

Three Bathers, Collioure, Henri Matisse, 1907, France, 61.36.14, G371



Questions:

1. Look closely at Matisse's *Three Bathers, Collioure*, painted in 1907. Describe what you see.
2. What would it feel like if you were on the beach instead of these bathers?
3. What about this painting seems timeless?

Main Points:

1. *Three Bathers, Collioure*, with its bright arbitrary colors and freedom of line and form, is characteristic of Matisse's Fauve style. The Fauves used bright, random colors and vigorous brushstrokes to express emotions and experiences.
2. Matisse treats forms here in a decorative, flat manner. The interaction of curved and straight lines provides variety within a well-composed structure.
3. The simplification makes figures seem flat but in contrast to the setting they have volume and plasticity.
4. Colors also perform a primarily decorative function. Matisse bought not only Cezanne's *Three Bathers* but also his credo: "Where color is its richest, form is at its fullest."

5. His interest in light is evoked through bright color, intense color for its own effect. As if in registers, he flattens the landscape as bands of color.
6. He began abstracting for personal expression
7. He used a rapid, loose, energetic brushstroke painted directly on plain canvas, parts of it exposed
8. A lingering element of pointillism is seen in the white dots of sailboats against the solid blue of the water.
9. These elements had been present in much of his earlier work but 1904 marked the beginning of their real development.
10. This painting exemplifies Matisse's fully developed Fauve style which he continued in the strikingly similar *Bathers With a Turtle* of 1908 in the Louise and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., Collection, St. Louis.
11. Then, under the influence of Cross and Signac, Matisse turned from emulating Cézanne to experiments in high-keyed color. Exhibiting his *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* at the Salon d'Automne of 1904, Matisse, with such artists as Derain and Vlaminck, was called a *fauve*—a wild beast—by the critic Vauxcelles.
12. In 1905, Louis Vauxcelles coined the phrase 'les fauves' (translated as 'wild beasts') to describe a circle of painters associated with Matisse. As their paintings were exposed in the same room as a classical sculpture, he stated his criticism and disapproval of their works by describing the sculpture as "a Donatello amongst wild beasts" ("Donatello parmi les fauves").

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Critical Analysis

from Flam, Jack. Matisse, the Man and His Art, 1869 - 1918. New York: Cornell University Press, 1986.

When Matisse returned to Collioure in the late spring, he made advances with all major subjects: still lifes, landscapes, figure compositions. In his still lifes he included cut flowers and live plants as compositional elements... This procedure provided him with a broad range of linear shapes and patterns that could be played against the solid forms of vases, plates, tables, and other inanimate objects.

"The increasingly conceptual tendency of Matisse's painting at this time is most strikingly seen in the three important figure compositions he executed at the beginning of the summer: La Coiffure, Music (Sketch), and Three Bathers.... Music and Three Bathers were clearly painted from imagination. (Flam, p. 202)

"There is very little modeling in either of these paintings, which anticipates the flatness and simplicity of the large figure compositions of the next 5 years. Three Bathers, which employs a three-figure composition similar to that of the Cezanne Three Bathers that Matisse owned, is not quite successful in its mixture of the general with the topical; there is something awkward about the contrast between the generalizations of the figures and the specificity of the setting. But it is nonetheless important for the intellectual and symbolic clarity with which the three poses are played against each other: the extremely closed pose of the figure on the left, the more open seated figure on the right, the extremely vertical standing figure. The poses not only denote different physical attitudes but also imply different states of being -- the passive, the contemplative, the active. A similar progression of poses was seen in Luxe, calm et volupté, and was to be much more fully realized in Bathers with a Turtle of early 1908." (Flam, p. 203)

By 1907 most of the Fauve painters had moved on toward “ more austere and sober styles and more muted color....Most discussions of the period identify it as a time when cubism began to succeed fauvism,...[which was] more or less finished by the end of 1906. ...Matisse himself had been alternating between brightly colored , decoratively conceived works and more monochromatic, sculpturally conceived works throughout the period. [Cubism and fauvism] were perceived not as opposing systems but rather as different possible responses to the art of Cezanne. ...Matisse and Picasso and Braque had in common an impulse toward abstraction, toward the autonomy of the picture as distinct from what the picture represented....Matisse [used] highly saturated color, reduced modeling, composition that played rectangular areas against arabesques, and an essentially intangible space.” (Flam, pp. 215-216)

Matisse Quotes appearing in Theories in Modern Art, by Chipp:

“What interests me most is neither still life nor landscape but the human figure. It is through it that I best succeed in expressing the nearly religious feeling I have towards life.” p. 135

“Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by the figures or the objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at a painter’s disposal for the expression of his feelings. All that is not useful in a picture is detrimental. A work of art must be harmonious in its entirety, for superfluous details would...encroach on the essential elements.” p. 132



Cezanne’s Three Bathers

Luxe, Calm et Volupte, 1904-5



Bathers with a Turtle, early 1908, above; Music, 1910, below



Matisse Biography

<http://www.henry-matisse.com/biography.html>

Henri Émile Benoît Matisse was a French artist, leader of the Fauve group, regarded as one of the great formative figures in 20th-century art, a master of the use of color and form to convey emotional expression.

Henri Matisse was born in December of 1869 in Le Cateau, France. He began painting during a convalescence from an operation, and in 1891 moved to Paris to study art. Matisse became an accomplished painter, sculptor and graphic designer, and one of the most influential artists of the 1900s. Matisse was born the son of a middle-class family, he studied and began to practice law. In 1890, however, while recovering slowly from an attack of appendicitis, he became intrigued by the practice of painting.



In 1892, having given up his law career, he went to Paris to study art formally. His first teachers were academically trained and relatively conservative; Matisse's own early style was a conventional form of naturalism, and he made many copies after the old masters. He also studied more contemporary art, especially that of the impressionists, and he began to experiment, earning a reputation as a rebellious member of his studio classes. Matisse's true artistic liberation, in terms of the use of color to render forms and organize spatial planes, came about first through the influence of the French painters Paul Gauguin and Paul Cezanne and the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh, whose work he studied closely beginning about 1899.

Then, in 1903 and 1904, Matisse encountered the pointillist painting of Henri Edmond Cross and Paul Signac. Cross and Signac were experimenting with juxtaposing small strokes (often dots or "points") of pure pigment to create the strongest visual vibration of intense color. Matisse adopted their technique and modified it repeatedly, using broader strokes. By 1905 he had produced some of the boldest color images ever created, including a striking picture of his wife, Green Stripe (Madame Matisse) (1905, Statens

Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen). The title refers to a broad stroke of brilliant green that defines Madame Matisse's brow and nose.

In the same year Matisse exhibited this and similar paintings along with works by his artist companions, including Andre Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck. Together, the group was dubbed les fauves (literally, "the wild beasts") because of the extremes of emotionalism in which they seemed to have indulged, their use of vivid colors, and their distortion of shapes.

Matisse's work reflects a number of influences: the decorative quality of Near Eastern art, the stylized forms of the masks and sculpture of African, the bright colors of the French impressionists, and the simplified forms of French artist Paul Cezanne and the cubists.

While he was regarded as a leader of radicalism in the arts, Matisse was beginning to gain the approval of a number of influential critics and collectors, including the American expatriate writer Gertrude Stein and her family. Among the many important commissions he received was that of a Russian collector who requested mural panels illustrating dance and music (both completed in 1911; now in the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg). Such broadly conceived themes ideally suited Matisse; they allowed him freedom of invention and play of form and expression.

His images of dancers, and of human figures in general, convey expressive form first and the particular details of anatomy only secondarily. Matisse extended this principle into other fields; his bronze sculptures, like his drawings and works in several graphic media, reveal the same expressive contours seen in his paintings. Although intellectually sophisticated, Matisse always emphasized the importance of instinct and intuition in the production of a work of art. He argued that an artist did not have complete control over color and form; instead, colors, shapes, and lines would come to dictate to the sensitive artist how they might be employed in relation to one another. He often emphasized his joy in abandoning himself to the play of the forces of color and design, and he explained the rhythmic, but distorted, forms of many of his figures in terms of the working out of a total pictorial harmony.

From the 1920s until his death, Matisse spent much time in the south of France, particularly Nice, painting local scenes with a thin, fluid application of bright color. In his old age, he was commissioned to design the decoration of the small Chapel of Saint-Marie du Rosaire at Vence (near Cannes), which he completed between 1947 and 1951. Often bedridden during his last years, he occupied himself with decoupage, creating works of brilliantly colored paper cutouts arranged casually, but with an unfailing eye for design, on a canvas surface. Matisse died in Nice on November 3, 1954. Unlike many artists, he was internationally popular during his lifetime, enjoying the favor of collectors, art critics, and the younger generation of artists.

Biographical information from [Microsoft® Encarta '97](#):