

National Gallery of Art

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Matisse



The Fauves

Henri Matisse



Henri Matisse, *Beasts of the Sea*, 1950, paper collage on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1973.18.1

In the last fifteen years of his life Matisse produced paper works by "cutting into color," as he said. These shapes, cut freehand and later glued onto a background, seem at once calm and dynamic.

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Matisse, Henri (-Émile-Benoît)

Timeline: [The 20th century](#)

"Instinct must be thwarted just as one prunes the branches of a tree so that it will grow better."

-- Henri Matisse

Matisse, Henri (-Émile-Benoît) (b. Dec. 31, 1869, Le Cateau, Picardy, Fr.--d. Nov. 3, 1954, Nice)

artist often regarded as the most important French painter of the 20th century. The leader of the [Fauvist](#) movement around 1900, Matisse pursued the expressiveness of colour throughout his career. His subjects were largely domestic or figurative, and a distinct Mediterranean verve presides in the treatment.

[\(Biographie en français\)](#)

Matisse, Master of Color

The art of our century has been dominated by two men: Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. They are artists of classical greatness, and their visionary forays into new art have changed our understanding of the world. Matisse was the elder of the two, but he was a slower and more methodical man by temperament and it was Picasso who initially made the greater splash. Matisse, like [Raphael](#), was a born leader and taught and encouraged other painters, while Picasso, like [Michelangelo](#), inhibited them with his power: he was a natural czar.

Matisse's artistic career was long and varied, covering many different styles of painting from [Impressionism](#) to near Abstraction. Early on in his career Matisse was viewed as a Fauvist, and his celebration of bright colors reached its peak in 1917 when he began to spend time on the French Riviera at Nice and Vence. Here he concentrated on reflecting the sensual color of his surroundings and completed some of his most exciting paintings. In 1941 Matisse was diagnosed as having duodenal cancer and was permanently confined to a wheelchair. It was in this condition that he completed the magnificent Chapel of the Rosary in Vence.

Matisse's art has an astonishing force and lives by innate right in a paradise world into which Matisse draws all his viewers. He gravitated to the beautiful and produced some of the most powerful beauty ever painted. He was a man of anxious temperament, just as Picasso, who saw him as his only rival, was a man of peasant fears, well concealed. Both artists, in their own fashion, dealt with these disturbances through the sublimation of painting: Picasso destroyed his fear of women in his art, while Matisse coaxed his nervous tension into serenity. He spoke of his art as being like "a good armchair"-- a

ludicrously inept comparison for such a brilliant man-- but his art was a respite, a reprieve, a comfort to him.

Matisse initially became famous as the "King of the [Fauves](#)", an inappropriate name for this gentlemanly intellectual: there was no wildness in him, though there was much passion. He is an awesomely controlled artist, and his spirit, his mind, always had the upper hand over the "beast" of Fauvism.



Notre-Dame, une fin d'après-midi (A Glimpse of Notre Dame in the Late Afternoon)

1902 (130 Kb); Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 72.5 x 54.5 cm (28 1/2 x 21 1/2 in); Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY



[Green Stripe \(Madame Matisse\)](#)



Le bonheur de vivre (The Joy of Life)

1905-06 (150 Kb); Oil on canvas, 175 x 241 cm (69 1/8 x 94 7/8 in); Barnes Foundation, Merion, PA



Flowers in a Pitcher

1906 (100 Kb); Canvas, 21 1/2 x 18 in; Barnes Foundation
Photograph by Charalambos Amvrosiou



Mme Matisse: Madras Rouge (The Red Madras Headress)

Summer 1907 (120 Kb); Oil on canvas, 99.4 x 80.5 cm (39 1/8 x 31 3/4 in); Barnes Foundation, Merion, PA



Le Rifain assis (Seated Riffian)

Late 1912 or early 1913 (130 Kb); Oil on canvas, 200 x 160 cm (78 3/4 x 63 in), Barnes Foundation, Merion, PA



La leçon de musique (The Music Lesson)

1917 (160 Kb); Oil on canvas, 244.7 x 200.7 cm (96 3/8 x 79 in); Barnes Foundation, Merion, PA



Seated Figure, Tan Room



1918 (110 Kb); 16 x 13 in; Barnes Foundation
Photograph by Charalambos Amvrosiou



Two Figures Reclining in a Landscape
1921 (150 Kb); 15 x 18 3/8 in; Barnes Foundation
Photograph by Charalambos Amvrosiou



