Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's 'Black countess' identified

The identity of a sitter in an early painting by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is here revealed. The finding expands and complicates recent attempts to highlight the role that Black women played in nineteenth-century French painting.

by **OLIVER WUNSCH**

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC'S painting the *Black countess* (Fig.1), which was bequeathed to the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge MA, by the banker and collector Maurice Wertheim in 1951, depicts a Black woman and a white coachman speeding along a coastal road in a horse-drawn buggy. Signed and dated 1881, it was painted by the sixteen-year old artist during a winter spent in Nice. Since Wertheim acquired it from the artist's family in 1937, various stories concerning the identity of the woman in the composition have proliferated, but with little evidence to support any claim.[1] In the 1946 catalogue of the Wertheim collection, John Rewald asserted that the painting was based on an actual person, 'a very handsome negress with a very distinctive personality'.[2] A version of this idea was repeated by others in the years that followed, but with no references nor any clues to identify the countess.[3]

Many nineteenth-century French newspapers mention a '*comtesse noire*', whose parties in Paris and Nice became legendary in gossip columns in the 1880s.[4] A notice about a costume ball hosted at her residence in Nice in February 1881 places her in the seaside resort at precisely the same time as Toulouse-Lautrec.[5] Several reports specify that '*la Comtesse noire*' was '*la comtesse Peiger*' (variously spelled Pegger, Peeger and Peyger),[6] but the most reliable confirmation of her identity comes in 1890 when several newspapers announce the countess's second marriage.[7] The record of her marriage in the municipal archives reveals key biographical details: the so-called 'Black countess' was born to a noble family in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on 12th April 1857; and her maiden name was Anne Justine Angèle Delva de Dalmarie.[8]

The restoration of Delva de Dalmarie's identity speaks to an urgent problem confronting the field of art history as scholars turn their attention to historically marginalised subjects. As a recent travelling exhibition devoted to the Black model has made clear, Black women are central to the history of modern European painting, but their presence has too often been ignored by the writers of that history.[9] The exhibition's curator, Denise Murrell, chose to focus primarily on subjects who were service workers with little power or fame; Delva de Dalmarie, however, was an aristocratic woman who commanded significant attention in her time. How did such a prominent woman's identity become detached from the painting? A deeper examination of Delva de Dalmarie's life and its intersection with Toulouse-Lautrec's work suggests some possible answers, revealing a paradoxical combination of notoriety and anonymity that defined what it meant to be a 'Black countess' in the *belle époque*.

Delva de Dalmarie was born to one of the most powerful families in Haiti. Her father was Jean Pierre Damien Delva, comte de Dalmarie (Fig.4), a military general and *grand chancelier* to the Haitian emperor Faustin Soulouque (1782–1867).[10] Not all members of the Haitian nobility were wealthy, but the Delvas were fabulously so.[11] According to one account, their fortune was eclipsed only by that of the emperor himself.[12]

The precise date of the Delva family's departure for France is uncertain, but the reason is clear: Emperor Soulouque was overthrown in 1858 and his administration was forced into exile.[13] Soulouque and General Delva were formally banished in perpetuity in May 1860.[14] The general,

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1 The painting passed from the artist's mother, the Comtesse Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec, to his cousin, M. Séré de Rivières, who sold it to Wertheim through Knoedler. See L. Carré, ed.: exh. cat. *Toulouse-Lautrec, Paintings, Drawings, Posters; Loan Exhibition for the Benefit of the Musée d'Albi, France, November 15 to December 11, 1937, at the Galleries of M. Knoedler and Company*, New York (Knoedler Gallery) 1937, p.20.

2 J. Rewald, entry in: exh. cat. *French Painting since 1870, lent by Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906*, Cambridge MA (Fogg Art Museum) 1946, p.20.

3 See, for example, M.G. Dortu: *Toulouse Lautrec*, Paris 1952, p.5.

4 The first reference appears in 'Échos de partout', *La Liberté* (21st October 1880), p.3.

5 'Zéro': 'Gil Blas à Nice et à Monaco', *Gils Blas* (9th February 1881), p.2.

6 See, for example, 'Tribunaux', *Le Constitutionnel* (21st March 1881), p.4.

7 'Le Passant': 'Les On-dit', *Le Rappel* (23rd September 1890), p.2; 'Le Masque de Fer': 'Échos', *Le Figaro* (21st September 1890), p.1; 'Petites Nouvelles', *Le Sud-Ouest* (23rd September 1890), p.2; and 'Gaultier-Garguille': 'Propos de coulisses', *Gil Blas* (24th September 1890), p.3.

