



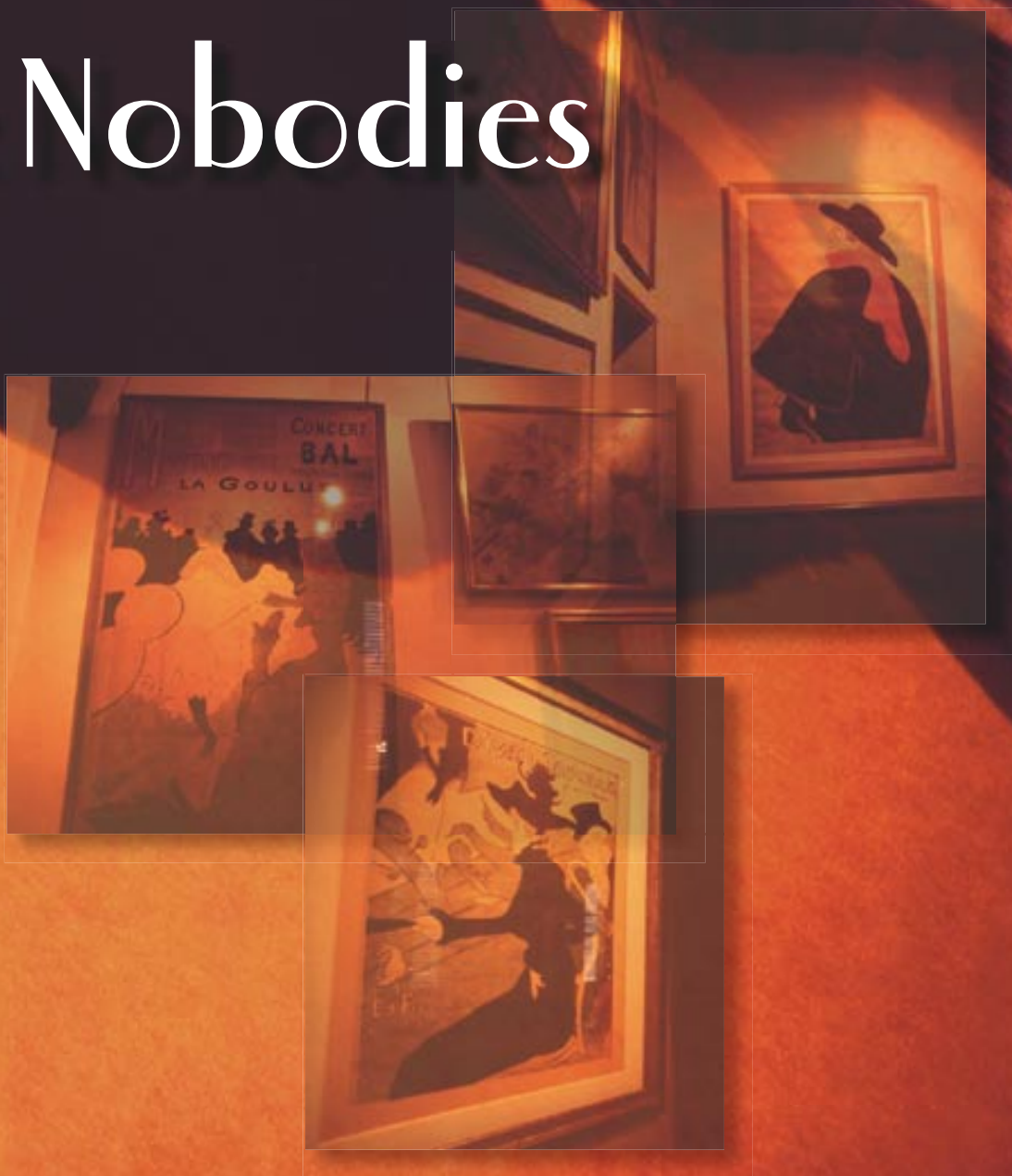
EXPLORING THE SHORT,  
BRUTISH LIFE AND UNREQUITED LOVE OF  
HENRI DE TOULOUSE LAUTREC IN PARIS

# A Rare Talent Among

**Text by Keith Harmon Snow  
with Lunden Abelson  
Photos by Keith Harmon Snow**

*Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*

# the Nobodies



**V**incent Van Gogh is dead? Henri de Toulouse Lautrec was shaken to hear news of the death of the unstable dreamer he loved. “You know what a friend he was to me and how anxious he was to prove it,” Henri wrote to the brother Theodore Van Gogh on July 31, 1890. In letters to his *maman*, Henry—the spelling his mother preferred—said nothing of it, for his aristocratic family would have dismissed Van Gogh as another of Henri’s unprincipled acquaintances of dubious pedigree and embarrassing conduct.

