

Chapter Three

Montmartre  
1890–1891

*Conder, for me, fulfilled all preconceived ideas of what a genius should look like. He was beautiful to look at, with a head like an antique marble, and a sleepy charm that somehow convinced one that here was someone unusual. 'The strange Bird' describes exactly the sort of sensation he first aroused.*

A. S. Hartrick<sup>1</sup>

THE PROSPECT OF PARIS notwithstanding, Conder found the final parting with his Melbourne friends hard, sensing he would miss their support and writing to Roberts 'I am sorry I went without saying goodbye, but I feel sure I shall see you in Paris one of these days—you are such a roving spirit'. He was aware of the great leap he was taking, hoping it would turn out well: 'I mean to work hard in Paris and do something, but I feel very doubtful about myself sometimes and fancy I have no originality at all'.<sup>2</sup> The 'last summer at Heidelberg' with its idealism and artistic companionship became a *leitmotif* that was to recur in the correspondence of all three—Conder, Streeton and Roberts—over the next dozen years. For Conder it provided a template of ideal artistic living and working conditions he was constantly to seek.

The *Austral* called at Albany then Colombo, which appealed to him as 'that city of Arabian nights' and where he managed a small oil sketch of a street scene. Aden came next, but by the time he reached Naples the close company he was forced to keep on board the boat had palled and he was ready for Europe. He disembarked, planning to travel overland to England. His studio contents, including all the works he hadn't sold or given away,

were sent on; some were to be left with Mrs Pryce but most would be taken to his new life in Paris. He immediately succumbed to Europe: 'I fell in love quite as much, I think, with the Neapolitan life and colour and enjoyed the Bay of Naples over Chianti wine and the guitars which seem so popular there'. He surrendered to the pleasures on offer—and further orchestrated the experience for Roberts' benefit: 'I shall never forget one Sunday afternoon, a perfect day, giving two Olivey Italians two francs for half an hour's music on their mandolin and guitar. It was a veritable dream to look on that blue sea and rose green hill land by Vesuvius and have 'Faust' divinely expressed to give that touch of sentiment to the whole. I never, somehow, expected things to have much romance . . .'<sup>3</sup>

He spent only two days in Rome and then moved on to Florence, seeing it through 'a Browning haze' and telling Roberts that Brownings' 'Old Pictures in Florence' 'helped me very much in the Uffizi Gallery, and the other galleries that I visited'.<sup>4</sup> He liked Florence but found the contemplation of its art and architecture raised disturbing questions about the nature of art and time. Later, from Paris, he wrote urging Theodore Fink not to neglect a visit there, for 'The charm lies in the great past of a few centuries ago & the present people seem but poor tenants of noble landlords that have gone away & left so much that is good & beautiful behind them'.<sup>5</sup>

Stopping briefly in Paris he inspected Julian's studios with a group of helpful American students, and visited the Luxembourg Gallery of contemporary French art where he was 'tremendously struck by Bastien-Lepage—he is perfect'. Arriving in Paris at a time when impressionism was losing favour and the new vogue for tonal painting, Velasquez and Whistler was at its height, he commented 'Paris is "grey" and so a great many of the pictures are grey, or cold blue . . . their truth lies in form and colour'. He was having difficulty getting his eye in: 'Chavannes is glorious. He is a decorator . . . I cannot at present admire much of what is called the Impressionist school—they are "ultra extremists"'.<sup>6</sup>

By July he was in England, staying with his former guardian Mrs Pryce for whom he painted a study of an English beach day at Littlehampton. Seeing her and his childhood surroundings and acquaintances again was a happy and rewarding time and he was loath to cut the visit short in any way—even begrudging a visit to London. He wrote to Roberts, apologising

for not looking up the artistic contacts he had given him there: 'I scarcely had the time I should have wished and being "precious short of cash" . . . I had no opportunity of spending much time in London, or of presenting the letters that I had'. He seems to have had a premonition about London. It was never to be a place in which he felt happy or wished to spend much time. For now, Paris was his target. But was the Paris of his imaginings to be anything like the reality he was to face in that late summer of 1890?

Paris had been the centre of European art since at least 1850. The successive policies of French rulers from Napoleon on had fostered art, seeing French art as integral to French nationalism and never hesitating to exploit it for propaganda purposes. The state-supported annual Salon was, by mid-century, the artist's Mecca. Success there meant a viable career and often much more. For foreign artists, just to be hung at the Salon guaranteed a reputation.

However, winning acceptance in this strongly Francophile system was not easy for foreigners. Admission into the state-run Ecole des Beaux-Arts was banned to foreigners until late in the century. This resulted in the proliferation of privately run *ateliers* where great masters of the Salon who felt so inclined could be persuaded to give advice to aspiring students. English, German, Belgian, Scandinavian, American—and Australian—students flocked to them. Paris was acknowledged as the place where the new was to be found; where reputations were made. Once made, foreign artists could return to their homeland as accepted masters, build up a clientele and themselves teach the wisdom they had gained in the Parisian *ateliers*.

Subtle changes had taken place in this system as the century progressed. Seeing there was money to be had, independent dealers began establishing themselves, cautiously at first. But by the 1880s and 1890s galleries such as those run by Paul Durand-Ruel or Georges Petit could boast better viewing conditions than those available at the giant annual Salons, and they would screen out work not worthy of notice. A visit to their elegant showrooms became a pleasure rather than the ordeal the viewing of some thousands of paintings, sculptures and engravings at the Salon could be. Moreover, they were open for most of the year. Wealthy collectors began to trust the new dealers and to build collections through their offices.

Success at the Salon, while still desirable, became less essential. From 1885 there were no longer any regular, state-sponsored exhibitions in France.

Under the Third Republic artists had become part of the free-enterprise system. By 1890, the year of Conder's arrival, the official Salon no longer existed. It was replaced by three major annual Salons, the most popular of which—and the largest—was the Salon des Artistes Français, the 'Old' Salon. Its exhibitions were dominated by the popular and the *juste milieu* or 'middle of the road' artists. The 'New' Salon, the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, was founded in 1890 in an attempt to provide a more exclusive context. It showed established artists in an elegant setting, including, for the first time, the decorative arts. The third Salon was that of the Indépendents—which operated without a jury, took the most radical art and was also very large. In such a competitive climate, critics and dealers developed new powers to make or break a reputation. It became important to have the right contacts, to be seen in 'artistic' company, to be in the know.

