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It Speaks to Me: Clayton Brothers on Toulouse-Lautrec's 'Touc, Seated on a Table,' c. 1881, at the Hammer Museum

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Animals have always been important in our own paintings—we've used dogs and birds and all kinds of hybrids where one animal starts to morph into something else. They're a gateway for us to gain empathy from viewers. That's one of the powerful things about this painting: you get involved to the point where you start to wonder about the dog. Maybe the dog was a shop dog, or belonged to a café owner, seeing that he's on the table and looks like he belongs there. He doesn't look scared; he has attitude. It's all in the eyes, which the painter captures very easily, as though he painted it on the spot. There's something else curious: a little mark right in front of the dog that looks like a cigarette, just enough to give you the idea that there are people around. It alludes to a bigger picture, a human side of the Moulin Rouge, the Parisian cabaret that Toulouse-Lautrec was haunting and that shows up in so many of his other pictures.

-- Rob and Christian Clayton, as told to Jori Finkel