Only three weeks earlier, on July 6, 1890, Henri lunched with his friends Theo and Vincent at Theo’s Montmartre apartment. Using his cane as a crutch, Henri painfully dragged his tiny, deformed body up the sloping rue Lepic, a cobblestoned street that curves up the hill of Montmartre.

Henri was unaware that he would never again join the Van Goghs to celebrate or bemoan the radicalism that brought them both renown and exile. Vincent Van Gogh was dead. Within six months, Theo would be dead too. And Henri aged twenty-four, after eight years in Paris was killing himself. It was of no consequence to the painter: he was following the green fairy of absinthe.

Nonetheless, by September of 1891, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, the gnomish *rapin agile* gang-leader of rebellious young art students gained fame overnight through the production of a cheap reproducible poster. It was not fine art, but advertising, commissioned by the owners of a nightclub famous for its vulgarity, Le Moulin Rouge.

The poster showed a provocative young tart with a reputation for lascivious behavior peddling the free market of love. They called her La Goulue “the glutton” and, like Henri, she indulged her every whim and delight. Louise Weber was a farmer’s daughter who gained big-city fame as a high-kicker inclined to dance without bloomers. “Daddy decency” and the police morals squad watched her.

Henri’s poster of the strawberry-blond caught the eyes of passersby because it zoomed straight to the fatal attraction: La Goulue’s *derrière*. She made a legend out of Henri, and he out of her. She would not be the last to strike his fancy.

## Fin de Siècle

*end of the century*

Montmartre in the late 1800s was “a notorious hideout for gangsters, known for at least 300 years as a place of illicit activities and riotous dissipation,” wrote Julia Frey. Frey’s exhaustive biography *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life* (1995) has an 1887 portrait of Henri “dressed as a Japanese.”

“Every night one came on him somewhere,” wrote a contemporary, “in the street, in the cafes, in the theatre,



in the music halls, in the circuses. He walked, his huge head lowered, the upper part of his body, which was in perfect proportion, leaning heavily on his stick...his black eyes shone furiously.”

Following Henri’s trail, I explore the *quartiers* (districts) north (Montmartre) and south (Pigalle) of Boulevard de Clichy, which cuts the area like the Seine cuts Paris. Here you can almost see the phantom of T-Lautrec hobbling on, pausing for a quick sketch of the nuances of human frailty, worried by the chaos of passing horseflesh and trolleys. The shadows cast by neon lights and the laughter echoing





along the streets bespeak the risqué lives that T-Lautrec displayed for the public at racy *cabarets artistiques*.

Cabarets like Le Chat Noir, which opened at 12, rue Victor Masse, but moved 500 yards to a safer spot at 84, Boulevard de Rochechouart. Aristide Bruant occupied the spot at 12, rue Victor Masse with a new club, Le Mir-liton, where he hung Henri's work. Bruant sang offensive ballads deriding the upper classes, and he always stopped the show to recognize Henri's arrival. The Tournée du Chat Noir at 68, Boulevard de Clichy has nine lives: I find people dancing to a saxxy jazz band.

The narrow, cobblestoned streets on the butte of Montmartre are lined with an assortment of bistros, cafes, crêperies, restaurants and cabarets; most provide live music, piano players or string quartets and almost all are decorated with antiques and art.

## La rue des Martyrs

*the street of martyrs*

Armed with a map of streets and metro, I walk to all the haunts of T-Lautrec and the immortalized subjects he chose for the illustration of his genius, along streets like rue des Martyrs, where Henri hired carriage and footman to drop him on top of Montmartre or at the train station:

T-Lautrec traveled often to sail the sea or row on the Seine.

Streets that crisscross the hill are today dotted with pastel cafes and cluttered galleries whose storefront windows reveal tired painters collapsed on couches in front of TVs, their lives as visible and transitory as the works-in-progress on their easels.

“Toulouse Lautrec was a very good illustrator, and it’s very hard to find original lithographs like these,” says Sylvan di Maria at gallery L’île Aux Images on the Isle St. Louis. Mr. di Maria

quotes prices of up to €2,800 (US\$4,200) for T-Lautrec’s original posters *Confetti*, *La Revue Blanche*, and *Jane Avril*. T-Lautrec’s 1888 oil-on-canvas *Etude de danseuse* (“Study of a Dancer”) sells for \$US75,000.

