



The Sign at the entrance to The Lapin Agile

THE REAL LAPIN AGILE

BY DANIELLE MAGES AMATO

Einstein and Picasso walk into a bar. It might be the oldest setup in the book. But instead of a punchline, Steve Martin delivers the complex and beautiful play *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. He takes two iconic figures of early 20th century art and science—real men who changed the course of world history—and puts them in an entirely fictional situation. In Steve Martin’s imagination and on stages around the world, two great men who never met are finally given the opportunity to discourse and debate—and of course, drink.

The bar into which Einstein and Picasso walk, however, is far from fictional. The Lapin Agile still exists: a humble, low-roofed cottage not far from the Place du Terre in the Montmartre district of Paris. This modest building boasts a fascinating history, not only as a crucible of modern art but also as the inspiration for one of Picasso’s famous paintings.

The bar was originally known as the Cabaret of Assassins, for the portraits of famous killers that hung on its walls. When illustrator André Gill took over in the 1870s, he painted a new sign for the establishment that showed a rabbit jumping out of a saucepan. That sign gave the cabaret its new name: the Lapin Agile, or the Agile Rabbit (The name was also a punning reference to “le lapin à Gill,” or Gill’s rabbit).



Pablo Picasso's painting *Au Lapin Agile*.

As in Steve Martin's play, by the early 20th century, the Lapin Agile was run by a bartender named Frédéric Gérard ("Freddy") and frequented by the beautiful artists' model Germaine Pichot. Picasso himself spent untold hours there, and he was not the only artist who considered the Lapin Agile a home away from home. The cabaret may have been small, dingy, dark, and smoky, but it was also one of the great centers of bohemian life in Paris. Along with its evenings of song, poetry, and comic performance, the bar played host to passionate debates about the nature of art, conducted by the likes of Modigliani, Apollinaire, Van Gogh, and Renoir.

In 1905, Freddy commissioned Picasso to create a painting to hang on the wall of the Lapin Agile—or perhaps he demanded the piece in exchange for an unpaid bar bill, as he was known to take artwork in payment for drinks. Either way, the result was *Au Lapin Agile*: a painting of Picasso himself, dressed as a Harlequin, drinking at the bar alongside Germaine and Freddy. The painting hung, unframed, in the cabaret until 1912, when Freddy sold it for the equivalent of \$20. In 1989, it sold for \$40.7 million dollars at auction, and it now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Into what better bar could Einstein have accidentally stumbled, in the 1904 of Steve Martin's imagination? The walls of the real Lapin Agile had long echoed with music, with conversations both profound and bawdy, and with the shouts of Picasso himself, calling for another drink. All that was missing was a visitor—or maybe two—to provide the extra genius for a truly ingenious play.

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