8 Registre Paroissiaux et d'état civil Croissy-sur-Seine 1889–1892, Archives départementales des Yvelines (hereafter AdY), act 79, 6th September 1890, inv. no.2MIEC122, available at http://archives.yvelines.fr/ark:/36937/s0053d267cc3ea38/53d267cca3b58, accessed 20th August 2019.

9 D. Murrell: exh. cat. *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, New

1. *Black countess*, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. 1881. Oil on board, 32.4 by 40.7 cm. (Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge MA).

according to reports, had foreseen this outcome and had already managed to transfer his family's vast fortune to Europe.[15]

Delva de Dalmarie probably came to France around 1860, just a few years old, wealthy and with a noble pedigree. Her father died in Paris in 1867, leaving her to live with her mother.[16] By December of 1873, still just sixteen years old, she had married Raymond Frédéric Joseph de Peiger, a twenty-eight-year-old civil engineer.[17] Nine months later she gave birth to a daughter, named Henriette Marie Madeleine de Peiger.[18]

Little else is known about Delva de Dalmarie's life until 1880, when her name begins to appear regularly in the society pages of French newspapers. Her first moment of public recognition came in October of that year, when she hosted a party for some 250 guests at her home in Paris on rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Reports of the party noted that the host was a certain 'Mme la comtesse P.', who was, by then, sometimes referred to as the '*petite comtesse noire*'.[19]

York (Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University) and Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 2018–19. The exhbition was reviewed by David Pullins in this Magazine, 161 (2019), pp.591–94.

10 Registre Paroissiaux et d'état civil Croissy-sur-Seine 1889–1892, AdY, act 79, 6th September 1890, inv. no.2MIEC122.

11 Soulouque was generous in conferring aristocratic titles, which meant that he could typically offer his nobles only a modest income, see G. Alaux: *L'Empereur Soulouque et son empire*, Paris 1856, pp.212–14; M.-R. Trouillot: *Haiti, State against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*, New York 1990, pp.79–80; and M.J. MacLeod: 'The Soulouque regime in Haiti, 1847–1859: a reevaluation', *Caribbean Studies* 10, no.3 (1970), pp.35–48, at p.44.

12 F. Buloz: *Annuaire des deux mondes: histoire générale des divers états*, Paris 1854, IV, p.879.

13 Press accounts of Delva de Dalmarie's life state simply that a 'revolution' forced her family to leave Haiti. See, for example, 'Hier et demain', *La Lanterne* (6th June 1882), p.3.

14 A. Turnier: *Quand la nation demande des comptes*, Port-au-Prince 1989, pp.105–06.

15 G. Alaux: 'La Révolution Haïtienne de 1859', *Revue des deux mondes*, Paris 1859, XXIII, p.392.

16 P. David: 'Nécrologe de 1867', *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* (5th January 1868), p.3.

17 Actes d'état civil, mariages, 8e arrondissement, Archives de Paris, act 804, 3rd December 1873, inv. no.V4E 3388.

18 Actes d'état civil, naissances, 8e arrondissement, Archives de Paris, act 1321, 23rd September 1874, inv. no.V4E 3392.

19 See, for example, 'Le Diable Boiteux': 'Nouvelles & Échos', *Gil Blas* (23rd October 1880), p.1.

2. ***Study for the 'Black countess'***, **by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. 1880. Pencil on paper, 15.9 by 25.7 cm. (Art Institute of Chicago).**

3. ***Study for the 'Black countess'***, **by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. 1880. Black grease crayon on paper, 15.9 by 25.7 cm. (Art Institute of Chicago).**

4. ***D. Delva***, **by C.G. Crehen, from** ***Album Impérial d'Haïti***, **by A. Hartmann. 1852. Lithograph after a daguerrotype, 40.5 by 28.5 cm. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library).**

Like many members of the Parisian aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie, Delva de Dalmarie spent much of the winter in Nice. Since the late eighteenth century Nice had attracted a small community of aristocratic Europeans during the cold weather months, but it was the arrival of the railway in 1864 that turned the city into a bustling international resort.[20] Among all the destinations along the French Riviera at the time, Nice stood out for catering to the most affluent members of society, offering luxury accommodations, a new casino and balls throughout the winter.[21]

The winter social scene in Nice was evidently important enough to be covered by Parisian newspapers; much of the information surrounding Delva de Dalmarie's time there stems from a violent and salacious incident that befell her on 21st February 1881.[22] She was attending a production of the play *Belle Lurette* at the Théâtre-Français and was seated in a box alongside a 'Mademoiselle Laure Heymann' and 'Monsieur Villiers'.[23] Between acts a woman named Clotilde Andral, Villiers's former lover, burst into the box and threw a mustard jar full of acid on him. Delva de Dalmarie, Heymann and Villiers all sustained minor injuries, and the incident caused a sensation in the French press.[24] It was, perhaps, at this moment that Delva de Dalmarie caught the attention of Toulouse-Lautrec, who had recently arrived in Nice.