All of which was a tall order for a 'semi-colonised' Conder coming to Paris to seek his fortune. Only one other from Australia before him had been able to penetrate the avant-garde and to work with the new and innovatory—John Peter Russell, who in the mid-1880s had become friendly with Van Gogh, Guillaumin, Emile Bernard and even Monet. But he had left Paris two years earlier to work in isolation at Belle Ile. Conder's best Australian contact was Tom Roberts; he had visited Paris only briefly in 1884 and knew only one artist resident there, the Spanish painter Ramon Casas.

Conder was aware of Casas, now a major figure in the *modernista* movement of Barcelona, and wrote to Roberts that 'One of your friends, Casas, has a studio within a stone's throw of me at the Moulin de la Galette. He exhibits this year at the Champs de Mars [the New Salon] some very good work . . . he works in a very grey way, a little lacking in colour, I fancy, but very charming in tone and altogether most pleasing'.<sup>7</sup> However, he did not seek the Spaniard out, probably because of the notoriously closed society Spanish artists in Paris kept. Casas' reputation was to grow throughout the 1890s as his combination of social realism and abilities as a society portraitist appealed to the conservative bourgeoisie of Barcelona—in much the same way as like qualities assured a clientele for Roberts in 1890s Australia. By the end of the decade his stature was such that the young Picasso felt himself to be in competition with Casas, appropriating his style as a portraitist for a time before transcending it.<sup>8</sup>



WILLIAM ROTHENSTEIN, CONDER SKETCHING AT JULIAN'S ATELIER, PARIS,  
BLACK CONTÉ ON PAPER, 1890

By early October the students had returned to Paris to begin the new year—and to prepare offerings for the Salons held in the spring. The *atelier* most popular with foreigners, Julian's, 'a congeries of studios crowded with students, the walls thick with palette scrapings, hot, airless and extremely noisy',<sup>9</sup> had been founded in 1873 in the rue du Faubourg St Denis. The proprietor, Rodolphe Julian, was a former painter who in 1881 had received the Légion d'honneur for his services to art teaching. His strategy was to hire models and arrange weekly visits from celebrated artists of the day. This appealed particularly to the English students, who were rarely permitted to draw and paint from the life in their own schools, and not surprisingly Julian's enterprise flourished with a number of studios being established.

Julian himself supervised the day-to-day running of his studios, establishing the life model's pose for the week on a Monday. Students would group themselves around the model on high or low stools and then learn the severe discipline of analytical observation by drawing and painting from the professional models. In-house competitions were held from time to time and the comments of the visiting masters on the students' efforts could be

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caustic. Julian employed a number of these over the years, the most famous of whom during Conder's time was 'Bougereau, whose name was a household word in Europe and America'.<sup>10</sup> Although ostensibly designed to prepare students for entry into the Ecole des Beaux-Arts or to help them get up an entry for the annual Salon, the *atelier's* real role was to prolong the status quo. It was not a system in which the imaginative thrived for long, and Conder was no exception. He transferred to the more lively Cormon's in the boulevard de Clichy at the beginning of 1891, and later in the year gave the discipline away altogether.

If distance was already weakening the bonds Conder had with his artist friends in Melbourne, Melbourne itself was loathe to lose sight of him. *Table Talk's* Paris correspondent, reporting on John Longstaff's and E. Phillips Fox's success at being hung 'on the line' at the Salon, adds that 'the Australian students now in Paris are looking forward eagerly to meeting Mr Charles Conder, Mr Aby Altson and Miss May Vale who have all resolved to go through a course of studies in Parisian studios'. Three months later the tone is a little worried—'Mr Charles Conder is, according to the latest tidings, too much engaged in going the rounds of the studios to settle to steady work just yet'—but soon there is good news for his followers: 'Mr Charles Conder . . . had taken a studio at 13 Rue Ravignan, Montmartre, Paris, where he has settled down to hard steady work. Mr Conder spends half a day in the schools, and the other half he devoted to study in his own studio, painting from still life or from a model'. Twelve months later a final faint but reassuring note appears: 'Davies, and Miss Davies, Conder and Alison Rae are making good progress'.<sup>11</sup>

But Conder was not to identify with any sort of 'expatriate' grouping of Australian students in Paris. He found no difficulty at all in relating to the Bohemian subculture of the artist-student he had read about in Murger, and was quickly accepted by the other students—sometimes to the irritation of other Australian students who found such assimilation difficult. John Longstaff, winner of the National Gallery of Victoria Travelling Scholarship in 1887 and in Paris on a meagre stipend—and somewhat hampered by a wife who loathed the French and refused to leave their tiny Montmartre apartment—was one. He reveals his jealousy of Conder's free and easy ways in a report to the *Argus* that Conder's dislike of academic routine led to his

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'clearing out from the English, American and Australian contingent, who stuck solidly to their studies, and betaking himself to the congenial society of young Frenchmen at Montmartre who speedily learned to idolise him'. Stolid and workmanlike himself, Longstaff evidences the deep prejudices Anglo-Australians harboured towards the French. He was appalled by Conder's willingness to relate to the local culture and wrote disgustedly, 'When last seen he was tastefully attired in pegtop nether garments of brown velveteen, with a short coat of the same delightful material, a crimson sash round his waist, and a tall pointed hat'.<sup>12</sup>

Longstaff was correct in reporting Conder's lack of patience with the ritual of studio teaching. Easily bored and of a mercurial temperament the idea of art founded on years of tedious life-drawing, figure compositions and endless critiquing by elderly academicians was anathema to him. Yet it was through the *ateliers* that he made his most significant contacts. At Julian's, where he worked largely with Benjamin Constant and Lucien Doucet, he came into contact with the group of ex-Sladers who were to be important for him for the next few years. Arthur Studd was one; Arthur Blunt another. Then there was the eighteen-year-old William Rothenstein commencing his second year. The diminutive Rothenstein was initially bowled over by his first contact with Conder, describing him as 'a blond, rather heavily-built man, blue-eyed, bearded, with long hair parted in the middle and falling over his eyes . . . He spoke with a soft voice and walked with a peculiar, rather shuffling gait. There was something oddly attractive about him'.<sup>13</sup>

So commenced a friendship that was to be both deep and complex on both sides. Rothenstein, dark, bespectacled, intense and physically small was attracted by Conder's easy looks and casual demeanour—the opposite of his own. Earnestness and serious ambition were as foreign to Conder as they were integral to Rothenstein—and therein lay the murky waters of the jealousy and envy that were later to drip poison into the friendship.

