New York, N.Y. - On March 23, 2001 Sotheby's present a sale entitled The Life and Art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The single-owner grouping of approximately 170 lots of prints, posters, manuscripts, books, drawings and photographs by or associated with the post-Impressionist artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was originally assembled by New York collector Herbert Schimmel from the 1950’s through the 1970’s. Schimmel was the first American collector to focus obsessively on the artist and he successfully compiled a comprehensive collection of the artist’s work and other memorabilia of the time. He installed the collection in his New York apartment and complimented it with furniture and French glass of the period to recreate a fin-de-siècle ambience. Among the extensive group of prints is an Elles suite estimated at $700,000/1,000,000 while the poster collection consists of nearly a complete run of examples of all the posters Lautrec ever made. The manuscripts are made up of more than 500 autograph letters by Lautrec to his family, artists, performers, printers and publishers, many of them important luminaries of the day. From March 14 - April 4, 2001 SOTHEBYS.COM will also offer nearly 200 lots from this collection.
Born in the south of France in 1864, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec chose to rebel against his aristocratic lineage by immersing himself in the bohemian life of the Monmartre district of Paris by the time he was in his mid-twenties. The cafés, cabarets, entertainers and artists of this area completely fascinated him and the rhythm and energy of this café life was directly translated into his work. In addition to his sketches and full-scale paintings, the originality of the style he developed is particularly evident in his posters. Rejecting the notion of high art in the traditional medium of oil on canvas, Toulouse-Lautrec made his first poster in 1891. He created more than 30 in the 10 years before his death and Sotheby’s will offer nearly a complete run of all of the posters in addition to several stages of many of the individual posters.

Included in the collection are all of his most famous images including a rare first printing of his first poster Moulin Rouge – La Goulue. The Moulin Rouge opened in 1889 and immediately Toulouse-Lautrec was fascinated with the atmosphere, and here captures variety star Louise Weber, called La Goulue (the glutton), in her erotic solo dance. Dating to 1891 the poster, which was widely displayed to advertise the new season at the Moulin Rouge, is estimated to fetch $100/120,000. In a series of letters written to his mother (Adèle de Toulouse-Lautrec) from January to December 1891, Lautrec discusses this first poster which established his reputation overnight. He notes in one letter that he is eagerly awaiting the appearance of his Moulin Rouge poster, and once it is published, in another letter he describes with pleasure the good reception it has received. The two letters, which provide wonderful insight into Lautrec’s mind just as he began to enjoy his new found fame, along with 24 other letters written to his mother addressing various topics, are estimated to sell for $30/35,000.

Also included in the series of posters is the familiar image of Jane Avril, a close friend of Lautrec’s and one of the great dancers of the day. She began her career as many others, dancing at the Moulin Rouge and then at the Divan Japonais, the Monmartre haunts where Lautrec devoted his time. Here she is pictured alone in a black dress with an iridescent snake winding up her body and her pale face framed by an enormous red hat. Dating to 1899, the poster is estimated at $30/40,000. Another well-known image of Jane Avril doing a high kick is also included. Dating to 1893 and estimated at $20/30,000, Jane is depicted doing one of her famous dances with leg lifted high and wearing her signature sullen expression. One of the autograph letters included in the collection is dated 25 June 1893 and relates directly to this image. Written by Lautrec to Firmin Javal, editor of L’Art français, the letter grants Javal permission to reproduce the famous poster of Avril doing her high kick. Estimated at $8/10,000, the letter is one of seven included in a group lot of other letters to critics, collector and dealers.
Lautrec created four posters of his good friend, the cabaret artist Aristide Bruant, who like many others popular performers of the day came from modest origins. Aristide Bruant performed both at the Ambassadeurs and at the Eldorado with his cabaret in 1892. Both of these prominent café-concerts were founded during the Second Empire around the middle of the century. Included in the sale is Lautrec’s Eldorado lithographed poster from 1892. This famous image of Bruant wrapped in his familiar red scarf is estimated to sell for $30/50,000.

The year 1892 saw Lautrec reach the height of his powers as an artist. It was the start of his most successful and productive period, and also the year in which he began to concentrate on lithography rather than painting. In a series of letters written to his mother from January to December 1892 included is a letter in which Toulouse-Lautrec remarks that he is “up to his neck” in drawings, but his greatest excitement is the news that Yvette Guilbert has asked him to make a poster for her. A single poster of Guilbert never materialized, but this letter may have been referring to a poster made by Lautrec in 1893 for the Divan Japonais. While the elegant Jane Avril and the critic Edouard Dujardin are placed in the foreground, the main subject of the poster is undeniably Yvette Guilbert, who stands on the stage – without a head but recognizable by her long black gloves. Estimated at $30/40,000 the poster was well received by the public, but in 1894 Guilbert had a more traditional poster advertising her performances at Ambassadeurs made by the artist Théophile Steinlen. The letter in which Lautrec refers to Guilbert is included in a group lot of 24 letters and is estimated at $25/30,000. As a wonderful companion SOTHEBYS.COM will also be offering Yvette Guilbert’s set of Louis Vuitton trunks (est. $2/3,000) which she always traveled with in addition to a pair of her long black gloves. Her gloves were her signature trademark and she never took the stage without them. They made her instantly recognizable and are estimated to sell for $800/1,000 on SOTHEBYS.COM.

