



Questions:

1. Look carefully and describe what you see.
2. How does Matisse's love affair with color play out here?
3. Matisse sought to achieve simplicity and balance in his paintings. What could be aspects of simplicity and balance in this piece?
4. How does Matisse seem to play with the contrasts between interior and exterior spaces? What other contrasts come to mind?
5. Matisse famously said, "Art should be devoid of troubling or depressing matter...a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue." How could this painting be considered *therapeutic*? Explain.

Main Points

1. Matisse regarded simplicity, balance, and serenity as the supreme achievement and message of French art.
2. Matisse's art is important for its abstraction, spirituality, and subjectivity.
3. He recognized the importance of still-lives in his own development. He copied paintings by Chardin and de Heem (1893) early on and reinterpreted de Heem in 1915.

4. He was searching for “what I believed to be exceptional in myself with means (colors) richer than in linear drawing, with which I brought forth what moved me in nature, through the empathy I created between the objects that surrounded me, around which I revolved and into which I succeeded in pouring my feelings of tenderness without risking to suffer from doing so as in life.”
5. Objects were not symbols or metaphors, literary references, not even important for their function.
6. Many of Matisse’s paintings include a window, allowing for depiction of both the interior of a room and the view of the exterior.
7. Hilary Spurling writes in Matisse the Master (p. 295) that Matisse said still lifes will “extricate me from the odalisques...[by 1928] I had pretty well come to the end of what I could do with construction based exclusively on the balancing of colored masses.”

#### Label notes:

A highly original painter, sculptor, printmaker, designer and book illustrator, Henri Matisse nevertheless began his career rather late in the academic studio of William Bouguereau. After 1900 he abandoned perspective and shadows, and he rejected the academic distinction between line and color, attempting to create an entirely new paradigm for western painting. Between 1918 and 1930 Matisse spent most of each year in Nice, during which time he evolved a more naturalistic style, concentrating on the female form, secluded interiors, and still-lifes saturated in light. His still-lifes, while not considered major works, were nonetheless extraordinarily beautiful. His interest in this subject matter culminated in a series of paintings in 1924, among which *Les Pensées de Pascal* may be counted. *Les Pensées* is a collection of the spiritual writings, or thoughts (*pensées*), of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), a 17th century French mathematician, physicist and later, Christian philosopher.

#### Background Information and Criticism

from Elderfield, John. Henri Matisse: A Retrospective. The Museum of Modern Art. New York, 1992.

Matisse found his calling while recovering from appendicitis at his parents’ home in Bohain-en-Vermandois in northern France. He left his law career and began his schooling with Bouguereau at the Academie Julian in 1891 at age 22. He left the Academie, disillusioned with the emphasis on art of the past, yet copied pictures at the Louvre because he believed in gaining a deep knowledge of the masters and their emphasis on human figural representation. He was admitted to the Ecole de Beaux-Arts in 1895 and studied under Gustave Moreau with George Roualt and Albert Marquet. Moreau told him he was “destined to simplify painting.” For Matisse, this “meant purification and elimination...enrichment and intensification.”

In 1897 Matisse met Pissarro who became a friend and adviser. In Paris at the time, Matisse may have seen the Salon des Independants 1898 exhibit featuring Signac’s Neo-Impressionist paintings, Cezanne’s work at the Vollard Gallery, Pissarro’s at Durand-Ruel, and/or Monet’s at George Petit Gallery. He so admired Cezanne’s Three Bathers that he bought it. His Neo-Impressionist style faded and his admiration for Cezanne, whom he termed “the god of painting,” became evident. In 1900 he started his first sculpture in the round, after Barye’s Jaguar Devouring a Hare (our Panther Devouring a Rabbit). In 1904, still working in a variety of styles, he returned to Neo-Impressionism to create Luxe, Calm, et Volupte, a modernized version of Arcadia based on pastoral paintings he studied in the Louvre.

He moved into Fauvism in 1905 when he and Andre Derain spent the summer painting together in Collioure. Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck and Henri Manguin exhibited in the Salon d'Automne 1905 and earned the label "les fauves" from Louis Vauxcelle, who objected to the "violent appearance" of the canvases, shown alongside serene sculpture. (Vauxcelle was nicer than the other critics, who called them "incoherents" and "invertebrates." --Jack Flam, Matisse, the Man and His Art)

"Fauvism meant... construction by means of color, and was therefore the source of everything that followed in his art. Color, free from tonal modeling, would be used not to imitate external reality, but rather to convey the artist's response to his subject. In the famous Open Window (1905) he combined drawn strips of color with broad areas of color, using many different kinds of painterly marks to create complex harmonies and dissonances.

"Le Bonheur de Vivre (1905-6) brought to an abrupt end the period of visually excited Fauve painting; it offered instead an effect of indolent calm, using broad areas of color bounded by arabesque contours that are reminiscent at times of Ingres, at others Gauguin, to picture a primal world, a Golden Age, populated by images of sexuality. [Le Bonheur de Vivre was bought by Leo Stein who later sold it to Albert Barnes.]

In 1907, Matisse increasingly would summarize and flatten the painted figure into a surface pattern, as in Three Bathers, Collioure.

In 1908 in his Notes of a Painter Matisse said the aim of the artist is "to discover the 'essential character' of things beneath their superficial appearances, thus to produce 'an art of balance, purity and serenity,' decorative (i.e., elaborated) in conception and expressive of his emotional reactions to the subjects he painted."

It also meant a constantly changing approach: he painted the "nearly indecipherable to the naturalistic to the fiercely colored to the contemplative." The medium changed, too: drawing, sculpture, prints, designs for costumes and stained glass windows, and finally paper cut-outs, a medium he invented.

Matisse moved to Nice for the light; he resided there alone most of each year between 1917 and 1930. During the 20's he painted "the harmonious, light-filled, and often profusely decorated interiors, with languorous and seductive models, that sacrificed the interest of the avante-garde....The flat, arbitrary colors of his preceding paintings, both 'decorative' and 'experimental' were replaced by a much broader range of soft tonalities that convey how light will suffuse an interior, associating whatever or whoever is in it. Light is almost palpable in these paintings.... (c.f. White Plumes, 1919) Matisse paints thinly and carefully, and usually fills out every part of the picture with its appropriate detail.

Matisse said he was a painter "not merely of visual sensations, but of the *feelings* such sensations evoked in him." Matisse's "subject matter is largely that of nature without culture, telling of a precultural, prehistorical harmony; he will never show us anything industrial or commercial, anything that belongs exclusively to the modern world."

## References

John Elderfield's Henri Matisse: A Retrospective (MoMA, 1992)

Hilary Spurling's Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954 (Knopf, 2007)