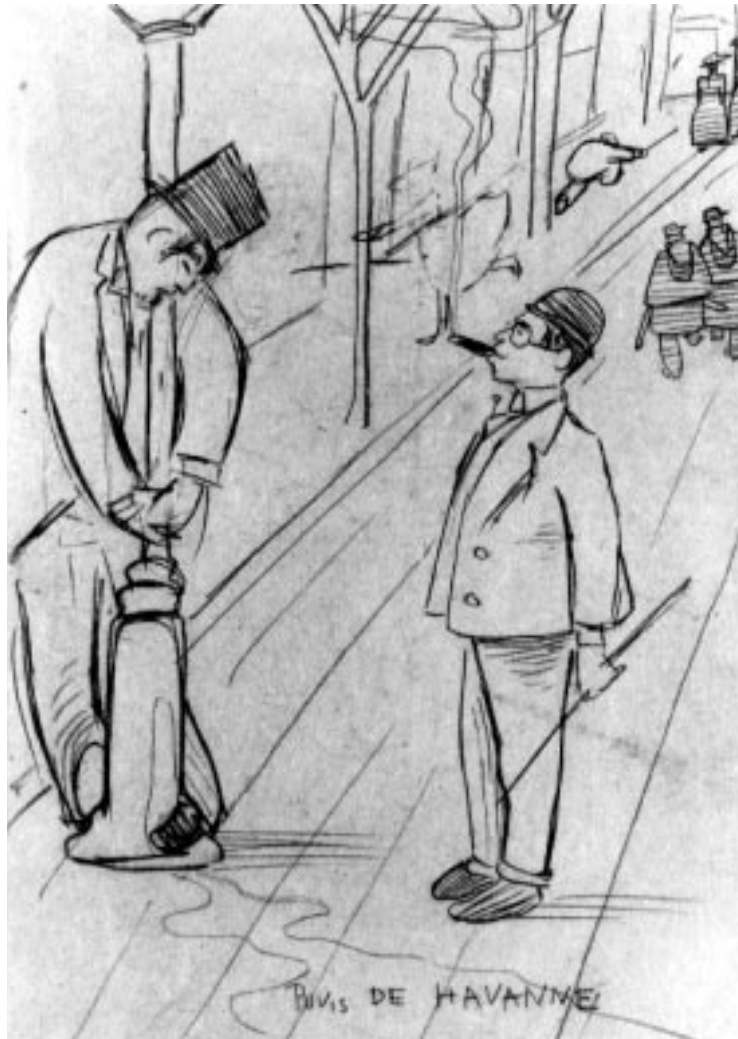
The two took to one another immediately and Conder invited Rothenstein to visit him in Montmartre to see his studio, where Rothenstein saw 'his work, pale panels of flowers, and blond Australian landscapes; a little weak and faded in colour, I thought, but with a delicate charm of their own'. He saw Conder's signed photograph of Janet Achurch in a place of honour and was intrigued. Conder's poverty must have been immediately

obvious, but so too was his passion for scene setting: 'His studio contained little else save a divan covered with fine Indian materials—soft white muslins with faint primrose and rose-coloured stains. Other muslins hung across the windows'.<sup>14</sup>

Rothenstein belonged to a large and close-knit Jewish family, firmly established in Bradford in the north of England. His sense of familial and personal security appealed to the rootless Conder, ever wondering what his next move might be. Rothenstein's confidence and courage enabled him to establish a vast number of useful contacts in the four years he spent in Paris, but the fact that Rothenstein allowed his art to be driven by ambition was something Conder was sensitive to and warned him about—to no avail.

Meanwhile, Conder was so taken with his energy that he invited Rothenstein to share his studio—which he did for a while—and never ceased chiding him about the true purpose of art. For whilst Rothenstein was to be forever marked by the Sladers' passion for draughtsmanship and took to heart Ingres' dictum painted over the entrance to Julian's, '*Le dessin est la probité de l'art*' (Drawing is the integrity of art), Conder took his inspiration from the world of natural appearances and from imaginative literature. He was never able to convince Rothenstein of the attractions of landscape painting, although he tried, beginning with a letter he wrote after making a visit himself in December 1890 to the sacred sites of *plein air* painting—Greuz, Barbizon and Fontainebleau. He included a sketch at the conclusion of his letter showing a cramped artist (Rothenstein) painting in the rain under an umbrella. Written on the accompanying dog is the other motto inscribed above the entrance to Julian's—'*Cherchez la caractère dans la nature*' (Look for character in nature).

Conder's choice of a studio location was perhaps the most momentous decision of his French career. For it was in Montmartre that he was to come into contact with artists Louis Anquetin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, men who would shape his attitudes and his art: and in the Montmartre life of the cabarets and *bals masques* he was to find the subject-matter for his allusive watercolours on silk. It seemed he struck out independently here, for he cites no particular recommendation to the area. The most compelling reason to locate in Montmartre would have been an economic one. It was far cheaper than the other favoured areas such as Montparnasse or the Latin Quarter to the south of the Seine.



WILLIAM ROTHENSTEIN, 'PUVIS DE HAVANNE: FRAGMENT OF SKETCH FOR DECORATIVE PICTURE/AFTER THE CLOSE OF THE 'MOULIN ROUGE'', BLACK CONTÉ ON PAPER, PARIS, C. 1891  
 NOTORIOUS FOR HIS SOBRIETY, ROTHENSTEIN HAS MADE A WHIMSICAL SKETCH OF HIMSELF AND CONDER RETURNING FROM THE MOULIN ROUGE. THE TITLE 'PUVIS DE HAVANNE' IS A PUN ON THE NAME OF THE FAMOUS FRENCH PAINTER AND MURALIST, PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.

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Most students coming from Australia chose to live in the traditionally inexpensive artists' area around the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. But by the mid-1880s much of the energy had forsaken this area for the more remote and dangerous northern shores of Montmartre. Certain established artists were already in the vicinity; Puvis de Chavannes had long had his studio in the place Pigalle and Degas lived in Montmartre for twenty years. John Peter Russell lived in one of the new apartment blocks in the boulevard de Clichy and had his studio at number 15 impasse Hélène, the famous Villa des Arts, from 1885 to 1888.