Another of Henri’s femme fatales, Jane Avril, grew up in poverty. Beaten and prostituted by an unmarried, alcoholic mother, Avril frequented Le Moulin Rouge, and it is likely they were lovers. Said one critic, “She had the beauty of a fallen angel. She was exotic and excitable.” They called her La Mélinite the “explosive.”

Avril looked into Henri’s seductive black eyes and saw a suffering soul. Rejected in the cradle by his father, Alphonse, Henri was unstable, psychologically afflicted, a perpetual drunk. He drank vermouth and absinthe distilled from a neurotoxic plant, outlawed in France in 1915. Henri had a burning need for attention: he would deride or caricature anyone to get it. He was a social nomad.

---

A Place de Clichy poster by René Pe’an and (facing page) one of Moulin de la Galette by Roedel, a contemporary of Lautrec, are colorful reminders of *fin de siècle* Paris. Right: Montmartre’s Place De Tertre comes alive daily with portrait artists and painters, both amateur and professional.

## Les Rapins Agile

*the agile painters*

Vincent Van Gogh arrived in Paris in 1886, and the friendship of the two *rapins* (“art students”) hardened as quickly as the paint on their imminent masterpieces. Working for years under the stifling direction of master Fernand Cormon, T-Lautrec and Van Gogh shared the prestige of Cormon’s atelier with numerous lesser “nobodies” like Bernard, Rachou and Anquetin.

They studied Monet, mingled with Degas, mocked the mediocrity and stifling morality of celebrated masters, and they were punished for it. Dotted the area you find their former haunts, like the paint shop of Julien Tanguy at 14, rue Clauzel, adjoining the elegant Hotel Residence des 3 Poussins, at the heart of the *quartier Pigalle*.

Henri’s unsparing *Au Bal du Moulin de la Galette* (1889) was inspired by Auguste Renoir’s *Un Bal au Moulin de la Galette* (1876), a gay and sentimental work obscuring the seedier sides of Montmartre. The old windmill (*moulin*) of the once risqué Moulin de la Galette looms over a garden reminiscent of a Montmartre forest, where Henri set his models.

Henri’s respect for Van Gogh was reciprocated by the Dutchman, ten years his senior, and, while the masters of the academy shunned the two nobodies of the neo-impressionist avant-garde, each supported the other. Defending Van Gogh, Henri at least once nearly came to blows: his opponent, curiously, was a dwarf.





## La Cirque du Petit Bas-du-cul

*the circus of "the little low-arse"*

T-Lautrec and Van Gogh often copied the other's themes. T-Lautrec painted his pastel portrait of Van Gogh (1887) at the Café Tambourin on the Boulevard de Clichy, which Van Gogh decorated with Japanese motifs to please the owner, a former model and mistress.



Henri painted the lives of the downtrodden and poor. With brutal insight he articulated subtle traits of character, accentuating the beauty and ugliness of people, the frailties beneath the veneers of kept-appearances, the hypocrisy of morals, the interplay of the sexes. He loved the circuses of Paris, and he painted their human oddities.

Henri painted the haggard faces and tubercular frames of the men and women lit by the artificial lights and gas lamps of gay Paris' most dangerous and racy quartiers red-light Pigalle and

brutish Montmartre, where the undercurrents of vice and violence both attracted and repelled the moneyed classes. Haunted by the dictates of noblesse oblige, stifled by the expectations of his monarchist parents, Henri was the family rebel, a shameless embarrassment soiling the family name.



## Artist's Inspiration: La Place du Tertre

by Lunden Abelson

**T**hey call it "a hill on a hill," La Place du Tertre. What better place to find inspiration than above the city of Paris: landscapes at your feet, rolling hills, historical architecture, contemporary and modern advances.

Standing on the butte of Montmartre, the city of beauty and love unfolds around you. La Place du Tertre is a cobblestoned square, once the center of artistic and bohemian life. Van Gogh, Renoir and Toulouse Lautrec spent days and nights here creating works inspired by the atmosphere and the ideals of the time.

On a cool day you can sit in front of a cafe under heat lamps enjoying a warm beverage and crêpe while witnessing the creation of art or the art of creation. Inhale deeply and you can smell the oil paints and paint thinner. Your keen ear hears the stroke of charcoal and the rubbing of fingers across the paper as they smudge the lines to create portraits.

The square is filled with artists creating and selling art. At first glance you see an immediate split in the styles of art; one half of the square has portrait artists inviting you to sit for an image in your likeness; the other half has artists of various mediums, styles and subjects.

Portrait artists work with charcoal, acrylics, oils and colored pastels. The unique eye of each insures the diversity of portraits and the chance to find the artist who can create a pictorial representation of you that pleases you. Portraits take about one hour to complete and cost between €80 and 120.

Walking along the edge of the square among the nonportrait artists you will see a trend in the work: floral scenes, meadows, winding streets with store fronts and cafes, the Eiffel Tower—images created, with skill and talent, strictly for tourists.

"A tourist can find in these a picture they can capture with their cameras," artist Cawain says. Cawain's artwork, of contemporary design, differed from his neighboring artists, each piece different from the other. After 50 years in the square, Cawain has noticed trends in the purchasing of art, and he has seen more artists creating artwork to fit the expressed desires of tourists. "The risk is that La Place du Tertre will be filled with commercial, carbon copy paintings that lack originality and creativity."

In the center of the square you find artists creating abstract, contemporary, heartfelt expressions as labors of love. As a lover of art, one can feel the difference between art as a representation of an image and art as feeling.



## Le Compte de Toulouse Lautrec

*the Count*

Struggling against his weaknesses, Henri painted voraciously, and he negotiated his depressions, obsessions and compulsions with bravado and persistence. He belittled himself in front of others, as quick to caricature his brutish shape as to lampoon the morals officer. "I'm not afraid of getting falling-down-drunk," he once said, "after all, I'm so close to the ground."

T-Lautrec used his art as a wedge in the cracks of the aristocratic hypocrisy he teetered in and out of. He was,



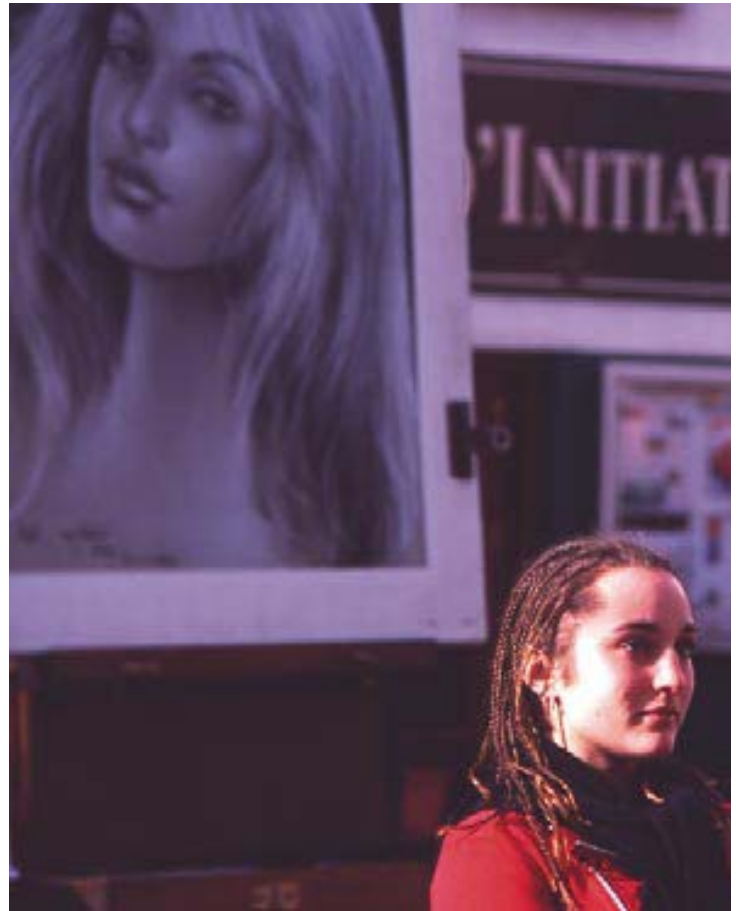
after all, Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Montfa, the future count and only surviving son born of the legitimate union of Alphonse Charles Comte de Toulouse-Lautrec-Montfa, and Adele Margarete Zoe, Alphonse's first cousin.

"Lautrec drank too much," Montmartre historian Pascal Deloffre tells me over dinner

at Le Petit Blue, on rue Muller. "He painted horses and prostitutes. He was a nobleman, but the upper-class ladies rejected him because he was deformed. He found pleasure in Montmartre, but gangs lived there, fighting all the time. Everybody knew Henri."

