

Henri Rousseau was a French painter, born in 1844. He wanted desperately to belong within the ranks of the traditional French Academy painters but it was not to be.

Rousseau was born to a poor family. His father's debts even caused the family to lose their home at one point. Rousseau served in the army for four years before going on to become a customs officer at the edge of Paris. He worked until he was 49, painting on the weekends, until he could retire and focus fully on his art. He taught painting lessons, performed as a street musician, and did other odd tasks to earn enough money to live as he painted.

He was completely self-taught and this showed in his work. He wanted to paint flawless, realistic works but a naivety, a simplicity, persisted that he couldn't shake. The traditionalist painters mocked him but he remained confident in his talent.

Rousseau's favorite subject was the jungle but he never actually saw a jungle. He based his scenery on the botanical gardens in Paris and the animals were drawn from guide books and zoo pamphlets. Some of his subjects he never saw in three dimensions so his paintings have a flat look to them. Also, Rousseau sometimes grouped together animals that would never be seen together in nature. In one painting, the bananas hang upside down from a tree.

There were some who liked Rousseau's paintings. For example, Picasso saw one of Rousseau's paintings being sold on the street as a junk canvas that could be painted over by a serious artist. Picasso bought the painting and then went to meet this ingenious artist.

After his death in 1910, Rousseau began to gain popularity and now his canvases hang in museums around the world.