

VALADON, UTRILLO & UTTER

IN THE RUE CORTOT STUDIO: 1912-1926

SOMOGY
ART
PUBLISHERS





Maurice Utrillo

UTRILLO: PICTURING THE PICTURESQUE

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Maurice Utrillo

La Maison de Berlioz à Montmartre ("The House of Berlioz in Montmartre") [detail], c. 1920

Oil on canvas ■ 55 × 46 cm ■ A. G. Leventis Gallery, Cyprus [Fig. 1 and Cat. 55]

“Utrillo’s ‘pictorial temperament’ is fundamentally picturesque”

In his unpublished autobiography, Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955) describes his first forays into painting in around 1903 as deeply intuitive: “continuing to follow the impulses of my pictorial temperament, I worked as I pleased, obeying my inspirations as they were dictated by my essentially sympathetic character.”¹ Although his mother was Suzanne Valadon, and he was exposed to artists such as Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec as a child, due to her career as a painter and model in Montmartre, Utrillo had no formal training as an artist.² Painting, for him, was a solitary and personal pursuit. However, the modesty of his approach belies the broader significance of his subject matter and style. Utrillo’s “pictorial temperament” is fundamentally picturesque – he gravitated toward the quaint, the rough-hewn and the crumbling, working within a fairly conventional aesthetic mode – but his sensitivity to his surroundings and his “essentially sympathetic character” made his scenes of Montmartre expand the meaning of the term for twentieth-century art. Indeed, a defining quality of Utrillo’s painting is its reflection on the picturesque as a modern mode, and on his own identification with its emphasis on decay.

A picturesque view, according to the term’s basic definition, is one that appears ready-made for painting, displaying an attractive variety and harmony of colours, lines and forms.³ “Picturesque” as an artistic classification is thus

1. “Continuant à suivre les impulsions de mon tempérament pictural, je travaille comme il me plaît et suivant mes inspirations dictées par mon caractère essentiellement sympathique,” Maurice Utrillo, “Autobiographie de Maurice Utrillo, peintre-paysagiste,” unpublished manuscript cited in Jeanine Wernod, *Maurice Utrillo V*, Flammarion, Paris, 1983, p. 31.

