Rousseau used over 50 shades of green alone. The diversity of colors, textures, and shades which he uses to portray the hidden layers of the tropical rainforest suggests a person who has spent considerable time in these ecosystems, sketching and studying form and function. Indeed, Rousseau himself actively helped build this myth, stating that he took part in the French expeditionary force sent to secure the coronation of the Hapsburg Maximilian

as Emperor of Mexico. However, evidence indicates that, during this time, Rousseau was actually in a jail in France and then volunteered in Angers. The long-standing debate on his true whereabouts continues to this day.

In *Exotic Landscape*, Rousseau inadvertently reveals the truth. This painting is not one that recreates vivid memories of military action in the subtropics. Here, a gorilla fights *mano-a-mano* with a South American Indian. These characters, juxtaposed from two different continents, battle among a hodgepodge of tropical vegetation: Classical greenhouse foliage from the formal gardens of Victorian Europe. In this painting, the African endemic *Sansevieria* grows with *Agave* from the Americas and banana plants from Asia. In an interview published in 1910, Rousseau confessed a particular fondness for the greenhouses of the Jardin des Plantes, with their colonial collections of diverse botanical specimens. What of the menagerie that Rousseau placed in these magical gardens? Here, he draws on soldiers' stories, colonial reports, and a series of magazine articles and photographs, some of which he copies directly into his work.

However, Rousseau, perhaps not as naive as many critics thought at the time, sees beyond the neat borders of the greenhouses where he found his inspiration. Rather than referring to nature with the romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henri Rousseau sees violence, darkness, and struggle set against the overbearing heat of the tropical sun. His miniaturized figures give the suggestion that their moment of battle is just one tiny fragment of time in a land dominated by the creeping growth of vegetation. He por-

trays the stifling, suffocating claustrophobia of the rain forest. His painting suggests that the battle grows will soon be smothered by the interminable power of the forest, a primeval force that ultimately claims us all.

Rousseau lived at the height of colonial power, perhaps the greatest phase of biogeographical homogenization yet encountered. This homogenization, captured in brutal detail by Crosby (1986), was an era of biological surprises. Seemingly innocuous species of plant, animal, and pathogen emerged on the scene of the new colonies to conquer, destroy, and then enable our global transformation. The new ecosystems they invade are a counterpoint to their origin—not a mirror image, but a window through which a species with low self-esteem can explode to become an uber-pestilence, a “hyperdisease” (MacPhee and Marx, 1997).

Here we see a curious parallel with the transformation of Rousseau himself from casual painter with an inferiority complex, to heroic soldier and Douanier (both false, of course) and hero of the avante-garde. This was an invasion of sorts, with Rousseau inserting himself into the foreign land of the artistic elite during his first Société des Indépendants in 1886, where he was received with curiosity and derision. Over the next few years, he persevered with a stubborn disregard for his critics to become an inspiration to the Surrealist movement. Was his success due to the naivety of a simple man, or was it a product of careful planning to exploit the rarified atmosphere of the Parisian Salons? We may never know, but perhaps a clue lies in the final parallel with biogeography: invasibility is indirectly proportional to the quality of the host ecosystem. The poorer the quality of the host ecosystem, the higher the success of the invader.

THE ARTIST

Henri-Julien-Félix Rousseau was born into the family of a plumber in Laval, Mayenne, France, in 1844. He attended

Laval High School, where he first won prizes for his artwork. He worked briefly for a lawyer. Upon stealing money from his employer, he sought to avoid punishment by joining the military. He moved to Paris in 1868, where he married and eventually secured a job as a toll collector. Rousseau began painting seriously in his early forties, and developed the style of a “naive” or “primitive” Post-Impressionist painter. Despite criticisms, his works appeared frequently in the Salon des Indépendants, both during his career and posthumously. Rousseau led an ignominious final few years, being sentenced to 2 years imprisonment (suspended) for bank fraud in 1909 and dying of blood poisoning in 1910.

Cover Art

Exotic Landscape—Fight between a Gorilla and an Indian (1910) by Henri Rousseau, oil on canvas, 44.75" × 64". Reproduced with the generous permission of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond and the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon. Photo credit to Travis Fullerton.

REFERENCES

- Crosby AW (1986) *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, New York: Cambridge University Press
- MacPhee RDE, Marx PA (1997) The 40,000 year plague: humans, hyperdisease, and first-contact extinctions. In: *Natural Change and Human Impact in Madagascar*, Goodman SM, Patterson BD (editors), Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, pp 169–217