



# TEACHERS' NOTES

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# Surprised!

Henri Rousseau,  
1891



In a jungle storm, as rain lashes the foliage and lightning flashes overhead, a tiger crouches low in the tall grass. A camouflage of stripes is not enough to hide it from our view as we glimpse a snake-like tail twisting through the leaves, a wide yellow eye, and a set of pointed white teeth in a blood-red mouth. Is it searching for prey or cowering in fear? Is there something concealed in the bushes or has the flash of lightning stopped it in its tracks? These are just some of the questions surrounding this well-known painting, created by a self-taught artist who painted imaginative and dreamlike landscapes.

## Style and substance

Henri Rousseau's *Surprised!* is a densely packed image where almost every part of the canvas teems with colour, shape, and movement, offering us a carefully constructed window into another world. He uses stripes of varying thicknesses to help structure his painting: the grass, tree trunks, branches, the tiger's fur, lightning, rain, and even the veins on the leaves. Most of these stripes taper diagonally from left to right, and the tiger moves in the same direction, giving the image a sense of movement and harmony amid the storm.

Some critics mocked Rousseau, calling his style simplistic. However, much of *Surprised!* is cleverly put together. Look at the tiger's back - the long grass mirrors the stripes of its fur, helping to balance the crowded image. The rain, also falling from left to right, has been created in an inventive way which remains a mystery, even after being studied by art historians and scientists. It may be extremely thin translucent paint, or a layer of varnish applied in diagonal streaks, but, whatever the technique, its effect is a striking illusion of a torrential downpour that covers every inch of the canvas.

Rousseau carefully planned the details in his pictures. Painting methodically in blocks, he would complete one section before moving on to the next. A pantograph, a mechanical device that makes an enlarged copy of an image when you trace around the original, might also have been used. Rousseau could have traced the tiger from another picture, perhaps explaining why the animal looks like it's floating on top of the plants.

Rousseau was criticised for not using linear perspective in his pictures, making them seem flat, but he created space here through his use of colour. The canvas is divided into three horizontal bars: the lowest (and closest) is a vibrant mix of greens; the middle is largely pale tree trunks overlapped by leaves; the top is a light grey sky. This method is typical of aerial perspective, where lighter colours are used further up the composition to give a sense of space receding into the distance.

The colours available to Rousseau were far more varied than they had been in the past. By the end of the 19th century, oil paints were increasingly made from chemically produced pigments (instead of crushed natural minerals) and were available pre-mixed in metal tubes. While many of the colours in *Surprised!* are greens, the variety of them is huge. Orange-greens, red-greens, yellow-greens, and more, each painted carefully in overlapping strips. Green's complementary colour, red, is also strikingly used on the right, balancing out the dominance of the tiger on the left.

This is the first of Rousseau's jungle paintings. He claimed his jungles were painted from memory following time spent in Mexico with the military, but he never actually travelled outside France. Instead of first-hand experience, Rousseau relied on a combination of research and vivid imagination.

## The jungle comes to Paris

In the 19th century, the French capital was a hotbed of artistic and scientific creativity and innovation. It was an outward-looking city, interested in other parts of the world, but often in a way that presumed French superiority. Like many European countries, including Britain, France's progress was driven by the enormous wealth and resources it gained from the colonies it held all over the world, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, where tigers and rainforests could be found.

The staging of the World's Fairs in Paris (1885–1937) gave the public the opportunity to learn about other parts of the world, and Rousseau visited in 1889. Among its many exhibits, including the new Eiffel Tower, the fair featured recreations of towns and villages from colonial territories, together with people from different cultural groups in these regions. The information given in these displays was often incorrect, and the people on show were made to perform for the visitors in ways that exaggerated and perpetuated stereotypes and misconceptions. Rousseau's jungle paintings reflect his era's fascination with other countries and



cultures, but the models he used to make *Surprised!* were located closer to home.

Rousseau visited the botanical gardens of the *Jardin des Plantes* where huge hothouses allowed visitors to walk among tropical plants. Writing to the art critic Arsène Alexandre, he said, 'When I go into the glass houses ... it seems to me that I enter into a dream'. He may have made sketches there, but books and magazines filled with botanical illustrations were also readily available in Paris at the time. While the plants in *Surprised!* were originally foreign to France, many imported examples could be seen easily in 1891. The dark green leaves in the bottom right belong to a rubber plant, common in homes, and the tree with small leaves in the top left is quite possibly a Parisian street tree, *Koelreuteria paniculata*.

The *Jardin* also had a zoo where Rousseau would have been able to study all sorts of live animals in cramped enclosures, including big cats, birds, and snakes from far-off countries. There were also displays of stuffed animals including lions, often posed as though they were hunting. The French artist Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) had also famously painted lions and tigers, and the tiger in *Surprised!* bears a strong resemblance to a work of his from 1862, *Tiger and Snake*. Rousseau may have seen Delacroix's paintings and been inspired.

## Surprised?

Who, or what, is 'surprised' in this painting? It was originally called *Tiger in a Tropical Storm* but Rousseau renamed it, giving different interpretations of what he meant. Perhaps the tiger was pouncing on unsuspecting explorers who had dared to enter its home, or perhaps it was itself startled by the ferocious storm. We might even be the ones who are surprised - surprised to find a tiger staring back at us from the walls of a gallery!