Baron Haussmann's modernisation schemes, which took place under the reign of Napoleon III, had driven the boulevard de Clichy right through the northern slums of Paris from the place Clichy to the place Pigalle, to be continued as the boulevard de Rochechouart. This wide new thoroughfare isolated Montmartre by its physical boundary but at the same time made it more accessible. Poorer artists began to move there and enterprising landlords set about constructing new studios for the more affluent, still to be found amongst the new apartment buildings that sprang up on either side of the wide boulevard in the 1880s.

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Not only because of the new building but also because the relationship of Paris to Montmartre was undergoing a major change in the 1880s and 1890s, the area had an exciting and stimulating character at the end of the century. The Butte itself was still characterised by windmills, quarries and steep gardens. At its base, where once customs posts had existed to impose tolls and taxes upon wines entering the city, there remained the bars and places of dubious entertainment.

La Butte de Montmartre had been included in the wider Paris area only in 1860, when it largely comprised market-gardens and a customs post. It had asserted its independence with the Commune of 1871—but at a terrible cost. And in the aftermath of the massacres, arrests and deportations that followed, the idea arose of constructing a sanctuary on the crown of the hill dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. A national subscription for the building was started in 1873, and it was hoped that the church would be a symbol of Montmartre and its independence. The white domes of the Basilica de Sacre Coeur took twenty-five years to build: the first services were conducted there in 1891.

The area remained a refuge for the very poor—including the poorest artists and writers—encapsulating, for the twentieth century, the nineteenth-century idea of the true environment of the penniless artist, transposed from Henri Murger's Latin Quarter of the 1840s to the steep slopes of Montmartre of the 1890s. Popular mythologising of the artist as Bohemian has meant that the facts of their everyday existence are easily glossed over. For those, including Conder, who had very little money and were dependant upon sales for their existence (as he was after 1892), life could be desperate. Certain facts directed how their lives could be led. For instance, because the studio that Conder rented in the rue de Ravignan offered no cooking facilities, all meals had to be taken externally—and thus a large part of his existence had to be lived publicly in bars and cafés. Laundries were cheap and plentiful, but personal hygiene facilities were scarce or non-existent. If one was ill, friends were vital, and bonds between artists in impoverished circumstances were often strong.

Clothing could also pose a problem. Evening dress was expected at any serious social occasion and often at particular dinners or evenings at the cabarets. Conder evolved his own solution to what could be an expensive necessity. In his growing identification with the heroes of Balzac and with the Romantics of the 1830s, he sought out costumes from that era in the flea markets and was noted for his long greatcoat and top hat. In keeping with the French (in particularly Toulouse-Lautrec's) perception of what it was to be English, he often wore riding costume, breeches and top boots—paradoxical presentation of the artist as man of action. Such costumes, necessitated by poverty, had the effect of increasing the aura of intrigue about him that attracted his contemporaries.

Conder's studio at 13 rue de Ravignan, half-way up the hill on the way to the Moulin de la Galette, had been constructed only in 1889 by an avaricious landlord, a M. Sebastian, and his eccentric architect Paul Vasseur. Between them they contrived a three-storeyed wooden construct clinging to the side of the steep slope, entered from the rue de Ravignan and dropping down steeply three flights to the rue Laveaux below. Its strange appearance gave it the nick-name La Maison du Trappeur (the home of the wild-beast hunter) but it has gone down in history under a more famous appellation, Le Bateau Lavoir (the floating laundry), coined by Picasso who took up residence there on his fourth visit to Paris in 1904.

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The building's sole appeal seems to have been its cheap rent, possibly augmented by a certain artistic camaraderie. It was so poorly constructed that it was damp within a few years. Freezing in winter and unbearably stuffy in summer, it had no gas or electricity. On a basement landing there was the one-and-only toilet, nothing more than a dark and filthy hole, and next to it the sole tap providing water for thirty studios. Little wonder that whilst living there Conder was only too ready to while away his time at the nearby cabarets, or that he was always ready to anticipate the absinthe hour.

This, according to the *Paris Magazine* of 1899, began 'vaguely at half-past five, and ends just as vaguely at half-past seven; but on the hill it never ends. Not that it [Montmartre] is the home of the drunk in any way; but the deadly opal drink lasts longer than anything else, and it is the aim of Montmartre to stop as long as possible on the terrasse of a cafe and watch the world go by'.<sup>15</sup> Absinthe, of which Conder became very fond, has been described as the perfect aperitif—unless one was in a hurry. Invented in Switzerland by a retired French scientist who wanted to create a drink using only local ingredients, he concocted a mixture consisting of wormwood, star anise and other herbs—and the result was the extraordinary blue-green 70 per cent proof absinthe. Because wormwood has a bitter flavour, the way to drink it was to pour a little absinthe into a glass and balance a slotted absinthe spoon across the top with a sugar cube in it. More absinthe, this time alight, was poured over the sugar cube and into the glass of absinthe, which also caught alight. One then added water and the clear liquid turned opaque, ready for drinking.

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The recipe was developed and distributed in France by Henri-Louis Pernod. It became very popular, especially in Paris and amongst the poets of the Latin Quarter. It was addictive and Paul Verlaine, who did not take to hashish, opium, ether or morphine, all of which were in fashion in Paris in the 1880s and 1890s, took to absinthe. He was often seen lingering over his glass in the cafes around the 'boul Mich'—where Phil May captured him in an illustration for *The Parson and the Painter*.<sup>16</sup> Contemporaries noted its physical effects: a hoarse, guttural absinthe voice, the wandering, glazed absinthe eyes and cold, clammy hands. It produced both gaiety and despair in drinkers and had reputed hallucinogenic and aphrodisiac properties. It was very popular until the neurotoxic effects of thujone, an active component of

wormwood, was discovered after regular drinkers suffered mental illness, seizures, paralysis and madness.<sup>17</sup> The cloudy green liquid was eventually considered so harmful that French health authorities had it prohibited as a drink in 1915.

But its charms were enough for the 22-year-old Conder writing to his old friend Roberts in 1891 from ‘a Montmartre cafe’, a place where ‘I come so often after dinner to talk bad French on subjects connected with Art and women. Dear me, how many wasted hours have I spent here. . .’<sup>18</sup> It needed the will and strength of personality of a Picasso to resist such temptations, and gradually Conder would find that the smoky green liquid had sapped his.