It is not clear whether Toulouse-Lautrec ever met Delva de Dalmarie. His letters make no mention of her and their circles of friends do not appear to have overlapped. Toulouse-Lautrec's social sphere in Nice was circumscribed, consisting primarily of his fellow guests at the Pension Internationale, the hotel where he and his mother stayed.[25] His mother brought him to Nice for three consecutive winters, from 1879

20 C.J. Haug: *Leisure and Urbanism in Nineteenth-Century Nice*, Lawrence KS 1982, pp.26–28.
21 *Ibid*., pp.47–60.
22 For an early account, see 'Fait divers', *Le Droit populaire* (26th February 1881), p.102.
23 D. Henrique: 'Affaire Clotilde Andral', *Le Gaulois* (25th March 1881), p.2.
24 According to one report, Delva de Dalmarie was herself the lover of Villiers between July and November of 1880, when they separated amicably, see *ibid*.
25 The hotel was located at 4bis rue Rossini, see H.D. Schimmel ed.: *The Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, Oxford 1991, p.28.
26 G.B. Murray: *Toulouse-Lautrec: The Formative Years, 1878–1891*, Oxford 1991, pp.8–29.
27 '*Qu'elle soit de celles* [. . .] *qui ont voiture, et qui s'étalent, des diamants aux oreilles, les soirs de premières, dans les avant-scènes des petits théâtres*', J. Frollo [Charles-Ange Laisant]: 'La Comtesse noire', *Le Petit Parisien* (7th June 1882), p.1.
28 '*On les croit riches, et cette illusion, qui soutient leur crédit, sera peut-être la cause première de leur fortune réelle*', E. Gourdon: *Paris au Bois*, Paris 1862, p.160.

to 1881, hoping that rest and warm air might provide him some relief from the genetic disorder that was already causing him debilitating leg injuries. Although it is possible that Toulouse-Lautrec encountered Delva de Dalmarie at some point during this time – or that he saw her passing in a carriage, as he depicted her – a more likely possibility is that he simply heard or read something about her, then elected to incorporate her into a painting.

The *Black countess* closely corresponds to other carriage and equestrian scenes that Toulouse-Lautrec drew and painted in the preceding year. His painting of his father driving a coach is especially similar, with the same diagonal movement across the composition and a nearly identical cross-armed man playing the role of passenger (Fig.5). Toulouse-Lautrec's teacher René Princeteau specialised in painting horses and such subjects constituted a major part of Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic training.[26] A sketchbook from 1880 contains numerous studies of men and women driving coaches, two of which closely resemble the composition of the *Black countess*, although the face of the woman is defined through cursory marks with minimal shading, indicating that Toulouse-Lautrec may have originally conceived her as white (Figs.2 and 3). Together these related works suggest that the *Black countess* is not a factual depiction of a scene that Toulouse-Lautrec witnessed, but instead represents his transposition of Delva de Dalmarie into a format that he was exploring at the time.

The fact that the painting deviates little from Toulouse-Lautrec's depiction of well-to-do white subjects, however, may still be meaningful. Much of the fascination that French journalists expressed about Delva de Dalmarie arose from the idea that a Black woman could engage in the rituals associated with affluent white people, that 'she is among those [. . .] who has a carriage, and who exhibits herself, diamonds on her ears, on the evenings of premieres, in the loges of small theatres'.[27] The mention of a carriage is significant both because of the connection with Toulouse-Lautrec's painting and because of the symbolic significance of carriages at that time. Owning a carriage had long been a marker of aristocratic or high bourgeois status, but by the second half of the nineteenth-century it had become a more slippery signifier. Already in 1862 the journalist Edouard Gourdon complained that ambitious men and women purchased carriages as literal vehicles of social mobility: 'We believe them to be rich, and this illusion, which supports their credit, may become the first cause of their real fortune'.[28] He noted