Pascal tips a street accordionist for a nostalgic ballad about Montmartre. Inspired by *vin rouge*, Pascal sings along. Another night he sends us across the street to cafe Au Soleil De la Butte, which serves hearty cuisine with a string quartet and a singer. Sacré Coeur and its steep gardens loom over the place.

Sacré Coeur becomes your compass and clock: at sunrise an old nun daily addles bent-backed across la Place du Tertre and down the narrow rue du Chevalier de la Barre, disappearing into the sacred courtyards of her piety; the church bells ring hourly; the lights go out around midnight. The gargoyles of Sacré Coeur incessantly watch you.



A young woman sits for a portrait at Place de Tertre (right); below, a Catholic nun makes her way every morning to the courtyards of the abbey behind Sacré Coeur, seen in the background. Facing page: Au Lapin Agile (The Agile Rabbit) was a favorite haunt of T-Lautrec and his gang in the late 1800s.





## Au Lapin Agile

*at the agile rabbit*

“Lautrec was a real artist,” says Vincent Thomas, proprietor of Au Lapin Agile, where I find a troupe of singers bringing down the house in a late-night cabaret. “He lived and felt life differently from other people.”

Vincent and brother Frederic, also a performer, run the joint. A cabaret since 1860, Au Lapin Agile was bought by their family at the turn of the century; their grandparents hosted greats like Picasso, Utrillo, Bruant and Toulouse Lautrec.

A *cabaret artistique* serving only spirits, it is a vivacious sing-along. The air is bathed in scarlet, thick with history and the original works by original people who came here to sing, insult, drink. Hanging outside is *Enseign du Lapin Agile*, by Andre Gill (1840–85), whose original hangs at Musée de Montmartre. The cabaret’s name is a play on words: *lapin agile* sounds like *là peint A. Gill* (“here paints A.” Gill).

You see painters and nonpainters plying the tourists on the Place du Tertre, and it is there that you find a budding artist whose inquisitive energy brings smiles to the hearts of men. She is hungry to share her soul with the world. You fall in love here, again, and again. Even in February, when easels are blown over and the bitter butte wind drives you into cafes, you are warmed by hot chocolate and happiness.





## Le Chat Noir

*the black cat*

At the nearby Musée de Montmartre, you find original letters; cabaret programs; magazines and newspapers; and Montmartre as it was *à la fin du siècle*—dirt trails winding up slopes covered with tangled brush, where animals grazed and wild beasts hunted, and dotted with gardens, vineyards, and the windmills that ground the grain for Paris.

There are masterpieces by T-Lautrec, photos of La Goulue and Jane Avril. Upstairs is an original photo of

The risqué nightclub Le Moulin Rouge opened at the turn of the century and still operates in its original location. Facing page: Sylvan di Maria at gallery *L'Île aux Images* on the Isle St. Louis shows the original T-Lautrec lithographed posters *Jardin de Paris: Jane Avril* (1893) and *La Revue Blanche* (1895).

Suzanne Valadon, another model friend and one of Henri's few lovers of a respectable standard; at one time they both had apartments at 7, rue Tourlaque. Henri's studio at 27, rue Caulaincourt was around the bend. When Henri discovered her secret—she was a closet artist—he introduced her to Degas (1887), who mentored her.

The Musée de Montmartre hangs the moving canvas by Adolphe Willette (1857–1926), who frequented the original Black Cat: Le Chat Noir opened to exploit the new liberties granted by law in 1881. Willette's *Parce Domine* (1885) represents “a cry of distress and terror issued forth toward God by a suffering people...this macabre dance can be seen as an allegory of death and the futility of life and its frivolous pleasures.” It reminds you of Henri's personal struggle.

Willette challenged social norms through a movement born from the jokingly organized *Expositions des Arts Incohérents* (1884). Showing the works of people who “didn't know how to draw,” it became a phenomenon, with annual exhibitions ignored by the academy and a Café des Incohérents that opened at 16, rue Fontaine, not far from Henri's No. 19 studio (c. 1890).

## Salon des Refusés

(show for the rejected)

It was the perfect club for Henri, though the first work he exhibited (1886) there is lost and, to shield the family name from scandal, he showed as “Tolav-Segroeg, a Hungarian from Montmartre, [who] has visited Cairo.”