But Conder had come to this new and stimulating environment for his art. How was he to respond to the myriad styles and directions that characterised the extremely diffuse art world that was Paris in 1890?

In Sydney and Melbourne he had easily fallen under the spell first of Roberts and then of Streeton. Their confidence in the *en plein air* ‘truth to nature’ style was the aesthetic basis of his own art. It became so popular a way of painting in Australia in the 1890s and turn of the century that it was eventually to be affirmed as the national style of Australian painting by the first historians of Australian art, William Moore and Lionel Lindsay.

Conder had made tentative explorations into allegorical and symbolist imagery in his last year in Melbourne, interested in developing less factual and rather more moody landscapes. Roberts had observed his experiments wryly and was now curious to know how he was responding to the Parisian aesthetic environment. Morbidly sensitive himself as to how his art was received, he wrote, trying to sound out the younger man’s reaction. Conder responded in February 1891, allowing some six months of Paris viewing to speak for him: ‘You ask my opinion on a difficult question—“If strangers remain themselves here?” . . . In my own case (one knows best) I feel, as far as painting is concerned I have remained myself without any temptation to follow others . . . I believe with most strangers over a certain age that they recognise the necessity of being themselves, and so go on the way they planned.’ So much to reassure an anxious Roberts and his Melbourne friends. He adds, with a shrewdness Roberts may not have anticipated: ‘Then another question in favour of oneself—you attract so much more attention if your work has some original quality which tempts you to go on’.<sup>19</sup>

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In fact Conder had taken a keen account of what were the favoured trends of the moment and was actively absorbing certain new developments, especially the preference for symbolist or other-worldly representation, colour and content. This had begun with the art he first responded to in the early months in Paris—Whistler, Puvis de Chavannes and Monet. Whistler was then showing the extraordinary dark-toned portraits of his last phase, and Puvis de Chavannes, another at the apotheosis of his career, his blond, mysteriously classicising subjects. Conder assured Roberts that ‘Puvis is great, great, great, and makes great pleasure’, and of Claude Monet:

I only wish you could have seen some of his landscapes; *they lived* . . . he paints them in the funniest way. He paints a good deal still with pure colour, but you quite lose the paint at three or four yards (less). He takes you among hayricks and sunsets in the most natural way and then lets you see it as you have been used—not in his but in your own way. I feel Monet in this way or not at all. He is without bias and scoffs at poetry, takes no interest in pictures . . .<sup>20</sup>

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First impressions were important for Conder. Whistler and Monet would remain the two living artists he most admired for landscape work, and his perceptive critique of Monet’s work of the early 1890s was to frame the direction his own landscapes would take in the years to come. Others would influence him—especially on a personal level, like Louis Anquetin—but Conder ‘remained’ himself in his landscape work largely by developing his art through a new understanding of Monet and Whistler.

The works that have survived from his first six months in Paris indicate an artist pausing and taking stock of which direction to follow. A *Self Portrait*<sup>21</sup> in monotonous tones of brown depicts him slumped in a couch in his studio, thinking, and dreaming, but not actively painting. A still life, *Smoke and Chrysanthemum Flowers*,<sup>22</sup> a sensitive exercise in Whistlerian aesthetics, bears interesting comparison with John Longstaff’s *Lady in Grey*<sup>23</sup> painted in Paris at the same time and which went on to win a *Mention honorable* at the Salon des Artistes Français (the Old Salon) in 1891. Conder’s still life is based upon a blond palette of greens and yellow-greys set off by the tones of white of the flowers in the vase and heightened by the introduction of a purplish-pink in

the trail of chrysanthemums coming from behind the vase and into the foreground. The composition is a rather staid studio affair, but enlivened by a typical Conder touch—the lighted cigarette resting in the foreground and angled towards the viewer.

But this kind of still life—or indeed any still life at all—was never repeated. Conder soon forsook serious studio exercises, just as he soon forsook the discipline of the life class, in favour of the beauties of the Normandy countryside and the imaginative possibilities suggested to him by the nightlife of Montmartre.

On a day-to-day level, he had yet to sell anything and began to think of falling back on his old money-earner, black-and-white work. Many British artists supplemented their incomes with illustrations and the 1890s were to unfold as a golden age for British book and periodical illustrations. Phil May, now back in Europe, had landed a job on a new English periodical, the *Black and White*. At this point, 1890, he was just at the outset of a very successful but short-lived career in England, where he died of alcoholism in 1903. He was to spend time in Paris that year and the next and kept in touch with Conder and Longstaff, friends from his Australian years. In his kind-hearted way he tried to alleviate their poverty by putting in a good word for them both on his new magazine—as he wrote to Theodore Fink in Melbourne: ‘I have got old Longstaff something to do on it also Conder. I hope they will do some good work because if they do it will be the making of them’.<sup>24</sup> So it was probably with the expectation of publication that Conder drew in 1890 *A Dream in Absinthe*,<sup>25</sup> a Symbolist reverie in pen, ink and watercolours.

Laced with ironic and self-deprecating images—from the ‘dead duck’ at the bottom of the sheet to the fleeing peacock in the centre having its plumage plucked by another bird to the amusement of an assembled group of birds, and the funeral-like procession of artists each holding a canvas and lined up hopefully on acceptance day at the Salon—the drawing offers a kaleidoscope of Conder’s new world. It is inscribed ‘Conder 90 Paris’, and just beneath a vignette of a cancan dancer being sketched by an unmistakable Toulouse-Lautrec, Japanese actors, a swirling sun and gargoyles overlay one another. The central standing figure refers to Sâr Pélédan, eccentric founder of the new Symbolist cult the Salon of the Rose + Croix. Wearing a striped robe tied with monastic-looking rope girdle and with anything but monastic-

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looking green hair (his sharp features and protruding ears actually belong to Phil May), Sâr Pélédan is lampooned presiding over the assorted chaos and oblivious to the predatory harpy immediately behind him. Stylistically it belongs to the irreverent mode of *Les Incobérants* but, while imaginative, Conder’s line is thin and exploratory. The drawing lacks a decisive central image. Although a clever attempt at mimicking the effects of absinthe on the mind, it proved too much for even the most irresponsible black-and-white editor. There is no trace of its ever being published. Conder followed it in February 1891 with *Mardi Gras Week in Paris*,<sup>26</sup> again in black pen but this time without the watercolour.