5. ***Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa driving his mail-coach in Nice*****, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. 1880. Oil on canvas, 38.5 by 51 cm. (Musée des Beaux-Arts de la ville de Paris).**

that women especially 'pursue with ferocity the dream of the horse and carriage'.[29] This understanding of the carriage as an emblem of social transformation and female autonomy made it a rich subject for artists to explore. Mary Cassatt, for example, took up these themes in her 1881 painting *Woman and child driving*, a work that has often been interpreted as a depiction of female independence in the Parisian public sphere (Fig.7).[30]

It is tempting to see Toulouse-Lautrec's *Black countess* in similar terms, as a visual challenge to conventional wisdom not only about gender and class, but also about race. A painting of an affluent Black woman speeding along the shoreline in Nice does not fit traditional assumptions about the period (so much so that one scholar insisted that the woman in the painting could not be Black at all, but must be a white woman wearing a veil).[31] But does Toulouse-Lautrec's painting endorse Delva de Dalmarie's disruption of social expectations or simply point to it? What position does the painting take on its subject, if any?

In a painting that measures just over forty centimetres wide, Delva de Dalmarie is roughly the size of a finger, rendered in short, economical brushstrokes. Toulouse-Lautrec was not averse to caricaturing Black subjects, as is made clear by his later depictions of Rafael Padilla, the performer known as '*Chocolat*' (Fig.6),[32] but his rendering of Delva de Dalmarie betrays no hint of distortion. Dressed fashionably, she stares fixedly forward, with an impassive expression. Beyond these facts, the painting tells us little about her. She is at the centre of the painting, but we are given no indication of her interior life.

6. *Footit et Chocolat*, from *Nib*, supplement to *La Revue Blanche*, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. 1895. Lithograph, sheet 35 by 49.6 cm. (Boston Public Library).

The limits of what the painting tells us about its subject are perhaps unsurprising given its small scale and the fact that Toulouse-Lautrec likely never met Delva de Dalmarie. But these qualities also echo the superficial way that she was described by journalists, who generally commented simply on the strangeness that a Black countess existed at all. 'What', one columnist asked in 1882, 'is this Little Black Countess? A girl, like many others; only one singularity: she is a negress. From this comes her great success'.[33] The remark betrays the biases of its author, but it also contains a grain of truth: Delva de Dalmarie attracted the attention of a predominantly white public because of her race. Writers placed greater emphasis on what Delva de Dalmarie was – Black and aristocratic – than on who she was as a person. It was, after all, this tendency that earned her the appellation '*la petite Comtesse noire*', which appeared in print far more often than any reference to her real name.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Delva de Dalmarie was never associated with Toulouse-Lautrec's painting. The picture's title, so far as it can be documented, appears always to have been *Black countess*.[34] As tempting as it may be to retitle works such as this in an effort to pull models from behind the cloak of anonymity (such retitling was on ample display in the expanded second iteration of Murrell's exhibition staged at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris),[35] historical titles provide clues about how a work was originally received and can point to blind spots embedded in the work itself. Toulouse-Lautrec's painting conveys little about Delva de Dalmarie, and to include her name in the title would be to demand of the work more than it offers.

At the heart of the painting, then, is a paradox: it is a work that renders nearly invisible the person who inspired it. Ralph Ellison memorably described this condition in his introduction to his novel *Invisible Man*, in which he points out that the 'high visibility' of Black men and women in modern society in fact made their individuality 'un-visible' to white people.[36] Krista Thompson has examined the ways that modern media, technology and consumerism have amplified this tension between hypervisibility and invisibility, allowing Black bodies to be fetishised while Black personhood is elided.[37] Delva de Dalmarie's celebrity in the emerging media landscape of the late nineteenth century provides an early example of the phenomenon, her reputation as 'The Black Countess' obscuring the person behind it.

What became, then, of Delva de Dalmarie? References to the '*comtesse noire*' continued to appear in French newspapers after

7. *Woman and child driving*, by Mary Cassatt. 1881. Oil on canvas, 89.7 by 130.5 cm. (Philadelphia Museum of Art).