In 1891 Henri began to gain notice. After a showing at the Salon des Refusés (“Show for the Rejected”) one critic called him “a rare talent among the ‘nobodies.’” He was dubbed “a cruel, subtle observer,” whose works exhibit “a savage realism” and “a witty, teasing and ferocious line.” At last he was discovered. From then on, for several reasons, he was a legend.

Henri de Toulouse Lautrec died on September 9, 1901, almost exactly a decade later, at 36. At the Cimetière Montmartre I find the graves of La Goulue and Degas and others, but Henri, terminally ill, died at his mother’s chateaux in Bordeaux.

“I can paint until I’m 40,” Henri once told the editor who supervised the printing of his grim poster *Le Pendu*—the hanged man. “After that I intend to dry up.”

Alphonse never accepted his son’s work. At

Henri’s funeral, Alphonse as egotistical and selfish as ever climbed aboard the hearse, seized the reins and whipped the horse, and left the mourners running in the mud behind. His mother loved him: Adele worked until her death (1930) to establish Le Musée de Toulouse Lautrec. It is in Albi, southern France, Julia Frey writes, where Henri “was born before dawn on a black November morning in 1864, while a violent autumn storm raged over the pink brick city.”

As for La Goulue, she grew fat. She took up belly dancing at street fairs in Paris, where they charged a few francs for the spectacle of La Goulue shaking her belly in her large tent. “She later tried her hand as a lion-tamer,” writes Frey. “When she got old and poor, she stood outside Le Moulin Rouge and sold peanuts.”

In 1929, the Louvre purchased and reassembled the lacerated canvases of La Goulue’s tent, which had been painted with murals, circa 1894, by Henri de Toulouse Lautrec. La Goulue died the same year, penniless. ■



## Portraits of Seclusion: Les Hotels de Pigalle

The quartier Pigalle, which abuts Montmartre and the Opera, offers two lovely lodging options steeped in the cultural and geographical milieu of the *Belle Epoch*. On the trail of T-Lautrec, I explore his haunts, night and day, and the hotels *Résidence des Trois Poussins* and *Royal Fromentin* define themselves for exceptional hospitality and service (absent elsewhere): they excel at helping you feel at home.

Seduced but exhausted by the mystery and inspiration of T-Lautrec, I return daily to romantic chambers. With a glass of wine and Frey’s biography of T-Lautrec, I soak in a hot tub, collect my soul, and plan my next day’s explorations.

“People find a relaxed, quiet atmosphere and a very homey feeling,” says owner Dominique David at the 40-room *l’Hôtel Résidence des Trois Poussins* ([www.les3poussins.com](http://www.les3poussins.com)). “It is comfortable, physically and mentally, and everything you want is nearby.”

He is right. At 15, rue Clauzel, the *Trois Poussins* straddles Montmartre and the business district. The former *Hôtel de Prefecture* was bought in 1973 by a Malagasy couple whose three children inspired the name. The highlight at *Trois Poussins* is the open-air terrace that accompanies an exclusive room overlooking the *Palais Garnier* (opera house); the room has exotic wood floors and exposed beams.

“It’s like a little village here,” says Mr. David, “with children playing on the terraces of restaurants in spring and summer. Mr. Del Montel down the street on *rue des Martyrs* is the best baker in Paris and everyone knows it.” Couples walk hand-in-hand on the street, and the shops on *rue Clauzel* sell handmade goods. The staff is attentive and friendly, reminding me of the caretakers of Henri’s apartments, who handled basic needs, attending to fires, laundry and cleaning out of mere kindness and compassion.

In a back room of the paint shop at 14, rue Clauzel next door, T-Lautrec and Van Gogh and others came often (1886) to discuss the Japanese woodblock prints that were flooding Paris. *La rue des Martyrs* down the block is closed to traffic on Sundays: a street market offers tantalizing treats. Alive with tourists and locals, the area sizzles with sensual pleasures comfortably accessed by foot, Metro or taxi.

“Le *Don Juan* was a famous cabaret until 1927,” says Pascal Cartaut, manager of the 47-room *Royal Fromentin* ([www.hotelroyalfromentin.com](http://www.hotelroyalfromentin.com)) built at the turn of the century; “all the famous painters and writers came to the cabaret here.” Laced with the antiques and art of the era, I find an old stage converted to a lounge, and the original antique lift to upper chambers that offer lovely vistas of Paris. Owner Philippe Oudin’s brochure *L’Absinthe* revives the legends, offering a walking tour of some 30 historical sites south of *Boulevard de Clichy*. Your hotel, as I said, is your haven of security and comfort here.