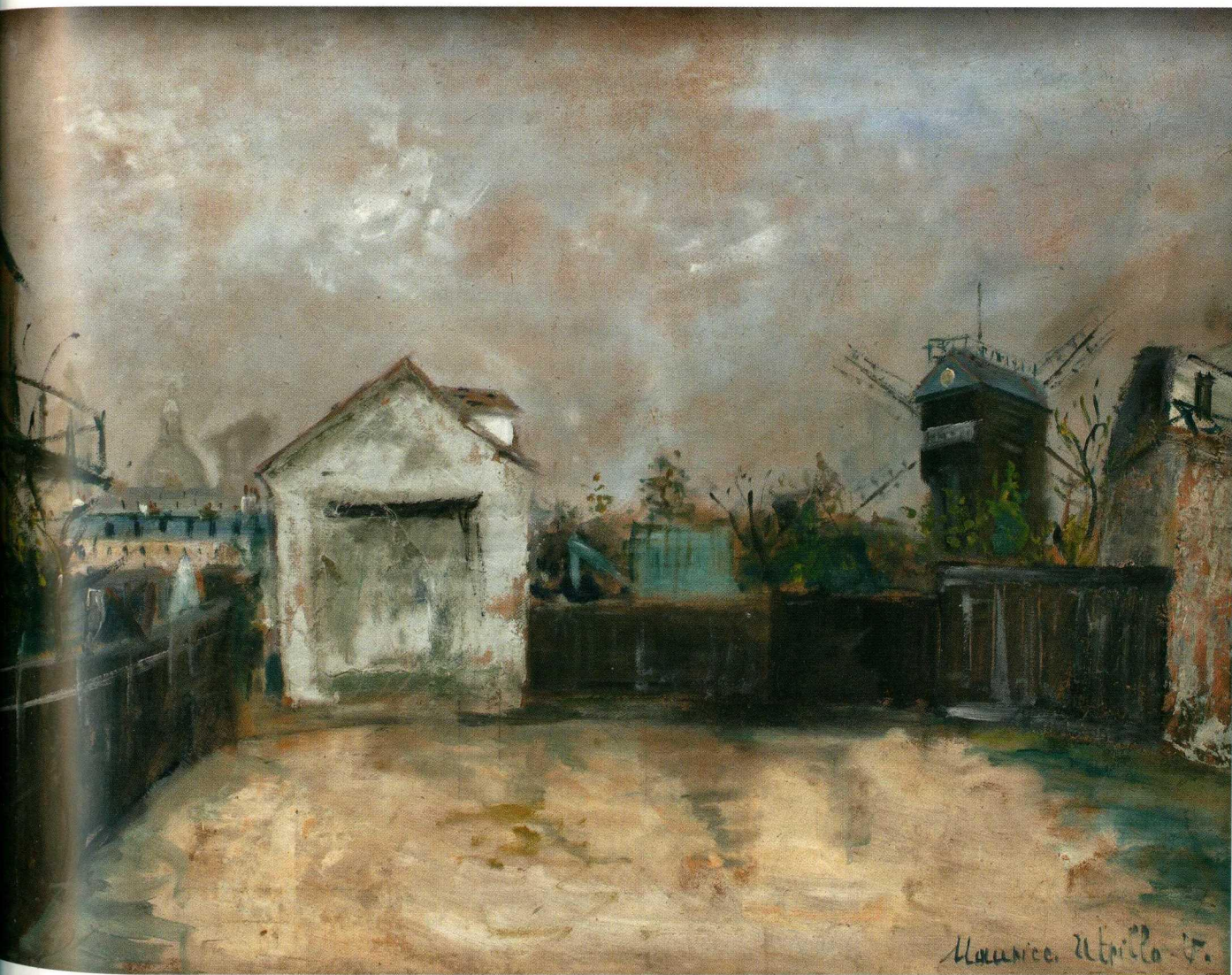
2. After painting on his own for several years, Utrillo applied to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1909, but was rejected.

3. “Pittoresque: 1) Qui concerne la peinture, 2) Il se dit de tout ce qui se prête à faire une peinture bien caractérisée, et qui frappe et charme tout à la fois les yeux et l’esprit. On dit d’une physionomie, d’un vêtement, d’un site, qu’ils sont pittoresques, lorsque leur beauté ou leur caractère bien prononcés les rendent dignes ou du moins susceptibles d’être représentés en peinture.” Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Paris, 1872-77. The French *pittoresque* is from the

Maurice Utrillo

Moulin de la Galette ("The Galette
Windmill"), c. 1914-16

Oil on canvas ■ 52 × 69.5 cm ■ Kunstmuseum
Luzern, Lucerne [Fig. 2 and Cat. 52]



innately self-referential: to paint in a picturesque mode is to translate into painting views that, presumably, already look like paintings, encouraging reflection on what this “picturesque” quality is and what the translation entails. In volume four of *Modern Painters* (1856), John Ruskin describes the picturesque as an inherently modern aesthetic category, a mediation between the more traditional categories of the beautiful and the sublime.⁴ A pleasing roughness and irregularity of subject matter and style characterise the picturesque, including a range of dark and light tones and contrasting colours. Architecture that exhibits signs of decay is intrinsically picturesque, because “a broken stone has necessarily more various forms in it than a whole one; a bent roof has more various curves in it than a straight one; every excrescence or cleft involves some additional complexity of light and shade...”⁵ But herein lies the problem. For Ruskin, “the modern feeling of the picturesque, ...so far as it consists in a delight in ruin, is perhaps the most suspicious and questionable of all the characters distinctively belonging to our temper, and art.”⁶ To translate ruin and decay into a pleasing painterly composition is morally suspect, unless, he argues, the painting is infused with a genuine and expansive “sympathy” for what it depicts. If it is not, it is a dangerously superficial “surface-picturesque”, defined by “mere external ruggedness”. If it is, it attains a higher form that he terms the “true or noble picturesque”.⁷ The fascination of Utrillo’s picturesque scenes of Montmartre lies in their investigation of both possibilities.