At the time he was feeling particularly flat, missing the close camaraderie of Streeton and Roberts, and he wrote crossly to ‘Bulldog’, ‘Why don’t you write; what have I done, or are you merely too lazy to remember old friends?’ He is tired, he writes, and the exhibitions he has seen don’t interest him. However, he was pleased to hear from Streeton that Roberts had sold his ‘Sheep Shearing’ (*Shearing the Rams*):

Next week is the ‘Mardi Gras’, and Paris is looking brilliant . . . My friends are counting on my attendance at their orgies, but I am not one of them this time . . . In truth, I am stale, stale as my letter shows, and, alas, my picture—and besides my purse. The Julian ball is next Saturday but I don’t think I shall go. I have no girl to take, you see, and it’s a necessary adjunct. I’ve tried the feminines, but—I know, alas, I’m better alone.<sup>27</sup>

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However, he managed to shake off his *tristesse* and joined in the pre-Lenten madness, as his sketch reveals.

*Mardi Gras Week in Paris* is a much more coherent image, stage-managed to a degree and with an eye to it being published in an English periodical. The drawing aims at capturing the flavour of the festivities in Paris immediately preceding the commencement of Lent, for a foreign and probably disapproving Protestant audience. The central image depicts Moulin Rouge dancers; to the right a group of revellers ‘Coming home from the Opera Ball’ and to the left the quasi-medieval ‘religious’ ceremonies of the type encouraged by Sâr Pélédan. Further vignettes of a Japanese dancer, a pantomime cow and a Javanese mask indicate the exotica of the revels. The



MARDI GRAS WEEK PARIS, PEN AND INK ON PAPER, 17.2 × 19.1 CM, 1891

whole is an acute visual reference point for Montmartre in this week of gaiety in the early 1890s. Conder was pleased with the result and, probably egged on by Phil May, sent it off to the newish and rather cheeky English periodical *Pick-Me-Up*—only to have it returned ‘with thanks’.

This was discouraging, for May had made quite a name for himself on the magazine with his *London Night by Night* series and was then involved in pen portraits of celebrities under the title *On the Brain*. Conder could see that black-and-white work was lucrative and could establish an artist. Max Beerbohm was one who in the early 1890s had work accepted by *Pick-Me-Up*, before going on to greater things. Yet one can see why it was not published. Conder’s line is thin and fussy at times, and the overall image is too detailed, lacking any clear focus. It does not compare well with the simplicity and

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sharp cleverness of, say, Phil May’s draughtsmanship, and perhaps Conder saw that too. Not long afterwards he gave it to Charles Rothenstein, William’s brother, in gratitude for a loan.

His first Parisian works—apart from still life—were imaginative pen drawings, *mélanges* of his own life and surroundings. Their deliberate compositional chaos owes something perhaps to the *Incobérants*, the group which, under Jules Levy, exhibited in Paris from 1882 to 1893. This group idealised the artistic way of life, enshrined time-wasting as a serious activity and looked only for wit and amusement in everyday life.

Their anarchic and humorous attitude to life may already have been known to Conder as evidenced in the 9 × 5 exhibition. His delight in graphic chaos—first glimpsed in his cover design for the 9 × 5 catalogue—has similarities with that of some of the *Incobérants* who worked for *Le Courrier français*, a magazine which chronicled Montmartre entertainment. Adolphe Willette and Joseph Favori in particular experimented with graphic disjunction and the use of multi and overlapping images in much the same way as Conder attempted in these two sketches. Yet the *Incobérants* were not simply fringe radicals. All were competent academic artists, and Willette had his work hung at the Salon in 1881 and 1883. This academic competence and acceptance gave their *pour épater la bourgeoisie* (to startle old fogeys) experiments in everyday life an added sting and made their exhibitions a direct challenge, albeit tongue in cheek, to the art establishment.

But Conder’s wit was not acerbic, nor was he particularly against the status quo. This was not Melbourne, where he knew he had supporters. In Paris his problem was rather one of gaining acceptance from the art establishment. And he felt nothing like the security of the French-born and educated artist in this avant-garde community, nor did he have an established stylistic base from which to launch such squibs. The result was that he did not persist with his pen-and-ink commentaries on Montmartre life and made no further efforts in the direction of getting black-and-white work. But the costumes, the masks, the fashion for appearing at the Opera Balls and special nights at the Moulin Rouge *en travesti* (in disguise) fascinated Conder and fed his appetite for seeing the world at one remove, as a fantasy, a ‘dream in absinthe’. Although he would persist for a time in making realistic sketches and studies of the dancers at the Moulin Rouge, as in *Moulin Rouge*,<sup>28</sup> these

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were to be superseded by an imaginative world he began to develop peopled very often by the mythical figures of the *commedia dell'arte* acting out the basic dramas of the human condition.

As the weeks lengthened into months Conder became used to the Montmartre environment. But it could not be said that he established any sort of daily student routine. Classes were endured less and less frequently. Visits to the Louvre continued but on an intermittent basis. More time was spent visiting other artists' studios and looking at small, independent exhibitions. Much more time was spent sitting at cafés and bars discussing art with his new friends. As in Melbourne he was a sharp observer of the life around him, considering it for subject matter in his art. He now took a particular interest in a form of entertainment that was new to him—the Montmartre cabaret.

The 1880s and 1890s saw the development of the Montmartre cabaret as the major promoter, catalyst and often site of collaborations between artists, writers, composers and performers in the production of art works, illustrated journals, dramatic pieces, music, spectacles—and even the proto-cinema invention of shadow theatre at Le Chat Noir. The cabarets promoted creative relations between various art forms as well as being in themselves subject-matter for artists. All shades of taste were catered for, from the anarchic mockery of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (first performed by puppets, later by actors at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Montmartre) through the energy and sexual provocation of the *quadrille réaliste* of the Moulin Rouge to the experimental performances of the shadow puppetry at the Chat Noir. Montmartre's cabarets provided a unique artistic and intellectual environment.