## The life of an artist

Henri Rousseau (1844–1910) was not from a family of artists, nor did he train at one of Paris's great schools of art. His family had experienced financial difficulties when he was growing up and he worked to support himself throughout his life, notably as a toll collector. He was given the nickname '*Le Douanier*' (the customs official) for years, despite never holding a position that high. He also offered art and music lessons to his neighbours and played the violin on the streets. His relative poverty may have dictated his style, forcing him to use an imaginative range of sources to conjure up images of things he could never experience.

Rousseau was at times referred to dismissively as a 'Sunday painter', meaning he was an amateur, a part-time artist, but this isn't accurate. While he originally had to work to support himself, painting in his spare time, he retired in his 40s and threw himself into his art full-time. Almost entirely self-taught, he worked hard developing not only his painting but also his image as an artist. He believed in his own abilities, on one occasion telling Picasso at a dinner party, 'You and I are the two most important artists of the age'.

It was some time before Rousseau became respected and appreciated by the art world. When his work was rejected by the École des Beaux-Arts's prestigious exhibition, the Salon, he found acceptance in the Salon des Indépendants, which exhibited art by anyone who wanted to participate. He displayed his work there from 1896 until the end of his life, trundling his canvases across Paris in a little cart. When the public first saw *Surprised!*, they were not all convinced that it was good; critics reported visitors 'doubled up with laughter' in front of his art, others asked if Rousseau 'painted with his eyes closed'. There were many who thought his work unrealistic and flat. However, when he exhibited in later years, huge crowds would gather in front of his works. One critic wrote:

## International Modernism

Rousseau's era saw the birth of Modernism in European art. This new style didn't try to imitate nature realistically but became more concerned with the expression of ideas and personal experience. In many ways the origins of this style came from a surge of interest in the art of other countries and continents, which spurred European artists to rethink their own work.

Sculpture and masks from West Africa and Oceania, and woodblock prints from Japan, were some of the most important international influences on painters like Rousseau. They often used non-realistic colours, more minimal forms, and perspectives uncommon to Western artists, all elements we can recognise in Rousseau's painting.

'In the midst of the hubbub, only a single utterance is heard: "Where are the Rousseaus?"'

Fellow artists also supported him. Younger, avant-garde artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Pablo Picasso complimented his untrained simplicity which many artists struggled to achieve. Picasso threw a famous party in Rousseau's honour, even buying his paintings, which he donated to the Louvre, ensuring Rousseau would be remembered as one of France's great artists.

Rousseau's paintings now hang in some of the most famous art galleries in the world, loved by millions. Perhaps it is for his imaginative scenes of make-believe jungles, and perhaps it is because he shows us that even an untrained artist without much money can delight and inspire others.

## Discussion points

This painting is an excellent starting point to get children thinking and talking, sharing ideas with each other, building on the ideas of others, and using new vocabulary. Here are some ideas to start discussions, developed in collaboration with primary school students. While some questions could be answered with 'yes' or 'no', encourage children to justify why they think that and consider other points of view.

### Emotions

How do you think the tiger is feeling? Why do you think that? Does everyone agree? Do emotions look the same to everyone? If not, why not? Is there a way to paint an emotion that everyone would understand? When have you felt more than one emotion at the same time? What title would you give this painting, and why? Who or what is 'surprised' in this painting? Why do you think that? Can you give objects human emotions? Could the jungle be surprised, for example?

### Art and skill

Is there such a thing as good or bad art, and why do you think that? What might make art good or bad? Do you feel this is a good painting or a bad one? Does everyone in the class agree? Can art be good even if you don't like it? Do you have to experience something to paint it? Can you paint a dream? How might that be difficult? How do you learn to paint? Could you learn on your own or does someone have to teach you? Have you ever learnt a new skill by yourself? Was it a different experience to someone teaching you?

### Changing times

Is it better to stick with tradition or invent new ways of doing things? Is it possible to do both? Are new things always better? Should artists change their styles over time or paint like artists from the past? Why? Can you imagine what it was like to live in a time when telephones and electricity at home were still quite new? What modern inventions do you use? Which ones might seem old-fashioned in the future and why? What else changes? How does the environment change over time? What effect does this have?

### Inspiration

What does being inspired by something mean to you? What inspires people to do or make something? Why might someone decide to make a painting? What sort of things have inspired you to do or make something? Why did you find those things inspiring? What do you think Rousseau might be trying to say with *Surprised!*?

## Related artworks

These artworks have elements in common with *Surprised!* - some in style and some in theme. Try comparing them through discussion; do they change how you see Rousseau's painting?

### In the National Gallery

Workshop of the Master of the Life of the Virgin, *The Conversion of Saint Hubert: Left Hand Shutter*, probably 1485–90

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Watering Place*, about 1615–22

Peter Paul Rubens, *An Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen in the Early Morning*, probably 1636

George Stubbs, *Whistlejacket*, about 1762

Alfred Stevens, *The Present*, about 1866–71

Vincent van Gogh, *Long Grass with Butterflies*, 1890

Paul Cézanne, *The Grounds of the Château Noir*, about 1900–4

### Elsewhere

Utagawa Kunisada I (Toyokuni III), *Tiger*, Edo period, 1830, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Eugène Delacroix, *Tiger and Snake*, 1862, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Marianne North, *Flowers of Sarawak*, Borneo, 1876, The Marianne North Gallery, Kew

Henri Rousseau, *The Dream*, 1910, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Athi-Patra Ruga, *Night of the Long Knives I*, 2013

Ben Sledsens, *Jaguar in the Jungle*, 2018

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, *Preparatory Painting, Pollinator Pathmaker*, 2020

Petrit Halilaj, *Very Volcanic Over This Green Feather*, 2021