Robe violette et Anemones
1937; *Purple Robe and Anemones*; Cone Collection, Baltimore Museum of Art



La Musique
1939 (180 Kb); Oil on canvas, 115.2 x 115.2 cm (45 3/8 x 45 3/8 in);
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY



Deux fillettes, fond jaune et rouge (Two Girls in a Yellow and Red Interior)
1947 (160 Kb); Oil on canvas, 61 x 49.8 cm (24 x 19 3/8 in); Barnes
Foundation, Merion, PA

The experimental years

Matisse's Fauvist years were superseded by an experimental period, as he abandoned three-dimensional effects in favor of dramatically simplified areas of pure color, flat shape, and strong pattern. The intellectual splendor of this dazzlingly beautiful art appealed to the Russian mentality, and many great Matisses are now in Russia. One is *The Conversation* (1909; 177 x 217 cm (5 ft 9 3/4 in x 7 ft 1 1/2 in)) in which husband and wife converse. But the conversation is voiceless. They are implacably opposed: the man-- a self portrait-- is dominating and upright, while the woman leans back sulkily in her chair. She is imprisoned in it, shut in on all sides. The chair's arms hem her in, and yet the chair itself is almost indistinguishable from the background: she is stuck in the prison of her whole context. The open window offers escape; she is held back by an iron railing. He towers above, as dynamic as she is passive, every line of his striped pyjamas undeviatingly upright, a wholly directed man. His neck thickens to keep his outline straight and firm, an arrow of concentrated energy. The picture cannot contain him and his head continues beyond it and into the outside world. He is greater that it all, and the sole "word" of this inimical conversation is written in the scroll of the rail: *Non*. Does he say no to his intensity of life? They deny each other forever.

Supreme decoration

But denial is essentially antipathetic to Matisse. He was a great celebrator, and to many his most characteristic pictures are the wonderful odalisques he painted in Nice (he loved Nice for the sheer quality of its warm, southern light). Though such a theme was not appreciated at the time, it is impossible for us to look at *Odalisque with Raised Arms* (1923; 65 x 50 cm (25 1/2 x 19 3/4)) and feel that Matisse is exploiting her. The woman herself is unaware of him, lost in private reverie as she surrenders to the sunlight, and she, together with the splendid opulence of her chair, her diaphanous skirt, and the intricately decorated panels on either side, all unite in a majestic whole that celebrates the glory of creation. It is not her abstract beauty that attracts Matisse, but her concrete reality. He reveals a world of supreme decoration: for example, the small black patches of underarm hair on the odalisque are almost a witty inverted comma mark round the globes of her breasts and the rose pink center of each nipple.

Sculpting in paper

Picasso and Matisse were active to the end of their lives, but while Picasso was preoccupied with his ageing sexuality, Matisse moved into a period of selfless invention. In this last phase, too weak to stand at an easel, he created his papercuts, carving in colored paper, scissoring out shapes, and collaging them into sometimes vast pictures. These works, daringly brilliant, are the nearest he ever came to abstraction. *Beasts of the Sea* (1950; 295.5 x 154 cm (9 ft 8 in x 5 ft 1/2 in)) gives a wonderful underwater feeling of fish, sea cucumbers, sea horses, and water-weeds, the liquid liberty of the submarine world where most of us can never go. Its geometric rightness and chromatic radiance sum up the two great gifts of this artist and it is easy to see why he is the greatest colorist of the 20th century. He understood how elements worked together, how colors and shapes could come to life most startlingly when set in context: everything of Matisse's works together superbly.

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WebMuseum, Paris



Fauvism

Timeline: [Fauvism](#)

"C'est Donatello dans la cage aux fauves!"

-- Louis Vauxcelles, Salon d'Automne, 1905.

"C'est donc sous la conduite de Matisse, et aussi sous l'influence de Van Gogh que les futurs fauves, Vlaminck, Friesz, Derain, Manguin, expriment dans leurs envois au Salon d'Automne un farouche et virulent enthousiasme pour les joies dynamiques des tons les plus crus."

-- M. Raynal, *Peinture moderne*.

"Le fauvisme pour Matisse, c'est l'accentuation décisive d'un type de rapport à la couleur qu'il s'emploiera à cultiver : le nerf du système."

-- Marcelin PLEYNET, *Système de la peinture*.