Italian *pittoresco*, which derives from *pittore* (painter). So “painterlesque” or “painterly” would be a more faithful English translation.

4. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 4, Smith, Elder & Company, London, 1856, pp. 1-15.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 6-7, 9.

The fact that Utrillo frequently painted from postcards makes the term picturesque all the more appropriate to his work.⁸ After finding his artistic signature in the quaint, sloping streets of Montmartre, rendering these scenes with strong tonal contrasts and compositions enervated by dynamic, jagged lines, he discovered he could paint these pictures just as well, or perhaps better, from two-dimensional black-and-white photographs rather than from life. His pictures then became quite literally and self-consciously “picturesque”, from their inspiration in ready-made pictures to their composition and palette to the eye-pleasing charm they ultimately offer the viewer.

Many of Utrillo’s paintings of Montmartre can be divided into two essential modes: a kind of melancholy picturesque, in which the artist’s personal identification with his neighbourhood’s decay is evident in the works’ leaden skies, deteriorating facades and empty streets, and what might be called a postcard picturesque, in which well-known landmarks of this bohemian quarter are bathed in sunny weather and humanised by quaint clusters of figures.⁹ The literature on the artist tends to emphasise his melancholy mode, projecting his well-known struggles with addiction and mental instability onto his œuvre. This is understandable given the way his career as an artist began: Utrillo only began drawing and painting at the age of nineteen, when his mother and doctors urged him to make art as a form of occupational therapy, a distraction from alcohol and a way to focus his unbalanced mind. But although many of Utrillo’s paintings exhibit sombre hues, a vertiginous or otherwise disorienting arrangement of space and an

8. Adolphe Tabarant notes that the artist began to work this way from the end of 1909 onwards, often working inside the confines of his studio apartment. Adolphe Tabarant, *Maurice Utrillo*, Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1926, p. 52. For examples of paintings for which the postcard source has been identified and preserved, see Jean Fabris and Cédric Paillier, *L’Œuvre complet de Maurice Utrillo*, Association Maurice Utrillo, Paris, 2009, pp. 651–77.

9. It must be said that quite a few of Utrillo’s paintings blend aspects of both modes, but this merger makes perfect sense, as I will go on to explain.



uncanny emptiness, many others are considerably more cheerful in their palette and chosen scenery. Utrillo either drains his postcard-like subjects of life by evacuating their figures and darkening their skies or brings them to life with vibrant varied colour. Both approaches, in different ways, speak to the decline of Montmartre in the early twentieth century.

A compelling example of Utrillo's melancholic picturesque is *Moulin de la Galette* ("The Galette Windmill"), c. 1914-16 [Fig. 2], in which Utrillo depicts Montmartre's famous seventeenth-century windmill – the landmark most emblematic of the area's rustic origins – on the margins of an empty, wintry courtyard. A wartime work (Utrillo's mental instability made him unfit for military service), the painting falls within the artist's "white period", defined by a range of white tones and a sense of eerie evacuation. Picturesque details abound: the peeling paint on the wall at the right edge, the tangled branches rising above the uneven fence, the lively white, grey and beige strokes used

Maurice Utrillo

***Le Lapin Agile*, 1910**

Oil on canvas || 50 × 61.5 cm || Musée National d'Art Moderne / Centre de Création Industrielle – Centre Pompidou, Paris, AM 2509 P [Fig. 3 and Cat. 47]

to depict the cold, threatening sky and the rough, time-worn surface of the white facade that dominates the composition. The windmill was saved from destruction in 1915, right around the time Utrillo painted the picture. His composition evokes the threat that it faced – along with Montmartre as a whole – from the encroaching of modernity as well as its own deterioration. The pathos of the picture comes from Utrillo's sympathetic identification with his subject, as a painter whose works deny or at least diminish the invasion of modernity and whose own physical and mental deterioration threatened his occupation from beginning to end.

Le Lapin Agile, 1910 [Fig. 3], exemplifies Utrillo's interest in the aesthetic of the postcard, showing the artist playing with the picturesque as an artistic mode. On the one hand, Utrillo gives us an ideal picture of Montmartre's rustic appeal: from the dirt road to the white picket fence to the delicate flowering trees to the colourfully composed facades of the buildings to the diminutive figures climbing the hill in the distance. The painting's palette is rich and lively, its composition full of variety and charm. On the other hand, the scene looks so staged, so flattened out, that its picturesque qualities appear as if in quotes. The charm of the scene is made to appear flimsy, its facades about to fold in on themselves like miniature cardboard maquettes.¹⁰ In this way Utrillo finds form for the way the village of Montmartre, especially its bohemian artistic culture, for which *Le Lapin Agile* was a well-known symbol, was experienced as mere scenery by casual visitors and tourists. The postcard was this phenomenon's ubiquitous sign.

10. Ara Merjian has called Utrillo's renderings of Montmartre "more vaguely scenographic than anecdotal", gesturing to the unreal, stage-set quality of these scenes with their dramatically foreshortened perspectives and flattened space. Ara Merjian, "Suzanne Valadon and Maurice Utrillo", *Artforum*, Summer, 2009: <http://artforum.com/picks/id=23168&view=print> (accessed 12 June 2015). This is central to their postcard aesthetic, and the artist would later translate this approach into actual scenography, doing sets and costumes for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1926 and for a production of Charpentier's opera, *Louise*, in 1948.

Well before Utrillo's time, the rustic village of Montmartre perched on a hill overlooking Paris was appropriated into that city's urban fabric – a lively neighbourhood teeming with artists and a major hub of nightlife and tourism. By picturing it as quaint, serene and sparsely populated, Utrillo recalls Montmartre's rustic past, a past from which the exploding entertainment industry of his own era profited by capitalising on the area's picturesque charm. Utrillo's approach in pictures like *Le Lapin Agile* [Fig. 3] acknowledges the artifice of his painterly mode. Certain subjects that he returns to again and again – the House of Berlioz [Fig. 3] and Le Moulin de la Galette [Fig. 2] were other favourites – point to Montmartre as a site of picturesque nostalgia already in the early years of the twentieth century, and his postcard aesthetic reads as a subtle critique of the packaging of this nostalgia in pictorial form.

Ultimately, it is Utrillo's sympathy for Montmartre, his profound identification with the place's gradual ruination and commercialisation, that gives his views of the neighbourhood their pathos. Not only did he spend much of his time ruining himself quite literally in Montmartre's streets and bars but he also built a lucrative career selling his paintings to the same people (Parisians and tourists alike) who commodified its culture. To return to Ruskin's terms, Utrillo's works are not *merely* picturesque but, rather, sympathetic reflections on the picturesque in all its superficial and marketable appeal in modernity. His astonishingly prolific output – he completed over 5,000 canvases over the course of his fifty-year career – is relevant here. It is as if, by building an œuvre of paintings that are relatively small in format yet vast in number, Utrillo was striving (however impossible the task) to paint on a scale competitive with the burgeoning postcard industry. The first fifteen years of his career as an artist coincided with the golden age of the postcard in France and around the world, a period when the incorporation of images made postcards a powerful medium not only

for epistolary communication but also for memory, nostalgia and publicity. Restaurants, hotels, nightclubs and other businesses distributed postcards as advertisements and souvenirs; they became an inescapable sign of the commodification of Montmartre as a picturesque relic and a mecca for tourists. By the latter half of the twentieth century the modern way to call a view “picturesque” was to say it “looks like a postcard”, not a painting, bringing the concept full circle. It is utterly appropriate that tourists can now buy postcards of Utrillo’s paintings when they visit Montmartre, but they must look at his paintings more carefully to understand their sympathetic reflection on the area’s spectacular decay.