Several cabarets are mentioned by name in Conder's correspondence, including Le Rat Mort in the place de Clichy. This was one of the oldest cafés in Montmartre and famous for its Second Empire decor—huge mirrors and elaborate gas-lamps featured—and was depicted by Forain, Manet and Degas. Le Rat Mort was home to disparate groups—homosexuals of both sexes, writers and models—and was appreciated for its atmosphere of eroticism. It was here that a lunch club met which Conder came to join in the early 1890s. Emile Friant was a leading member, a realist artist much admired by Conder during this period, as were Louis Anquetin, Alfred Stevens, critic Edouard Dujardin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Conder painted a small

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'CHAT NOIR', SKETCH FROM A LETTER DATED 7 FEBRUARY 1891, BLACK INK ON PAPER,  
TOM ROBERTS PAPERS, VOL. 2  
THE REFERENCE IS TO THE ARTISTIC MONTMARTRE CABARET LE CHAT NOIR.

study of a group dining there, which is now in a private American collection. Another favourite meeting place was L'Abbaye de Thélème, a café particularly favoured by literary types. But the one that dominated Conder's evenings—and his imaginative world—was Le Moulin Rouge.

This was not a great distance from his studio in rue Ravignan, just down the hill, and he seems to have been attending performances there a month or so after his arrival in Paris. It was probably there that he met Toulouse-Lautrec through other artists he had become friendly with, particularly Louis Anquetin. Lautrec, who had been a student of Cormon's for five years, ending up as the studio's *massier* or head student, had relocated across Paris to Montmartre in 1886. He was five years Conder's senior. The early 1890s were the years of Lautrec's ascendancy. His work was becoming more and more widely known through his posters and illustrations for playbills, and through the works he exhibited with various independent groups. He was also gaining the respect of his peers, particularly Degas, for his outstanding draughtsmanship.

Lautrec's preferred male company, apart from his male relatives and artists, were those who shared his obsessive fascination with alcohol or brothels, preferably both. He liked them to be 'partners in crime' but needed to be the dominant personality in a group. Conder fell in easily with this social construct, offering no resistance to Lautrec's schemes and with an apparently limitless capacity for sensual pleasure. They enjoyed the cabaret performances together, after which they would tour the *boîtes de nuit*, Conder building up that wealth of sexual experience which would make him such a congenial companion to English 'Decadent' poets and to writers Arthur Symonds and Ernest Dowson and which he would later use to enhance his mystique, enthralling younger artists with tales of nocturnal Paris. Although Lautrec was regarded by many as an anti-intellectual aristocrat, nevertheless he was close to two of the most complex minds of his generation, Edouard Dujardin, Symbolist critic and poet, and Felix Fénéon, critic and anarchist. Conder's role as listener rather than talker, follower rather than initiator, suited them all.

Like many others, Lautrec was struck by Conder's appearance, the strong build, long honey-coloured hair and sleepy eyes. Lautrec is first sketched by Conder in 1890 in *A Dream in Absinthe*, while Conder is first

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depicted by Lautrec in 1892 in *Jane Avril leaving the Moulin Rouge*<sup>29</sup>—Conder going in the opposite direction behind her, a bulky figure in a hat and overcoat. Their friendship seems to have developed between these two points. We have no hint of what Conder thought of Lautrec's art: he makes no reference to it in any of his correspondence. As a long-term Montmartre resident and Conder's senior, Lautrec offered him advice as to exhibition venues and potential dealers. But Conder's artistic vision was worlds away from Lautrec's cruel, subtle observations. Lautrec's attraction to Conder probably arose from his persona rather than his art. He saw him as the 'type' of an Englishman and portrayed him as such, slightly debauched, enjoying slumming it in the Montmartre cabarets. Usually he drew Conder at night, in a formal setting, as in *Aux Ambassadeurs—les gens chics* in 1893.<sup>30</sup>

For this, Lautrec made an oil study of Conder in evening dress and gave it to him. Thinly but exquisitely painted on cardboard, he has captured the essence of Conder's attraction: the hooded, sleepy eyes, the pose at once assertive but relaxed and the suggestion, in the full lips and introverted green eyes, of sensual pleasures anticipated and recalled. Lautrec has immortalised him as *l'homme sensuel*. We do not know what Conder felt about this piece of character reading. The work subsequently came into the possession of one of his female patrons, Ryliss Hacon, who in old age sold it to the Aberdeen Art Gallery, in Scotland.

Lautrec's most famous representation of Conder is the lithograph *La Loge au mascaron doré (The Box with the Gilded Mask)*.<sup>31</sup> This was done as a theatre program for Lautrec's friend André Antoine, founder and actor-director of the Théâtre-Libre (1887–1896) near the place Pigalle. Done for the play *Le Missionnaire* which opened on 24 April 1894, Lautrec took as his subject the audience rather than the play and portrays two spectators seen from below, a disdainful Conder seated beside Jane Avril posing as his companion, a red-haired figure with opera glasses. The last time he is represented by Lautrec is in the 1897 lithograph *La Danse au Moulin Rouge* where Conder is seated at a table in the background wearing an English bowler-hat.<sup>32</sup>

Conder's friendship with Lautrec continued throughout the 1890s. On two occasions when Lautrec was in London (which he loved), he made a point of contacting Conder and doing the nocturnal rounds with him. In Paris they were frequent attenders at the Moulin Rouge, dining and watching

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the performance together. The cabaret had opened on 6 October 1889 and businessmen founders Joseph Oller and Charles Zidler realised they had a success on their hands from the very beginning. It was located in the right place, at the foot of the Butte in the place Blanche where the first artistic dance halls and bars had blossomed, and was designed by Willette, *Incobérentes* artist and designer of the moment. The Moulin Rouge attracted a broad clientele, from the local working-class men and women through wealthy sophisticates from the Right Bank to poets, artists and writers. Eye-catchingly contrived as a large red-painted mill with its sails revolving, while the miller's wife looked out of one window and the miller leant out of the other, it was so constructed that, as the illuminated sails began to turn, the two exchanged gestures of affection.

Further banalities were repeated in the interior, where the visitor went through pastiches of a Seville *corrida* and a Norman village and then encountered structures reminiscent of Holland. But the fashionable were not put off by such hackneyed visual references. They had come for the *quadrille*.