Fauvism, French Fauvisme, style of painting that flourished in France from 1898 to 1908; it used pure, brilliant colour, applied straight from the paint tubes in an aggressive, direct manner to create a sense of an explosion on the canvas. The Fauves painted directly from nature as the Impressionists had before them, but their works were invested with a strong expressive reaction to the subjects they painted. First formally exhibited in Paris in 1905, Fauvist paintings shocked visitors to the annual Salon d'Automne; one of these visitors was the critic Louis Vauxcelles, who, because of the violence of their works, dubbed the painters "Les Fauves" (Wild Beasts).

The leader of the group was [Henri Matisse](#), who had arrived at the Fauve style after careful, critical study of the masters of Postimpressionism [Paul Gauguin](#), [Vincent van Gogh](#), and [Georges Seurat](#). Matisse's methodical studies led him to reject traditional renderings of three-dimensional space and to seek instead a new picture space defined by movement of colour. Matisse exhibited his famous "Woman with the Hat" (Walter A. Haas Collection, San Francisco) at the 1905 exhibition; brisk strokes of colour--blues, greens, and reds--form an energetic, expressive view of the woman. As always in Matisse's Fauve style, his painting is ruled by his intuitive sense of formal order.

Other members of the group included two painters from Chatou, Fr., André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck, who, together with Matisse, formed the nucleus of the Fauves. Derain's Fauve paintings translate every tone of a landscape into pure colour, applied with short, forceful brushstrokes. The agitated swirls of intense colour in Vlaminck's works are indebted to the expressive power of van Gogh. Three young painters from Le Havre were also attracted to Fauvism by the strong personality of Matisse. Othon Friesz found the emotional connotations of the bright Fauve colours a relief from the mediocre Impressionism he practiced; his companion Raoul Dufy developed a rather carefree ornamental version of the bold style that suited his own personal aesthetic nature; and

Georges Braque created a definite sense of rhythm and structure out of small spots of colour, foreshadowing his development of Cubism. Albert Marquet, Matisse's fellow student at the École des Beaux-Arts in the 1890s, also participated in Fauvism, as did the Dutchman Kees van Dongen, who applied the style to depictions of the fashionable society of Paris. Other painters associated with the Fauves were Georges Rouault, Henri Manguin, Charles Camoin, and Jean Puy.

Fauvism was for most of these artists a transitional, learning stage. By 1908 a revived interest in [Paul Cézanne](#)'s vision of the order and structure of nature had led them to reject the turbulent emotionalism of Fauvism in favour of the logic of [Cubism](#). Matisse alone pursued the course he had pioneered, achieving a sophisticated balance between his own emotions and the world he painted.

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“When I realized that every morning I would see this light again, I couldn’t believe how lucky I was.”

Henri Matisse

Artists often leave their studios and travel to new places for inspiration. In the East Building’s ground floor gallery 31, find a colorful group of paintings made by French artists during painting holidays.

Henri Matisse, *Open Window, Collioure* (detail), 1905, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney

2 Matisse and Derain Side by Side

After settling with his family in a hotel, Matisse invited his friend, the young painter André Derain, to join him. Matisse and Derain worked every day, often painting side by side around Collioure. They sketched the boats in the harbor, the fish market, and the nearby Pyrenees. They even made pictures of each other. Using paints straight from the tube with little mixing, they applied vibrant—often unexpected—colors to their canvases. Their collaboration led to a new freedom in art-making: the use of color to express the feeling of a place.

1 Summer in the Sun

In summer 1905 Henri Matisse left Paris for the French village of Collioure. Then a quiet fishing town, Collioure nestles between the Mediterranean Sea and the Pyrenees mountains close to the Spanish border. The landscape and lifestyle there were very different from Paris. The brilliant light in the South of France, reflected from the sea, captivated Matisse.

**How do you spend your summer vacation?
Do you spend time outdoors enjoying the
warm weather?**



Summer in the Sun
The port of Collioure,
photographed by Matisse
© 2003 Succession H. Matisse,
Paris/Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York



**Matisse and Derain
Side by Side**
Henri Matisse, *Derain Painting*,
1905, pencil, © 2003 Succession
H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New York

4 The Wild Beasts

In fall 1905, Matisse and Derain showed their paintings at an important exhibition in Paris called the Salon d'automne. People were shocked by the bold brush strokes and strange color combinations. Many laughed at the paintings. One art critic nicknamed the artists *fauves* (the French word for “wild beasts”) because of their wild and expressive brush strokes and loud colors. Still, Matisse and Derain inspired many artists to explore color in new ways.