Toulouse-Lautrec painted her. There were rumours in the autumn of 1881 that she was separated from her husband and that a second marriage was planned with a foreign prince.[38] Then, in June 1882, came stories that she had attempted suicide and whispers that her extravagance had sent her to financial ruin.[39] She next surfaces in an 1883 English-language guide to Parisian courtesans, which describes her as 'about twenty-five years of age, slight, well-made, as black as night, and as hot as fire'.[40] Throughout the rest of the 1880s she is briefly noted in descriptions of the Parisian social scene, appearing at Longchamps or spotted at the theatre.[41]

By 1890 she had married again, this time to the prominent French journalist and playwright Raoul Toché. The marriage certificate mentions an illegitimate child, Raoul Réné Robert, born on 17th June 1884, who was then officially recognised as their son.[42] Beyond this point Delva de Dalmarie appears infrequently in published sources. She was reported to be present at a ball in Nice in May of 1893, was seen in the Bois de Boulogne in 1896,[43] and was present at her son's marriage in Paris in 1907.[44] Her subsequent fate is unknown. Toulouse-Lautrec has left us a striking image of the *Black countess*, but a full portrait of Delva de Dalmarie has yet to be painted, or, perhaps, discovered.

29 '*Les femmes* [. . .] *poursuivent avec acharnement le rêve de l'équipage*', *ibid*., p.165.
30 G.M. Thomas: 'Women in public: the display of femininity in the parks of Paris', in A. D'Souza and T. McDonough, eds: *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Manchester 2006, pp.32–48; and S. Fillin Yeh: 'Mary Cassatt's images of women', *Art Journal* 35, no.4 (1976), pp.359–63, at pp.362–63.
31 J. Lassaigne: *Lautrec: Biographical and Critical Studies*, Geneva 1953, p.22. Technical analysis found no layers of white beneath the dark paint, leaving little doubt that Toulouse-Lautrec intended from the start to represent a woman with dark skin, see S. Easterbrook: 'Technical examination and comparison of two Toulouse-Lautrec paintings in the Wertheim Collection of the Fogg Art Museum' (1985), conservation file, 1951.64, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge MA. For a summary of Easterbrook's findings, see J. O'Brian: *Degas to Matisse: The Maurice Wertheim Collection*, Cambridge MA 1988, pp.78–80.
32 For Padilla's identity see G. Noiriel: *Chocolat clown nègre: l'histoire oubliée du premier artiste noir de la scène française*, Montrouge 2012.
33 '*Qu'est-ce que c'est que la Petite Comtesse Noire? Une fille, comme beaucoup d'autres; une seule singularité: elle est négresse. De là son grand succès*', in Frollo, *op. cit*. (note 27), p.1.
34 The title was attached to the painting as early as 1926, when the work still belonged to Toulouse-Lautrec's mother. That year, the artist's friend and dealer Maurice Joyant included the painting under this title in his catalogue of Toulouse-Lautrec's work, see M. Joyant: *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1864–1901*, Paris 1926, I, p.254. Given the close relationship of Joyant with the artist and his family, it seems plausible that the story of the 'Black countess' originated within the family, perhaps even with the artist himself.
35 A. Higonnet: 'Renommer l'œuvre', in D. Murrell: exh. cat. *Le modèle noir: de Géricault a Matisse*, Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 2019, pp.26–31.
36 R. Ellison: *Invisible Man*, New York 1981, p.xv.
37 K.A. Thompson: *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, Durham NC 2015, pp.39–40.
38 'Le Diable Boiteux': 'Nouvelles & Échos', *Gil Blas* (3rd September 1881), p.1.
39 'Le suicide de la Comtesse-Noire', *La Lanterne* (6th June 1882), p.3.
40 *The Pretty Women of Paris; Their Names and Addresses, Qualities and Faults, Being a Complete Directory; or Guide to Pleasure for Visitors to the Gay City*, Paris 1883, p.158.
41 'Diablotin': 'Les Propos du boulevard', *L'Écho de Paris* (16th September 1884), p.1; 'Le Diable Boiteux': 'Nouvelles & Échos', *Gil Blas* (20th February 1886), p.1.
42 Registre Paroissiaux et d'état civil Croissy-sur-Seine 1889–1892, AdY, act 79, 6th September 1890, inv. no.2MIEC122. For the son's birth record, see Registre Paroissiaux et d'état civil Chatou 1882–1884, AdY, no.102, 19th June 1884, inv. no. 2MIEC82, available at https://archives.yvelines.fr/ark:/36937/s0053cff2b897679/53cff-2ba80c42. The boy was registered in Paris two years later: Actes d'état civil, 9e arrondissement, Archives de Paris, act 1972, 26th September 1886, inv. no.V4E 0093.
43 R. O'Monroy: 'Le Pied', *La Lanterne* (4th May 1893), p.1; and 'Échos et nouvelles', *Gil Blas* (3rd June 1896), p.1.
44 Actes d'état civil, 1907, Mariages 17e arrondissement, Archives de Paris, act 1898, 26th September 1907, inv. no.17M 298.