A wonderful example of Lautrec’s psychological fascination with his subjects is the lithograph portfolio Elles, executed in 1896. Between the years of 1892 and 1895, Lautrec was a regular visitor to the brothels in Paris, where
he would observe and sketch the prostitutes, fascinated with their lives and personalities. He was very interested in representing the women as people, not necessarily as prostitutes, engaged in their everyday activities of bathing, dressing and sleeping. Lautrec excelled at the medium of lithography and this portfolio is known as his best and a pinnacle of color lithography. In excellent condition, the complete suite of 10 lithographs is estimated to sell for $700,000/1,000,000.

The sale of The Life and Art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec also includes photographs and other works of art from the Belle Époque era. Chief among the drawings included in the sale is a charcoal, pastel and pen drawing of Aristide Bruant by Théophile Steinlen. Estimated at $3/5,000 this drawing was reproduced on the cover of the February 24, 1895 issue of Gil Blas illustré accompanying Bruant’s song Fin de siècle. The drawing depicts Bruant performing on top of a table in his small cabaret, The Mirliton. Another drawing included in the sale is a study for the cover of Le Chronique Medicale by Lautrec. Dating to 1891, the pencil image of a skull and books was thought to be too macabre and was rejected by the founder of the journal. Estimated at $6/8,000 the image was later published after Lautrec’s death in the February 15, 1902 issue of the journal. Also featured are two very fine works on paper by Lautrec’s friend Louis Anquetin, including the striking racing watercolor L’Arrivee which is estimated to sell for $8/12,000.

The live and online auction will also feature six of the eight pastels of the American dancer Loïe Fuller made by artist Charles Maurin (1856-1914). Maurin met Lautrec in the late 1880’s and the two became friends, becoming regulars at the Moulin Rouge and other Monmartre nightspots. Two pastels will be offered in the live auction and four will be available online at SOTHEBYS.COM each carrying an estimate of $3/4,000. The remaining two pastels are located in the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library.

Photographs of Lautrec and other luminaries of the day are also a part of both the live and online sales. Featured in the live auction on March 23, 2001 is a full-length photograph of Lautrec circa 1892. As a child, Lautrec showed an early interest in art which was perpetuated by the fact that he was forced to convalesce for long periods of time following the fracture of both of his femurs. Part of a group lot of photographs and estimated at $500/700, this albumen print shows Lautrec at the approximate age of 28, and the deformities which resulted from his childhood accidents are apparent. Standing just nearly five feet one inch tall, he is seen here with his fully developed upper body resting on dwarfish legs, leaning ever so slightly on his cane. Other photographs which will be sold on SOTHEBYS.COM from March 14 - April 4, 2001 include a number of cartes-visites of Lautrec as a child, in addition to photographs of various artists of the time including: Loïe Fuller, Louise Weber (La Goulue), Anna Held, and Lona Barrison with estimates ranging from $40 - $200.
Aristide Bruant had his red scarf, Yvette Guilbert had her black gloves, and May Belfort had her black cat. The Irish born performer was another of Lautrec’s favorites beginning in 1895. Belfort was known for her innocent appearance in contrast with her erotic performances, and also for the fact that she never took the stage without her signature cat. She performed regularly at des Décadents, and for her performance at Petit Casino she commissioned a poster of herself most likely performing her most popular act, “Daddy wouldn’t buy me a bow-wow.” Included in the live auction and estimated at $20/30,000, Lautrec depicts her dressed in baby clothes carrying the black cat. Among his letters, Lautrec references May and her cat. Dated to the early 1890’s one letter is written to artist Maxime Dethomas and in it Lautrec states that “Miss Belfort is asking around for a husband for her cat”. Lautrec then asks whether Dethomas would like to volunteer his cat as a mate for Miss Belfort’s feline. Estimated at $8/10,000 the charming and humorous letter is included in a lot of 4 other letters to fellow artists spanning the years 1883-1895.

Another charming letter included in the sale is from a sixteen-year-old Lautrec written in 1880 to his Aunt Josephine’s dog who has just given birth to a litter of puppies. In this sweet four-page letter, the young artist addresses the dog as “Chère Madame” and congratulates her on the birth of her puppies. Estimated to sell for $1,200/1,800, Lautrec concludes the letter with a request to greet her mistress (Aunt Josephine) with a lick and by shaking her paw. Also written by Lautrec in 1880 is a letter to his Aunt Josephine with a sketch of a postman delivering a letter. “Knock, knock!!! – Who’s there? – It’s me. – Ah, so it’s you, Monsieur Henry. – How’s my Aunt?...” Lautrec continues, describing the barks of his Aunt’s two dogs in musical terms (A minor), and then completes his message with a heartfelt acknowledgment of his love for his Aunt: “But even though the distance between us makes it impossible to give you a real hug, the emotion I feel is just as great. But it is useless to say any more, since you know very well I love you and all the paper and all the ink in the world would add nothing to that.” This wonderful insight into Lautrec’s relationship with his Aunt is included in a group lot of 10 autograph letters which is estimated at $10/15,000.

For More Information, Please Contact
Matthew Weigman
Lauren Gioia
(212) 606-7176
fax: (212) 606-7381

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