First devised by dancer Rose Pompon in 1860 the *quadrille réaliste*, or *quadrille naturaliste* as it was first known—to be renamed the French *cancan* (tittle-tattle) by the English inventor of the modern music-hall Charles Morton—was immediately popular in France and just as immediately barred in England, where it was considered too daring. Danced largely by working-class factory girls, seamstresses and dressmakers' apprentices as an avenue for working off the frustrations of their daily lives, it gradually evolved into its definitive form over the next few decades. By the 1890s this could be seen at the Moulin Rouge performances at ten o'clock every evening. The large dance hall would be cleared in the centre and, to the furious strains of Offenbach, the performance would begin. Lasting eight minutes, the authentic *quadrille* demanded great qualities of balance, suppleness, acrobatics and rhythm.

The average height of a dancer was five feet six inches. Their costumes consisted of black stockings, suspenders and lacy petticoats. It was considered *de rigueur* to show a few inches of flesh above the stocking tops. The skirts were voluminous—described by performer Jane Avril as being '12 metres in circumference . . . of panels and frothy lace, as were the drawers. The effect of the black stockings against this snowy whiteness was to emphasise the shape of the legs'.<sup>33</sup>

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Acknowledged as an unspoken erotic invitation, the ten o'clock performances were eagerly anticipated. As the dance culminated in the splits, male dancers (except the rubber-limbed Valentin le Décossé) were excluded and the cancan became something of a display of female sexual power. Solo routines were developed as each dancer in her turn was allowed to give free expression to her own imagination. One ritual, however, was always observed: the removal of a male spectator's top-hat by the skilful movement of a dancer's leg—something Conder experienced for himself, and much to his pleasure, as he related to Will Rothenstein's older brother Charles: 'Moulin Rouge is I think the same place but lately I have not affected it much. I certainly was there a few nights ago after a long absence & Rayon d'Or made the evening conspicuous to me by kicking off my hat—the cruel return for an appreciative smile at her dancing'.<sup>34</sup>

Rayon d'Or, whose real name was Chretiennot, was so nick-named because she was the only one of the high priestesses of the cancan to make her fortune—courtesy of an American adventurer with whom she had decamped to Alaska. There they had struck it lucky, but she became homesick for Montmartre and persuaded him to return to Paris. She danced at the Moulin Rouge for a few years in the early 1890s, dyeing her hair in accord with the source of her fortune, before leaving with her lover for New York.

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But the most famous exponent of the *quadrille* was La Goulue, alias Louise Weber, so called because of her habit of emptying the glasses at the bar. Sketched by Conder, she modelled for Renoir and for Lautrec, who became a friend and allowed her to watch him work in his studio. La Goulue was a true child of the streets, brought up by a laundress mother and taught to read by the nuns. A short career in the wash-house in the rue de la Goutte d'Or—made famous by Zola in *L'Assommoir*—ended when she was sixteen and spotted dancing at the Elysée-Montmartre dance hall by Joseph Oller, one of the proprietors of the Moulin Rouge. She soon became his principal attraction.

Delighted by her fame, La Goulue pushed eccentricity to the limits. She was the only woman permitted to dance bare-headed and was prone to arrive at rehearsals leading a goat. Short and stockily built she had amazing athleticism and was particularly admired for her skill at dancing on table-

tops. Conder certainly responded to her, as he confessed to the now remote Tom Roberts in Melbourne:

‘La Goulue’ danced well at the Moulin last night and afterwards fought another dancer in the street. I didn’t see the latter but the reporter of Gil Blas recounted it to me. La Goulue is very seductive and nice to look on and wears pantaloons of soft thin muslin when she struts her hour upon the boards. They say she is bad and dances the same nude at the Cafe American after 12 o’clock. I myself have been prone to admire her in a spiritual sense.<sup>35</sup>

She was well paid, earning 800 francs a month from the Moulin Rouge alone and more for special performances and for tours. In 1895 she left, intending to set up on her own. The venture was not successful and her subsequent decline was rapid, first to circus work and then, when her athleticism deserted her, exhibiting wild animals in fairside booths. Her end was in her beginning. Drunk and impoverished she could be seen on the streets of Montmartre selling peanuts, matches and cigarettes until her death in 1929.

Conder was captivated by the dancers and their setting. He sketched them on the spot, as Phil May wrote to Theodore Fink—kindly putting in a good word for Conder to his Melbourne patron: ‘Conder is here working away like mad. I think he has some ‘staff’ in him. We went to the ‘Moulin Rouge’ together the other evening and made some impressions: but I don’t think they will take the medals at the salon’.<sup>36</sup> But May’s foresight went unrewarded. On his visit to Paris the following year Fink was unable to catch up with Conder, who was painting in Normandy, and the two were never to see one another again.

Tiny sketches of frothy cancan dancers appear in 1890 and 1891 in the letters he wrote to the Rothenstein brothers. His only known oil study of the *quadrille* was probably painted in the studio from on-the-spot sketches. *Moulin Rouge* is a small study depicting a block of assembled men and women in a circle around two dancers wearing purple, mauve and white petticoats. The large dance-hall background is sketched in lighter yellows, pinks and oranges, contrasting with the black of the male evening dress and that of their female companions. In style it has the same square brush-strokes that characterise

his Australian work. Unlike Lautrec, Conder was not tempted to construct anything more than a most basic composition—which he then gave to Charles Rothenstein, inscribing the painting ‘In Memory of a pleasant evening. 30 Oct 1890’.

The Moulin Rouge was to prove a crucial source of inspiration for Conder—but at one remove. He recognised the limitations of his naturalistic approach to it early, and stopped sketching there. But he never stopped observing. For the Moulin Rouge’s presentations of masked balls, pageants and *tableaux vivants*, developed in the 1890s under designer Roedel, provided the inspiration for the imaginative world of costumed lovers and courtesans, imagery which Conder developed in his fan paintings from 1893.

For the remainder of 1891, after a sojourn painting in the Normandy countryside he seems to have attended Cormon’s in a more and more desultory fashion as he succumbed to the pleasures of his environment. Mistresses were acquired and fallen out with apace. By the end of the year Conder’s health had collapsed; his syphilis had recurred and he was unable to do anything. His finances too were at a low ebb—but he was rescued from both by the generosity of an artist friend, Henry de Vallombreuse. Planning to winter away from Paris in the warmth of North Africa, De Vallombreuse invited Conder to join him at the Parc de Fontainebleau at Mustapha, on the outskirts of Algiers. Here he offered rest, peace and recuperation. Conder accepted, and left Paris for Marseilles as November bleakness took hold of the city.