Toulouse-Lautrec posters were extremely audacious, employing flat colors, hard, clear outlines, exaggerated foreshortening, and bold repetition of shapes and words. Their subjects – especially cabaret singers, dancers, and prostitutes – were chosen primarily for their sexual attraction. Yet these works are remarkable as well for essentially disregarding the motifs most commonly used in the advertisements of the day. There is nothing in Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster oeuvre comparable, for example, to Jules Chéret’s Le Bal du Moulin Rouge (1889) in which décolletage and bared thighs tell the whole story. Instead, the artist combines an elaborate vocabulary of metropolitan styles, attitudes, and expressions to establish a complex and fetishistic allure.

Jane Avril (1893) for example, was created on the occasion of an appearance by the celebrated dancer at the café-concert Jardin de Paris. The five-color lithographed poster reveals the range of the artist’s technique and style, including ink spatters, colors that overflow contours, and an expressive framing line which meanders from foreground to back. The dancer herself accordingly occupies an ambiguous zone; her plumed bonnet caresses the background framing line at upper left while her raised leg taunts the phallic bass viol neck in the extreme foreground.

In the poster Ambassadeurs, Aristide Bruant (1892), we admire a celebrated entertainer known as much for his lusty gestures as for abusing his audiences, (he was a sort of Don Rickles and Frank Sinatra in one). Bruant commissioned Toulouse-Lautrec to represent him in his unique and instantly recognizable attire: wide brimmed hat, Inverness cape, and long, red scarf. Bruant fills the poster, squeezed between its four borders, and between the spectator and the seductively posed sailor who gazes from upper right.

But Lautrec did not only produce posters for circus performers and risqué night-club acts. He also made posters and illustrations for sophisticated magazines such as La Revue Blanche. The journal, published between 1889 and 1903, was among the most important of fin-de-siecle Paris. Established and edited by the three Natanson brothers, it published the work of poets and dramatists as well as politicians. Mallarme, Proust, Gide, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Tolstoy all appeared in its pages, and the Nabis artists – including Vuillard, Bonnard and Vallotton (not to mention Toulouse-Lautrec) – were celebrated as well. Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist, it embraced universal human rights, condemned anti-Semitism, and supported anarchism, pacifism and internationalism. It was for this heady and provocative, bi-monthly that Toulouse-Lautrec created one of his most memorable posters.

La Revue Blanche represents a woman dressed in the latest Parisian style as she glides seductively toward the viewer on unseen ice skates. With plush fur collar and muff (ornamented with spider-like broches), straw hat and veil crowned with feathers, and a blue coat with complementary red-orange spots, she is the very epitome of fashion. And yet once again there is the stir of the fetishistic or the forbidden that gives the image its special power: the single, diminutive, gloved hand at lower left, (the other is cut off by the right margin of the poster), the small, pouty mouth, red hair and beads for eyes. Together, the features and costume suggest a woman who withholds as much as extends her charms. The green feathers at the top of the poster caress the words comprising the magazine title, suggesting that the reader of La Revue Blanche will be granted access to pleasures unavailable to less enlightened souls. Thus modern art, literature, politics – as well as a particular, literary commodity – are all granted their special allure in the figure of a modern woman, dressed in blue, with an improbably tall, feathered hat.