Matisse's view of Collioure
Henri Matisse, *Open Window, Collioure*, 1905, oil on canvas,
National Gallery of Art,
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
John Hay Whitney

3

Two Views of Collioure

Matisse and Derain do not show us Collioure as it actually looked in real life. Instead, the artists captured the intensity and energy of Collioure's blazing sunshine by painting it alive with dazzling colors.

Look at *Open Window, Collioure*, Matisse's view of the town port. Through the window, small boats bob on pink waves under a sky banded with turquoise, pink, and periwinkle. Vibrant outdoor light pours through the window onto the flower pots on the sill, coloring the windows mauve, azure, and pink.

**Can you imagine the warmth of the day?
What might you hear or smell while looking out this window?**

Turning from the sea, Derain painted the olive groves with the steep hills of the Pyrenees in the background in *Mountains at Collioure*. Examine the variety of brush strokes that Derain used to paint this rugged landscape. Do you see the twisting red lines that form the trunks of the olive trees? Derain's bold, separated stripes of blues, grays, and greens create a rhythmic pattern of leaves ready to wave in a breeze, the way olive trees do. Now look at the mountains and the sky. Derain used broad, sweeping strokes of color to form the mountains rising behind the trees.

If you could visit Collioure, would you prefer to take a hike in the mountains or a stroll by the sea?



Derain's view of Collioure
André Derain, *Mountains at Collioure*, 1905, oil on canvas,
National Gallery of Art,
John Hay Whitney Collection

To learn more about the fauve painters, visit our Web site for this online tour:
<http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/fauve/index.htm>

book nook

These books about color and creativity can be found in the Children's Shop on the Gallery's concourse level or at your local library or bookstore.

A Magical Day with Matisse

By Julie Merberg,
illustrated by Suzanne Bober
Baby to preschool

Playful rhyming texts accompany Matisse's paintings.

A Bird or Two

By Bijou Le Tord
Ages 4 and up

The colors of the Mediterranean Sea are captured in this story about Matisse in Nice.

Pete's Chicken

By Harriet Ziefert,
illustrated by Laura Rader
Ages 4 and up

In this story about artistic imagination, a young rabbit named Pete paints a chicken in his own special way.

The Yellow House

By Susan Goldman Rubin,
illustrated by Jos. A. Smith
Ages 6 and up

Learn about the artists Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, who painted side by side in the South of France one fall.

try this!

activity

Colorful Cut-Outs

Matisse enjoyed going to warmer places and liked to watch sunlight shimmering on the sea. After his summer with Derain, he returned to Collioure for vacation, traveled to other seaports on the French Mediterranean, and visited Italy, North Africa, and Tahiti. *Beasts of the Sea* is a memory of his visit to the South Seas.

Many years after his fauve paintings, Matisse developed a new form of art-making: the paper cut-out. Still immersed in the power of color, he devoted himself to cutting colored papers and arranging them in designs. "Instead of drawing an outline and filling in the color...I am drawing directly in color," he said. Matisse was drawing with scissors!

What shapes do you recognize in *Beasts of the Sea*?
Can you find shapes that remind you of:

playful
fish

sinuous
eels

floating
seahorse

curvy
coral

spiral
shells

waving
seaweed



After cutting shapes that reminded him of a tropical sea, Matisse arranged the pieces vertically over rectangles of yellows, greens, and purples to suggest the watery depths of the undersea world.

Visit the East Building Tower Gallery to see examples of Matisse's large cut-outs, then create your own colorful collage. First, collect colored papers. Or, like Matisse, make your own colored paper by painting entire sheets of white paper in one color. Use heavy cardstock so the paper doesn't curl. Next, find a theme for your work. Like Matisse, you can choose a view from your window or a memory of a vacation as your inspiration. Using scissors, cut the paper into different shapes that remind you of that place. Then, arrange your cut-out shapes on a large piece of colored paper. Move the pieces around, rotate them, and experiment with layering. When you are satisfied with the design, glue your shapes in place.

While creating the cut-outs, Matisse hung them on the walls and ceiling of his apartment in Nice. "Thanks to my new art, I have a lush garden all around me. And I am never alone," he said. Where will you hang your cut-out?

Because light can harm colored paper, the Tower Gallery is open only a few hours each day in order to prevent Matisse's cut-outs from fading. Hours: Monday through Saturday 10:00 – 2:00 and Sunday 11:00 – 3:00.

left: Henri Matisse at work on a paper cut-out in his studio at the Hôtel Régina, Nice-Gimiez, early 1952, © 2003 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

above: Henri Matisse, *Beasts of the Sea*, 1950, paper collage on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund